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When Academic Freedom Becomes Conditional: Authoritarianism, Neoliberalism, and the Politics of Knowledge Production

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Abstract
This roundtable contribution examines the changing meaning of academic freedom through the interconnected dynamics of post-Soviet authoritarianism, neoliberal governance, and contemporary struggles over knowledge production in the Global North. Drawing on my experiences as a scholar from Azerbaijan working across authoritarian and Western academic contexts, I argue that academic freedom should not be understood through a simple binary of 'repression' versus 'freedom.' Instead, different political and institutional regimes produce different modalities of constraint that shape what can be researched, taught, funded, and publicly articulated. In post-Soviet contexts, academic life is structured through direct forms of state control, including censorship, ideological policing, curriculum regulation, and informal surveillance. Yet relocation to European academia does not necessarily resolve these tensions. Focusing particularly on recent controversies surrounding Palestine solidarity movements, anti-gender politics, and the rise of far-right discourses across Global North, I explore how universities increasingly regulate dissent while simultaneously presenting themselves as spaces of openness and critical inquiry. I argue that contemporary academia functions not outside relations of power, but through them, producing forms of self-censorship, precarity, and strategic silence. Ultimately, this contribution asks how critical academia, once imagined as a democratic refuge, has increasingly become a site of survival, and what this transformation reveals about the fragile and conditional nature of academic freedom today.

Keywords
Academic freedom; neoliberal academia; knowledge; post-Soviet; Global North; decolonial

Introduction

What does academic freedom mean to those who have never experienced political freedom? Growing up in Azerbaijan, and later engaging with activist and academic spaces across the post-Soviet space, I encountered democracy not as a lived reality but as an abstract promise: one that rarely materialized in practices such as free elections or open public debate. This absence shaped my early understanding of knowledge production: academia was not a space of critique, but one structured by state oversight, ideological conformity, and implicit boundaries of what could be said, studied, and published.

My decision to leave Baku in 2017 to pursue a master's degree in gender studies in Prague was motivated, in part, by a search for intellectual and political freedom. In Europe, I began to learn the language of academic freedom, academic integrity, and critical scholarship. Gender studies appeared as a field capable of unsettling dominant norms; critical inquiry seemed not only possible but institutionally supported. Yet this apparent transition, from "repression to freedom", was neither linear nor complete. Returning to Azerbaijan for fieldwork during my MA and PhD, I confronted once again the constraints of an authoritarian knowledge regime. Academic production remained tightly regulated, particularly in the humanities and social sciences. The majority of scholars working in the field of gender studies in Azerbaijan, in my experience, reproduce a fundamentally depoliticized understanding of the field. I often found it striking, if not deeply frustrating, that colleagues teaching at institutions such as Baku State University or the Azerbaijan Diplomatic Academy, one of the country's most elite universities, approached gender not as a critical analytical framework but as a narrow project of women's empowerment. Within this framework, gender is stripped of its epistemological and political force: it is no longer a tool for interrogating power, hierarchy, or normativity, but rather a technocratic or developmental category (Jalilova 2019; Zamanov 2022). As a result, queer and lesbian women's narratives are routinely erased, while broader queer, gay, and bisexual presences are rendered invisible within both curricula and research agendas.

These conditions raise a fundamental question: how can one sustain meaningful academic research in a context where gender cannot be taught as a social construction, but must instead conform to an essentialist and binary understanding? To participate in such a system is, in many ways, to reproduce the very epistemic limitations one might seek to challenge. For me, this created a profound tension between remaining within institutional academia and maintaining intellectual integrity. Refusing to participate in this economy of knowledge production, however, does not resolve the problem; it merely relocates it.

When one leaves and enters European or North American academia (often imagined as spaces of 'intellectual freedom' and 'critical possibility') one encounters a different, but no less consequential, set of constraints. For those who choose to remain in Europe, whether due to geographical proximity, family ties, or the precarious conditions of migration, this transition reveals what I would describe as another layer of hypocrisy. Unlike the overt censorship characteristic of authoritarian contexts, these constraints are less visible yet deeply structuring. This hypocrisy manifests in multiple forms. In the wake of recent pro-Palestinian mobilizations across universities, for example, I have witnessed (in countries such as Germany, US, UK, and Switzerland where I have direct experience) instances in which the basic principles of academic freedom have been undermined. Scholars have been dismissed, contracts terminated, invitations withdrawn; students have faced disciplinary action, including the revocation of their status. These incidents are often justified through the language of institutional neutrality, public responsibility, or reputational risk. Yet in practice, they signal clear limits to what kinds of political engagement and critical inquiry are deemed acceptable within the academia.

