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Academic Freedom in a Time of Gaza: The Riskification of Humanitarian Speech

Elhadj Moussa BenMoussa
Office for Postgraduates, Research and Engagement, University of East London, London, United Kingdom
E.BenMoussa@uel.ac.uk

Abstract
Since October 2023, universities have increasingly become sites where humanitarian expression concerning Gaza is negotiated through institutional logics of governance rather than solely through principles of academic freedom. This article introduces the concept of the *riskification of humanitarian speech* to explain how expressions of concern for civilian suffering are increasingly reframed as matters of reputational, legal, financial, and political risk. Drawing on critical scholarship by Joan Wallach Scott, Judith Butler, Wendy Brown, Sara Ahmed, and Achille Mbembe, the article argues that contemporary universities are shifting from protecting intellectual dissent to managing institutional exposure. Rather than relying on direct censorship, universities increasingly govern controversial speech through procedural mechanisms, administrative caution, and appeals to neutrality. The article contends that neutrality frequently functions as a strategy of institutional risk management rather than political impartiality. While focusing on debates surrounding Gaza, the analysis offers a broader framework for understanding the changing relationship between academic freedom, humanitarian discourse, and university governance in an era of intensifying political polarisation.

Keywords: Academic freedom; Gaza; Humanitarian speech; Riskification; University governance; Institutional neutrality; Higher education.

Introduction

Since October 2023, universities across Europe, North America, and Australia have become sites of intense contestation over Gaza. Student encampments, faculty statements, public lectures, and calls for ceasefire have generated disputes that extend well beyond disagreements about the conflict itself. Universities have increasingly found themselves navigating donor pressure, political scrutiny, media attention, legal concerns, and competing claims about safety and discrimination. In this context, speech about Gaza has often been treated not only as political expression but as an institutional problem requiring management.

This essay argues that the contemporary university is witnessing the riskification of humanitarian speech. By riskification, I mean the process through which expressions of concern about human suffering are transformed into matters of reputational, financial, legal, or security risk. Humanitarian speech does not necessarily become controversial because of its intellectual weakness or ethical inadequacy. Rather, it becomes controversial because acknowledging suffering may generate institutional costs. The concept helps explain a pattern visible across different national contexts. Universities rarely prohibit speech directly. Instead, events are delayed, speakers are reviewed, statements are softened, additional security procedures are introduced, and controversial discussions are redirected into administrative processes. The effect is not always censorship in a traditional sense. It is the gradual translation of moral and political expression into a problem of institutional governance.

The Gaza crisis has exposed this transformation with unusual clarity. Universities have long presented themselves as spaces committed to critical inquiry, intellectual openness, and democratic debate. Yet recent controversies suggest that academic freedom increasingly operates within a wider framework of risk management. The question is no longer simply whether universities protect free expression. The more pressing question is whether they can tolerate forms of speech that carry reputational consequences. Drawing on the work of Joan Wallach Scott, Judith Butler, Wendy Brown, Sara Ahmed, and Achille Mbembe, this essay argues that academic freedom is being reshaped by institutional logics that prioritise stability over dissent. In this environment, neutrality often functions less as political impartiality than as a strategy of organisational self-protection. The challenge facing universities is therefore not only how to defend free inquiry, but whether they remain willing to host forms of humanitarian speech that disrupt institutional comfort.

From academic freedom to risk management

Academic freedom is traditionally understood as the right of scholars and students to pursue inquiry, teaching, and public engagement without fear of political interference or institutional sanction. Liberal accounts of academic freedom generally focus on external threats: state censorship, ideological control, religious authority, or political pressure. Within this framework, the university appears as a protective institution whose role is to shield knowledge production from external interference.

