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Biographical Reflections On Academic Freedom—Part One

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Abstract

During the Covid-19 pandemic, we all became used to people wearing masks and covering their faces to protect society. By now these masks are off and we can clearly see everyone's faces; we can read their lips and can understand their expressions and gestures. Words, however, are not coming freely from these mouths. The war on Gaza is just the last example of how questions of how to talk and what can be said permeate the academic community, undermining the essence of being a researcher, teacher and scholar. We, the editors of *PARISS* felt that we should not remain silent on this topic, which affects all of us, albeit in rather different ways. Therefore, we decided to write a collective article in which we could combine voices of various experiences, creating a patchwork of insights on how dilemmas of academic freedom appear in different guises in our experiences.

Keywords

Academic freedom – collective – Israel – Gaza

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- ¹ This is a collective article, published under the name 'PARISS collective', consisting of (Corresponding author) Didier Bigo, Akos Kopper, Emma Mc Cluskey, Elspeth Guild, Nicholas De Genova, Arnaud Kurze, Anna Leander, Catherine Goetze, Mark Maguire and Anastassia Tsoukala. Each author, however, is responsible for their own contribution, and names of respective authors are listed next to the title of each intervention. The order of contributions (and order of authors who constitute *PARISS* Collective) has been chosen randomly.

Ireland Unfree—Mark Maguire

Freedom of expression, academic freedom, and intellectual responsibility are rarely discussed in the same breath. However, they have recently collided in ways that threaten Irish university life. In 2023 and early 2024, the government of Ireland spent considerable effort trying to push deeply unpopular legislation on “hate speech” through parliament, while academics are demanding institutional support for their activism, and responsibility is vanishing in the fog of a culture war. Here, I discuss the currents, historical and political, roiling academic life in a post-colony, and some of the tensions surfacing.

Academic freedom in the Republic of Ireland is expressed in the *Universities Act* of 1997 as the right to “test received wisdom, to put forward new ideas and to state controversial or unpopular opinions” in or outside the university without fear of penalization. This robust formulation passed into law during the *mise-en-scène* of a new, progressive, and global-facing republic, just as sectarian hostilities in Northern Ireland formally ceased, and the curtain fell on the censorious influence of the Catholic Church. The legislators ventriloquized the zeitgeist by aiming to protect universities from authoritarian moralizers in search of an institutional home. However, to paraphrase Edgar Allen Poe, the disease is now inside the walls.

During the past quarter of a century, the span of my academic career, I have noted the moments during which academic freedom has surfaced in national conversations. It has mainly been when political voices demanded investment in business-oriented or employment-ready degrees over the (“uneconomic”) humanities and social sciences or when cost-cutting civil servants sought to slash through the protection of employment tenure. However, the conflict between Israel and Palestine has regularly spotlighted academic freedom.

Indeed, the Irish Federation of University Teachers, which represents most academics, has been dragged both for expressing solidarity with Palestine and rejecting calls to boycott Israel. Moreover, in the wake of the horror of October 7th, and the subsequent invasion of Gaza, university vice presidents sent messages urging academics to restrain themselves from denouncing disinterested colleagues. Why does Israel and Palestine loom so large in Ireland? After all, borrowing from Elizabeth Bowen, it is just an island moored loosely off northern Europe.

Many Irish republicans situate their “struggle” alongside international civil rights campaigns and post-colonial liberation movements. This is not a theoretical gesture: During the 1970s, the IRA maintained close ties with ETA, the Baader-Meinhof Gang, and especially with the PLO, with whom they regularly traded arms and expertise. Little wonder, then, that Belfast has regularly been festooned with pro-Palestine murals. In this context, at least viewed from the perspective of the Republic of Ireland, one would assume that, given the island’s small size, the relationship between political radicals and activist academics would either be uncomfortably close or happily distant. However, across the humanities and social sciences, academics have formulated decolonization theories without feeling the urge to practice them and self-identify as the “resistance” without coarsening their hands in the marketplace of ideas.

It is notable that the ghost of Edward Said still hovers over Ireland. Said’s essay “Yeats and Decolonisation” marked a critical moment in his career and it influenced the Irish intellectual scene greatly. However, academics generally preferred to bracket his political commitments and his views on the university in society. There is no discussion today of Said’s objection to the Irish peace process, and few even know that he echoed Max Weber by cautioning against those who would turn the lectern into a political bully pulpit for “a new ascendancy [that would] prescribe and anathematize”.²⁸ Said’s ghost warns us that many academics wish to wave a sword without wielding it, but even soulless symbolic gestures bring dangers.