What emerges, then, is not a simple contrast between repression 'there' and freedom 'here,' but a more unsettling continuity in the logics that govern academic life. If in Azerbaijan (or similarly in Russia) academic freedom is constrained through direct state control, censorship, and ideological policing, in European and North American institutions

similar effects are produced through more diffuse mechanisms: funding dependencies, managerial oversight, and the policing of political speech. In this sense, academia does not stand outside regimes of power; it actively participates in them. This is precisely what recalls Michel Foucault's (1977) formulation of discipline: not merely as repression, but as a productive force that shapes what can be known, said, and institutionalized. Academia demands discipline, too. It rewards certain forms of knowledge while marginalizing others, producing a field in which scholars learn, often implicitly, how to navigate boundaries, avoid risk, and align themselves with dominant epistemic and political frameworks. The question, then, is not only whether academia is free, but how freedom itself is structured, distributed, and limited.

This leads to a further set of questions that are crucial for understanding the contemporary condition of academic freedom: who funds academic institutions in Europe and the Global North? How are research agendas shaped by neoliberal grant regimes, institutional priorities, and political alliances? To what extent can critical scholarship remain independent within a system increasingly oriented toward competition, productivity, and external partnerships, including those with state and corporate actors?

What I am grappling with, ultimately, is not simply the presence or absence of academic freedom, but its transformation across different political and institutional contexts. Refusing to romanticize either authoritarian or Western academic systems, I instead seek to trace how different regimes of power produce different modalities of constraint: some explicit, others subtle, but all consequential for the production of knowledge. Therefore, I return to the central question that animates this contribution: how did critical academia, once imagined as a space of refuge and democratic possibility, become a site of survival? And what does this shift reveal about the changing meaning of academic freedom in an era marked by authoritarian resurgence, neoliberal restructuring, and intensifying struggles over knowledge, legitimacy, and dissent?

Academic freedom under authoritarianism

As I have already suggested in the introduction, mechanisms such as curriculum control, hiring restrictions, surveillance, and informal pressure are not exceptional but constitute the everyday infrastructure of academic life in post-Soviet space, including Azerbaijan (also see Tlostanova 2018; Hendl et al. 2024; Pavlova 2025; Zamanov 2025). Knowledge production in such contexts is not simply influenced by the state; it is actively regulated, filtered, and pre-structured through institutional and political oversight. This is particularly evident in state universities, where decisions about what can be taught, researched, and published are shaped by explicit and implicit expectations of ideological conformity. Curriculum control operates as one of the most visible mechanisms of this regulation. Entire fields, especially those perceived as politically sensitive, such as gender studies, critical race scholarship, or research on state violence, are either excluded, diluted, or reframed to align with state-sanctioned narratives (for instance, teaching essentialist gender studies and refusing critical perspectives on it) (Zamanov 2022).

These epistemic constraints are reinforced through hiring practices. Academic positions are rarely allocated on the basis of critical expertise or intellectual innovation; instead, loyalty to institutional and political hierarchies often plays a decisive role. Scholars who align themselves with dominant frameworks (producing non-critical, positivist, and often repetitive work) are more likely to secure promotions, funding, and long-term stability. In contrast, those who attempt to challenge prevailing paradigms risk professional marginalization, dismissal, or exclusion from academic networks. Surveillance, both formal and informal, further consolidates this environment. It operates not only through state apparatuses but also through institutional cultures in which colleagues monitor one another, and where deviation from accepted norms can have immediate consequences. The result is a pervasive atmosphere of self-censorship. Scholars learn to anticipate boundaries before they

are explicitly enforced, adjusting their research questions, language, and conclusions accordingly. In this sense, control is not only external but internalized.