The contemporary university presents a different challenge. The most significant threat to academic freedom is no longer necessarily external. Increasingly, universities themselves internalise political, financial, and reputational pressures and reproduce them through administrative governance. Academic freedom is not always restricted through direct censorship. More often, it is constrained through institutional calculations of risk. Joan Wallach Scott (2019) argues that academic freedom has never been a politically neutral principle. It has always been shaped by struggles over legitimacy, authority, and power. Universities have historically protected some forms of dissent while marginalising others. Academic freedom therefore should not be understood as a stable right guaranteed by benevolent institutions. Rather, it remains a contested practice whose limits become visible during moments of political crisis.

The Gaza crisis has exposed these limits with unusual clarity. Universities routinely affirm commitments to open inquiry, critical debate, and freedom of expression. Yet when

speech concerning Palestinian suffering generates donor concern, political scrutiny, media attention, or reputational anxiety, institutional responses often shift from intellectual engagement to administrative management. The issue is no longer whether an argument is academically defensible. The question becomes whether the institution can absorb the consequences of hosting it. Wendy Brown's (2015) analysis of neoliberalism helps explain this transformation. Brown argues that neoliberalism is not simply an economic doctrine but a governing rationality that reshapes institutions according to market values. Universities increasingly operate as competitive organisations concerned with rankings, partnerships, fundraising, branding, and external legitimacy. Under these conditions, speech is evaluated not only for its intellectual merit but also for its potential organisational costs.

As a result, controversial speech becomes a reputational event. A faculty statement on Gaza can trigger donor complaints. A student protest can generate media scrutiny. A public lecture can become a political controversy before it takes place. Universities therefore begin to assess academic expression through a framework of institutional exposure. The central question shifts from "Is this argument intellectually valuable?" to "What risks does this create for the institution?" This shift has profound implications for academic freedom. Universities rarely prohibit speech outright. Instead, they govern through procedures that appear politically neutral. Events require additional approval. Speakers undergo extended review. Public statements are revised through communications teams. Security assessments become more stringent. Administrative caution gradually replaces intellectual confidence.

Sara Ahmed's (2021) work on institutions is particularly useful here. Ahmed demonstrates how organisations often respond to political challenges by transforming them into procedural matters. Conflict is not openly suppressed; it is absorbed into administrative processes. The institution appears responsive while simultaneously limiting the disruptive force of critique. In this sense, procedure itself becomes a mode of governance. This dynamic is especially visible in relation to Gaza. Universities frequently emphasise the need for balance, neutrality, and community cohesion. These concerns are not inherently illegitimate. Universities have genuine responsibilities to ensure student safety, prevent discrimination, and maintain inclusive learning environments. The difficulty arises when the language of neutrality becomes a mechanism for avoiding politically uncomfortable questions. Humanitarian concern for Palestinian civilians is increasingly interpreted through the language of institutional risk rather than academic debate.

The result is what may be described as anticipatory governance. Universities do not wait for controversy to occur; they seek to prevent it in advance. Administrators assess how speech might be perceived by donors, politicians, journalists, alumni, and external stakeholders. Future reputational consequences become more influential than present intellectual considerations. Academic freedom remains formally protected, yet the conditions under which it can be exercised become increasingly narrow. This development marks a significant transformation in the role of the university. Academic freedom was historically justified because knowledge production often challenges dominant assumptions and established power. Its purpose was not to eliminate conflict but to create conditions in which difficult questions could be examined openly. When universities prioritise risk avoidance over intellectual engagement, they reverse this logic. Controversy becomes evidence of institutional failure rather than a normal feature of democratic inquiry. The significance of Gaza lies precisely here. The issue reveals how universities increasingly govern speech through risk management rather than scholarly evaluation. The challenge is not simply that controversial ideas encounter opposition. The challenge is that institutional responses increasingly focus on managing consequences rather than defending inquiry. Academic freedom becomes conditional upon organisational comfort.

This transformation provides the context for understanding what I call the riskification of humanitarian speech. Humanitarian concern is not necessarily rejected because it lacks moral force or intellectual legitimacy. It becomes problematic because it is perceived to generate institutional risk. Speech about suffering is translated into a question

of governance. It is this process, rather than censorship alone, that defines the contemporary crisis of academic freedom.