In the immediate aftermath of October 7th, *Irish Times* journalists set the cultural tone, describing the horrors that unfolded and the IDF’s response in purely military and geopolitical terms. Immediately, academics saturated the public sphere with “context” statements, mainly Middle Eastern history washed through a colourless, odourless fluid of post-colonial theory. Consensus

28 Cited in Daniel, Gordon “‘The Politics of the Classroom Are Not the Politics of the World’: An Unpublished Speech by Edward W. Said,” *Philosophy and Literature* 44(2): 380–394, 2020, 385.

loves simplicity. Hundreds of academics signed a public letter demanding a boycott of Israeli higher education. A few signed a counter-letter opposing the politicization of universities. However, despite Ireland's trade links with Israel, including millions of unethical euros in purchases from arms producers, there is no opposition position. Instead, we have academics demanding their universities reflect their moral values, with a minority worrying that society now sees the lectern as a pulpit for moralizing disguised as critical thinking. After all, the public demand for business-oriented or employment-ready degrees has already brought a precipitous decline in arts and humanities enrolments, and the cost-cutting civil servants are scratching at the door.

At first glance, campus conflict over academic freedom seems unrelated to the rising censoriousness in society, but this is certainly not so in Ireland. Many of the academics who are calling for boycotts and denouncing colleagues for remaining outside the arena are the ones who crafted and supported Ireland's forthcoming incitement to violence, hatred, and hate offenses legislation. Strangely, the fact that international intellectuals who have expressed solidarity with Palestine have been accused of hate speech has not dampened the academic enthusiasm for censorship. The public is overwhelmingly against the new law in Ireland, but the political class, unelected NGO representatives, and academics are offering full-throated support. The exemption enjoyed by those sectors under the proposed legislation may explain their reaction. Academic freedom will soon no longer be a right but rather a privilege.

Today, as bombs fall on Gaza, the new ascendancy is portraying Ireland as the "island of solidarity" while using legislation to convert rights and responsibilities into privileges to be enjoyed by the elect few. Said's warning that they will "prescribe and anathematize" knowledge seems prophetic. He was inspired by and fearful of the darkness WB Yeats detected in people who presented as saviours but whose values were pretence:

The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.

Israel-Palestinian conflict and academic freedom in Greece—Anastassia Tsoukala

Contrary to what has been observed in many liberal democracies, the present Israel-Palestinian conflict has not entailed any restrictions on academic freedom in Greece. Pro-Palestinian protests have, on occasion, been repressed unprovokedly but scholars are free to express their point of view, in academia

as well as in both mainstream and social media, though the Greek government has clearly supported Israel from the very beginning of the conflict.

This freedom of expression does not stem from a robust state of academic freedom. In the latest edition of the Academic Freedom Index²⁹ the country ranks 67th out of 179 countries; in the 2023 edition it ranked 81st, and in the 2022 one it ranked 74th.³⁰ Moreover, deep concerns of both Greek leftwing politicians and civil society over the wavering state of the rule of law were recently shared by the European Parliament.³¹ The preservation of academic freedom with regard to the Israel-Palestinian conflict therefore calls for an explanation that is arguably dissociated from civil liberties-related issues, to be grounded in both domestic and international interests at stake.

At the domestic level, the longstanding vulnerability of the post-war small Greek-Jewish community,³² due to deeply-rooted antisemitism,³³ is presently heightened in front of the combined effect of the impressive re-emergence of the far-right in the central political arena³⁴ and the traditional Pro-Palestinian position of leftwing and far-left parties and groups. Given this explosive mixture of limited political support and broadly diffused social hatred, it is plausible to assume that any government attempt to foster its unpopular pro-Israel stance

29 "Academic Freedom Index 2024" Academic Freedom Index, https://academic-freedom-index.net/research/Academic_Freedom_Index_Update_2024.pdf, accessed March 30, 2024.

30 "Academic Freedom Index 2022" Academic Freedom Index, <https://www.pol.phil.fau.de/files/2022/03/afi-update-2022.pdf>, accessed March 30, 2024 and "Academic Freedom Index 2023" Academic Freedom Index, https://academic-freedom-index.net/research/Academic_Freedom_Index_Update.pdf, accessed March 30, 2024

31 European Parliament, "Resolution on the rule of law and media freedom in Greece", February 7 2024, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2024-0069_EN.html, accessed March 19, 2024

32 Core Jewish population is estimated at 4,100 persons, i.e. 0,38 per 1,000 in the population (Institute for Jewish Policy Research, <https://www.jpr.org.uk/countries/how-many-jews-in-greece>).

33 Apostolou, Andrew. "The crudest hatred: antisemitism and apologia for terrorism in contemporary Greece." *AXT/Antisemitism and Xenophobia Today* (2005). London: Institute for Jewish Policy Research <https://www.cohen.gr/newEn/apostolou.pdf>, accessed March 28, 2024

34 In the 2023 general elections, three far-right parties won 12,8% of the national vote. See Patrick Smith "Far-right victories in Greece highlight trend across Europe", *NBC News*, June 27th 2023 <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/election-greece-right-wing-spartans-trend-europe-italy-lepen-vox-rcna91094>, accessed March 26, 2024

by restricting academic freedom would have jeopardized the very safety of the Greek-Jewish community.