The consequences of such a system are starkly illustrated in recent cases. For example, the arrest of PhD student Bahruz Samadov, who publicly called for peace between Armenia and Azerbaijan, demonstrates the extent to which even minimal forms of political expression can be criminalized (Scholars at Risk 2025). His imprisonment signals a broader message to the academic community: that critical engagement with politically sensitive issues is not merely discouraged but punishable. Academic freedom, in this context, is not negotiated; it is foreclosed.

At the same time, these conditions produce a parallel academic economy characterized by what might be described as institutionalized academic disintegrity. It is not uncommon for scholars to translate existing works (often from Russian into Azerbaijani) and present them as original contributions, successfully defending theses and advancing to doctoral or professorial positions. Such practices are not simply individual ethical failures; they are symptomatic of a system in which originality and critical inquiry are neither rewarded nor required. When academic advancement is dissociated from intellectual rigor, the very notion of academic freedom becomes entangled with its opposite: a scooping out of scholarly integrity.

Taken together, these mechanisms make the production of critical knowledge, particularly in fields such as gender and sexuality studies, extremely difficult, if not impossible. Under such conditions, academic work is not a site of inquiry but a site of compliance. The boundaries of acceptable knowledge are tightly policed, and the risks of transgression are both immediate and severe. If academic freedom is often understood as the capacity to pursue knowledge without undue interference, then in this context it is systematically undermined through a combination of structural constraints and everyday practices.

'Academic freedom' in Europe

As I noted earlier, my initial encounter with European academia was marked by a sense of excitement and possibility. It appeared to offer precisely what had been structurally foreclosed in authoritarian contexts: space for critique, intellectual autonomy, and engagement with politically sensitive questions. Yet this perception quickly became more complicated. European academia, too, is structured by hierarchies, circulating forms of power, and uneven distributions of legitimacy. While these dynamics take different forms than in Azerbaijan, they nonetheless shape what can be said, who can speak, and under what conditions.

One of the most revealing moments in this regard has been the period following 7 October 2023 (Pratt et al. 2025; Koddenbrock and Voß 2025; Tommasi et al. 2026). The academic responses to the war in Gaza have exposed deep fractures in how principles such as academic freedom, critical inquiry, and ethical responsibility are applied. In particular, the question of genocide (and its denial or selective recognition) has emerged as a key site of tension. For scholars working within critical frameworks, including gender studies and constructivist approaches, there is an expectation that concepts such as violence, oppression, and human rights are applied consistently, without political double standards. If violence against civilians, including sexual violence, is recognized as unacceptable in one context, it cannot be relativized or silenced in another without undermining the very foundations of critical scholarship.

However, in practice, voicing such positions has become increasingly risky. Across multiple contexts, including Germany, UK, Switzerland and the US, scholars and students who have expressed pro-Palestinian positions or critically engaged with state violence have faced significant consequences. These include dismissals, the termination of fellowships, revoked invitations, and, in some cases, the loss of student status. In the United States, numerous campus protests have been met with police intervention, detentions, and the

revocation of visas for international students (Bachman and Luiz 2026). In Germany (Grimm et al. 2025), the termination of anthropologist Ghassan Hage's affiliation with the Max Planck Institute has become emblematic of the broader climate in which political expression is treated as a liability rather than a component of academic engagement (The European Association of Social Anthropologists 2024). These developments are not isolated incidents but point to a broader pattern of institutional sanctioning. Entire departments and programs can become vulnerable when associated with politically contentious positions. Cases such as the closure of academic units like Institute for the Study of the Middle East and Muslim Societies at the University of Bern following public controversies raise urgent questions about who ultimately decides the boundaries of legitimate knowledge (University of Bern 2024). Are these decisions driven by scholarly debate, or by institutional concerns over reputation, funding, and political pressure?

Such cases compel me to revisit foundational assumptions about academic freedom. Who is authorized to produce knowledge, and under what conditions? To what extent do older hierarchies, particularly those shaped by racialized, gendered, and geopolitical power, continue to structure academic legitimacy? The persistence of these inequalities suggests that academic freedom is not universally distributed but differentially accessible. It raises the uncomfortable possibility that what counts as 'acceptable' knowledge is still, to a significant extent, mediated by historically entrenched forms of authority, including enduring configurations of white, male, and Eurocentric privilege.