The riskification of humanitarian speech

The concept of the riskification of humanitarian speech refers to the process through which expressions of concern for human suffering are reclassified as sources of institutional risk. Rather than being evaluated primarily on ethical, humanitarian, or scholarly grounds, such speech becomes subject to administrative calculations concerning reputation, funding, security, legal exposure, and public relations. The issue is no longer whether a claim is morally compelling or intellectually defensible. The issue becomes whether the institution can manage the consequences of allowing it to circulate. This process differs from traditional understandings of censorship. In liberal accounts, censorship typically involves the direct suppression of speech by a state or authority. Riskification operates more subtly. Speech is not necessarily prohibited. Instead, it is subjected to layers of governance that alter its conditions of possibility. Events are postponed. Speakers are reviewed. Statements are rewritten. Additional procedures are imposed. Administrative caution gradually shapes what can be said, by whom, and under what conditions.

The significance of this process lies in its ability to preserve the appearance of openness while simultaneously narrowing the space for meaningful dissent. Universities can continue to affirm their commitment to free expression even as controversial speech becomes increasingly difficult to organise, sustain, or defend. The issue is not the formal existence of academic freedom but the practical conditions under which it can be exercised. The Gaza crisis provides a particularly revealing example. Since October 2023, many universities have faced demands to respond to unprecedented levels of violence and humanitarian suffering. Faculty members, students, and researchers have sought to organise discussions, issue statements, host events, and express solidarity with affected populations. Yet institutional responses have often framed these activities through the language of risk. Concerns about donor relations, media scrutiny, campus tensions, legal liability, and reputational damage frequently become central considerations.

What is striking is that the object of concern is often not speech advocating violence or discrimination. Rather, it is speech that draws attention to suffering and demands ethical recognition. Humanitarian language itself becomes politically charged. Calls for ceasefire, expressions of solidarity, discussions of civilian casualties, or critiques of state violence may be interpreted less as contributions to public debate than as potential threats to institutional stability. This dynamic reflects what Judith Butler (2009) describes as the politics of grievability. Butler argues that public recognition of suffering is never distributed equally. Some lives are more readily acknowledged as worthy of protection, mourning, and public concern than others. Humanitarian speech therefore does not simply describe suffering; it participates in broader struggles over whose suffering becomes visible and whose remains marginalised. Within universities, these struggles increasingly intersect with institutional governance. Administrators must navigate competing constituencies, conflicting political pressures, and highly polarised public debates. Yet the language used to manage these tensions often obscures underlying questions of power. Decisions are presented as procedural rather than political. Restrictions are justified through appeals to safety, balance, neutrality, or institutional responsibility. The political dimensions of these choices become difficult to identify precisely because they are translated into administrative language.

Sara Ahmed's (2021) analysis of institutional life helps illuminate this process. Ahmed shows how institutions frequently transform political challenges into procedural questions. Complaints become administrative cases. Structural inequalities become matters of policy compliance. Demands for change are redirected into bureaucratic processes. In a similar way, humanitarian speech can be transformed from an ethical intervention into a governance problem requiring management.

The concept of riskification ultimately captures a broader transformation in university governance. Humanitarian speech is increasingly evaluated not only for its scholarly or ethical significance but also for its potential institutional consequences. This shift illustrates how academic freedom is becoming shaped by administrative rationalities that prioritise organisational resilience, reputational protection, and risk management. Rather than relying primarily on direct censorship, contemporary universities increasingly regulate difficult conversations through procedural mechanisms that redefine politically sensitive speech as an issue of institutional governance. The significance of Gaza, therefore, extends beyond a single geopolitical conflict. It exposes wider changes in how universities negotiate academic freedom, public responsibility, and humanitarian engagement in an increasingly risk-conscious higher education environment.