In this anti-Israeli context, infringement of academic freedom might also be harmful to the ever-growing bilateral strategic partnership that covers many different fields, ranging from defense and energy to tourism, trade and technology.³⁵ Widespread anti-Israeli feelings are somewhat contained by the fact that bilateral close relations are limited to core state issues and financial affairs. Enlargement of these fields at the expense of civil society, which is nowadays hypersensitive to civil liberties endangered by the overall enfeebled rule of law, would probably stir up both antisemitic and critical leftwing reactions that in turn could produce, even in short-term, undesirable effects on the growth of the bilateral partnership.

These factors interact with the collective memory of the troubled political history of the country, marked by an array of authoritarian and dictatorial regimes. Since its coming to power, in 2019, the present government has been heavily criticized for its increasingly authoritarian mode of governance.³⁶ Immediate restrictions on academic freedom would have revived memories of dictatorial censorship likely to impact on the results of the second round of the regional and municipal elections, held on October 15, 2023, and posterior ones would be harmful to government legitimacy under constant attack for the overall decline of the rule of law.

Nonetheless, however important these domestic interests at stake may be, they would not have prevailed if they were subordinated to major international ones. As will be explained below, this was not the case despite Greece being clearly under the US sphere of influence. Actually, in geopolitical terms, Greece is undoubtedly an important player in the Eastern Mediterranean but remains less powerful than Turkey in that it can neither control nor profit eventually

35 Nedos, Vassilis “Greek-Israeli strategic partnership is ‘rock-solid’”, *I Kathimerini*, July 9 2023, <https://www.ekathimerini.com/opinion/interviews/1215021/greek-israeli-strategic-partnership-is-rock-solid>, accessed March 28, 2024.

36 Tsoukala, Anastassia. “Government multiform authoritarianism” (in Greek), *3Point Magazine*, March 21 2021, <https://3pointmagazine.gr/o-polymorfos-aytarchismos>, accessed March 30, 2024; Rafenberg, Marina, “Greek PM Mitsotakis seeks second term playing on a ‘me or chaos’ strategy”, *Le Monde*, May 21 2023, https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2023/05/21/greek-pm-mitsotakis-seeks-second-term-playing-on-a-me-or-chaos-strategy_6027458_4.html, accessed March 30, 2024

from many different, and often conflictual, regional interests.³⁷ In the Balkans, the expected regional stabilization following the signing of the 2018 Prespa Agreement has not been achieved for the Greek foreign policy from 2019 on has either decelerated the improvement of neighboring relations or fueled conflictual ones,³⁸ thus preventing the country from guiding public opinion beyond its borders. For what matters here then, opinions expressed by Greek scholars have very limited, if any, international impact.

Low international influence is further limited by the marginal position held by the Greek language at the international level. Academic opinions expressed in Greek would only matter if they were broadcasted by foreign mass media in English. A highly improbable hypothesis as this would annihilate the restrictions on academic freedom imposed in the countries concerned. Greece's international weakness in geopolitical and linguistic terms therefore leaves intact the importance of the domestic interests at stake, thus allowing Greek scholars to publicly criticise Israel's war on Gaza.

This leads to the rather ironic conclusion that the protection of civil liberties seems to be divorced from the robustness of the rule of law in a given country. Academic freedom has been infringed in countries with long parliamentary traditions and protected in a country suffering from a sharp decline in civil rights and liberties. This apparent paradox is arguably explained by the fact that freedom-restricting countries are at the same time predominant geopolitical players and powerful influencers in linguistic terms. Opinions expressed by their scholars had to be hushed because they were likely to influence both domestic and international public opinion and, hence, put pressure on respective political decisions that play a crucial role in the Israel-Palestinian conflict. Domestic factors, such as the volume and the political, financial, and social power of respective Jewish communities, are certainly important in both electoral terms and power-relations but arguably come second to geopolitical and geo-economic interests at stake.

37 Tsardanidis, Charalambos. "Greece's Changing role in the Eastern Mediterranean." *The new geopolitics of the Eastern Mediterranean: Trilateral partnerships and regional security*, Friedrich-Ebert Stiftung, and Peace Research Institute Oslo, Report No 3 (2019): 73–93. Mallinson, William, Pavel Kanevskiy, and Aris Petasis. "Then is now, but the colours are new: Greece, Cyprus and the evolving power game between the West, Russia and Turkey in the Eastern Mediterranean." *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies* 22, no. 3 (2020): 306–332.

38 Alice Taylor and Sarantis Michalopoulos. "Greece pressures Albania to show "way out" of bilateral crisis" *Euractiv*, November 14 2023, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/news/greece-pressures-albania-to-show-way-out-of-bilateral-crisis>, accessed March 29, 2024.