At the same time, these dynamics cannot be understood in isolation from broader political shifts. The rise of far-right movements, particularly in the United States but increasingly across Europe, has intensified attacks on gender studies, queer scholarship, and critical race perspectives (Korolczuk et al. 2025). The so-called 'anti-gender' movement, which gained momentum during the illiterate Trump era, has contributed to funding cuts, program closures, and the delegitimization of entire fields of study. Importantly, this discourse is not confined to the Global North; it resonates strongly with narratives in post-Soviet contexts, where gender and queer studies are similarly framed as ideological threats or forms of 'propaganda' (Edenborg 2017; Zamanov 2024). What becomes visible, then, is a transnational convergence of conservative epistemologies. The essentialist understandings of gender that I encountered in Azerbaijan are not confined to that context; they reappear, in different forms, within European and American academia. This challenges any simplistic division between 'East' and 'West' as distinct epistemic or political spaces. Instead, we are confronted with a global configuration in which certain topics (gender diversity, queer existence, critiques of state violence and others) are increasingly contested, regulated, or excluded.

From an ethnographic perspective, these developments are also closely tied to the political economy of knowledge production. What gets funded, what is considered 'relevant,' and what is deemed too controversial are all shaped by institutional priorities and external pressures. There have been discussions, particularly in the United States, around restricting specific terms and research agendas in academic publishing (Schreiber 2025), echoing earlier practices in contexts like Russia, where LGBTQI+ studies have long been labelled as 'propaganda' (Edenborg 2017). These parallels are not coincidental; they reflect a broader trend in which academic freedom is negotiated within shifting political and ideological landscapes. In this sense, the challenges facing academic freedom in Europe do not simply mirror those of authoritarian contexts, but neither are they entirely distinct. Rather, they reveal a continuum of constraint, in which different mechanisms interact to shape the limits of knowledge production. The result is not the absence of academic freedom, but its conditionality. And it is within this conditional space that scholars must navigate, negotiate, and, increasingly, survive.

The neoliberal university: economic governance and strategic silence

To connect these dynamics across authoritarian and European contexts, it is necessary to turn to the concept of the neoliberal university. If earlier sections have shown how academic freedom is politically constrained through censorship, denialism, and institutional sanctioning, this section argues that academic freedom is also structured, perhaps more subtly but no less powerfully, through economic governance. Academic freedom is not only politically constrained; it is economically governed. Neoliberal governmentality reshapes universities by reconfiguring them according to market logics: competition, productivity, efficiency, and external funding dependency (Zamanov 2025). Within this framework, knowledge production is no longer primarily oriented toward critical inquiry or public engagement, but increasingly toward measurable outputs, grant acquisition, and institutional rankings (also see Troiani and Dutson 2021; Alaniz and Cozzarelli 2024). As a result, academic freedom becomes tied to one's capacity to secure funding and maintain institutional value.

One of the most immediate consequences of this shift is the normalization of precarity, particularly for early career researchers. Scholars who have completed their PhDs often find themselves moving between short-term contracts, fellowships, and project-based positions, frequently lasting no more than one or two years. This condition produces not only economic instability but also a form of epistemic vulnerability. When one's livelihood depends on securing the next grant or contract, the risks associated with political expression or critical positioning become significantly heightened. In such a context, strategic silence emerges as a survival mechanism. Early career scholars, including myself, are acutely aware that openly criticizing institutional structures, addressing politically sensitive issues such as the ongoing violence in Gaza, or challenging dominant paradigms may negatively affect their chances of securing funding. This does not necessarily require explicit censorship; rather, it operates through anticipation. Scholars learn to calibrate their research agendas, language, and public engagement in ways that minimize risk and maximize employability. In this sense, neoliberal academia produces not only knowledge but also self-regulating subjects. Importantly, this dynamic is not limited to precarious scholars. Even well-established academics are often embedded in funding ecosystems that discourage controversy. Large-scale research grants, institutional partnerships, and donor relations create incentives to avoid positions that might be perceived as politically contentious. The result is a broader culture of caution, in which the boundaries of acceptable knowledge are shaped not only by intellectual considerations but by financial and reputational calculations.