Why neutrality is not neutral

Universities frequently present neutrality as a foundational principle of academic life. During moments of political conflict, institutional statements often emphasise balance, impartiality, and the need to avoid taking sides. Such positions are usually justified as necessary for protecting academic freedom, maintaining community cohesion, and preserving the university as a space for open debate. Neutrality appears to offer a way of managing disagreement without privileging particular political viewpoints. Yet neutrality is never as straightforward as it appears. Critical scholars have long argued that institutions do not stand outside politics; rather, they participate in shaping which voices are amplified, which concerns are recognised, and which forms of knowledge acquire legitimacy. The decision not to speak is itself a form of institutional action. Silence, like speech, has political consequences.

Rather than functioning as the absence of politics, neutrality often operates as a particular mode of institutional governance. Decisions about whether to issue statements, host events, or publicly acknowledge humanitarian crises are rarely made in a political vacuum. Instead, they are shaped by competing pressures surrounding institutional reputation, public legitimacy, legal responsibility, and stakeholder expectations. The significance of neutrality therefore lies not in its claim to impartiality, but in how it structures which forms of humanitarian concern become institutionally acceptable and which remain politically difficult to express

Sara Ahmed's analysis of institutional diversity work demonstrates how institutions frequently adopt the language of inclusion while simultaneously limiting the transformative implications of that language. Institutions often present themselves as responsive and progressive, yet they remain deeply invested in preserving existing structures and avoiding disruption. The language of neutrality can function in a similar way. It creates an appearance of impartiality while obscuring the unequal effects of institutional decisions.

Achille Mbembe's work on power and human vulnerability further deepens this critique. Mbembe (2019) argues that modern forms of governance shape not only how people live but also whose lives become publicly valued and protected. Political communities are structured through distinctions between those whose suffering commands attention and those whose suffering remains peripheral. Although universities are not states, they are institutions that participate in broader processes of recognition. Their responses to humanitarian crises inevitably communicate judgments about whose experiences matter and whose claims deserve public engagement. This does not mean universities should become partisan actors or abandon commitments to intellectual pluralism. The argument is not that universities must endorse particular political positions. Rather, the argument is that neutrality should not be confused with the absence of politics. Every institutional decision takes place within a field of power. Refusing to acknowledge this reality risks transforming neutrality into a mechanism through which existing inequalities remain unchallenged.

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The Gaza crisis has revealed that neutrality is not the opposite of politics. It is one way of organising politics. Understanding this distinction is essential if universities are to remain places where humanitarian concerns can be discussed openly rather than managed quietly through the language of institutional risk.

Academic freedom after Gaza

The debates surrounding Gaza have revealed more than disagreements about a particular geopolitical conflict. They have exposed deeper transformations in the governance of contemporary universities. At stake is not only how institutions respond to one humanitarian crisis, but how they understand academic freedom, public responsibility, and the role of the university itself. This essay has argued that the current moment is characterised by the riskification of humanitarian speech. Humanitarian concerns are increasingly interpreted through administrative frameworks concerned with reputation, security, legal exposure, donor relations, and organisational stability. Speech is not necessarily prohibited. Instead, it is governed, managed, reviewed, delayed, and contained through institutional procedures that seek to minimise disruption. The result is a subtle but significant shift in the conditions under which academic freedom operates.

The significance of this development extends beyond Gaza. Universities are likely to confront future crises involving war, displacement, climate catastrophe, racial injustice, democratic decline, and other forms of human suffering. In each case, institutions will face pressures to balance intellectual openness against concerns about controversy and reputational risk. The challenge is whether universities will continue to understand their primary responsibility as the management of institutional exposure or whether they will remain committed to creating spaces where difficult ethical and political questions can be examined openly.

The lesson of Gaza is therefore not simply that academic freedom is under pressure. It is that academic freedom is increasingly being evaluated through the logic of risk management. If universities become primarily concerned with avoiding controversy, they risk narrowing the very intellectual space they were created to protect. The future of academic freedom may ultimately depend on whether institutions can distinguish between genuine threats to their communities and the unavoidable discomfort that accompanies democratic inquiry.

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