This raises a crucial question: who funds academic research, and under what conditions? The distribution of funding, whether through public institutions, private donors, or transnational organizations, plays a decisive role in shaping research priorities. Certain topics are privileged because they align with political, economic, or ideological interests, while others are marginalized or excluded. In recent years, I have witnessed the increasing visibility of research agendas aligned with conservative and far-right discourses, including anti-gender and anti-migration narratives, some of which receive substantial financial backing (Korolczuk et al. 2025). At the same time, critical scholarship faces growing challenges in securing sustained support.

The question of public funding further complicates this landscape. If universities are, at least in part, financed through taxpayer contributions, to what extent are research priorities accountable to the public? And who constitutes this 'public'? These questions are rarely addressed directly, yet they underpin ongoing debates about the legitimacy and value of academic work. In practice, however, funding decisions are often concentrated within institutional and political structures that remain opaque and unevenly accessible. At the same time, broader political narratives (such as the rise of far-right discourses around migration) intersect with these economic dynamics. Claims that there are "too many migrants," for instance, do not only shape public policy but also influence academic labor markets. Secure,

long-term academic positions are increasingly scarce, while short-term and project-based roles flourish. Competition intensifies, success rates for funding applications decline (often falling below 10%, such as MSCA; ERC and others) and the pressure to conform to dominant agendas increases.

Taken together, these developments reveal how neoliberal restructuring contributes to a form of academic complicity. While the mechanisms differ from those observed in authoritarian contexts, the outcome is not entirely dissimilar: the narrowing of intellectual space and the disciplining of critical inquiry. If in Azerbaijan such constraints are enforced through direct state control, in European contexts they are mediated through economic pressures, institutional priorities, and self-regulation. What emerges, then, is a convergence between political and economic forms of governance. Academic freedom is neither fully absent nor fully realized; it is negotiated within a system that simultaneously enables and restricts critical knowledge production. Understanding this dual structure is essential for moving beyond simplistic binaries and for recognizing how contemporary academia across different geopolitical contexts produces not only knowledge, but also the limits within which knowledge can be produced.

Concluding remarks: academic freedom as a condition of survival

What I have sought to trace throughout this contribution is not a simple decline of academic freedom, nor its uneven distribution between 'authoritarian' and 'democratic' contexts, but its transformation. Academic freedom today operates through multiple, overlapping regimes of power that do not simply prohibit knowledge, but shape the conditions under which it can be produced, articulated, and sustained. These regimes differ in form, ranging from direct state repression to more diffuse mechanisms of institutional governance and economic dependency, but they converge in their capacity to delimit critical inquiry.

It is precisely at the intersection of these political and economic pressures that critical academia has been transformed. What was once imagined, perhaps idealistically, as a space of refuge, a site for democratic engagement and epistemic experimentation, has become, for many, a terrain of navigation and endurance. To remain within academia, particularly as a scholar working on politically sensitive topics, increasingly requires not only intellectual commitment but strategic adaptation: knowing when to speak, when to remain silent, and how to frame one's work in ways that remain legible within shifting boundaries of acceptability. This shift does not mean that critical scholarship has disappeared. On the contrary, it persists often in fragmented, precarious, and transnational forms. But its conditions of possibility have changed. Academic freedom can no longer be understood as a stable institutional guarantee; it must be approached as a conditional and contested practice, shaped by broader struggles over power, legitimacy, and knowledge production.

Answering the question, then, of how academia became a site of survival requires rejecting the assumption that it was ever fully outside these dynamics. Rather, what has changed is the intensity, visibility, and global interconnectedness of the forces that govern it. Authoritarian resurgence, the rise of transnational far-right movements, and the deepening of neoliberal governance have together reconfigured the academic field, narrowing the space for dissent while simultaneously demanding its performance in controlled forms. What this reveals about academic freedom today is both profound and clarifying. Academic freedom is not a given, nor a universal condition secured by institutional location. It is a fragile, uneven, and often contradictory practice: one that must be actively negotiated and, at times, defended against the very institutions that claim to uphold it. Recognizing this does not require abandoning the idea of academic freedom but rather rethinking it: not as a static ideal tied to particular geopolitical contexts, but as an ongoing struggle over the terms under which knowledge can be produced, shared, and contested. In this sense, the question is no longer simply whether academia is free, but for whom, under what conditions, and at what cost. And it is within this space of tension, between possibility and constraint, critique and survival, that the future of critical scholarship will be determined.

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