

· Issue 53 ·

Academic Freedom and the Idea of the University

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Academia as an assemblage: Academic freedom and boycotting Israel

Luca Falzea

Abstract

This article examines academic freedom within the neoliberal restructuring of universities, conceptualising academia as an assemblage of dynamic and contested elements. It argues that neoliberal logics of marketisation, precarity, and managerialism reshape academic values, narrowing freedom to align with capitalist imperatives. Against this backdrop, the article analyses two Italian case studies regarding debates on cutting ties with Israeli universities complicit in military oppression [1]. Their divergent outcomes illustrate how definitions of academic freedom may differ within the specific assemblages of technical and general universities. Ultimately, the article calls for a critical engagement with academic freedom's political dimensions.

Introduction: Academic Freedom and the Neoliberal Turn

Engaging critically with universities, the way they produce knowledge and their contradictions is vital to understand the role they play in enforcing and creating oppression. Various contributions have argued that the university system has been undergoing – for decades and in almost the entire world – a neoliberal restructuring, with a progressive corporatization of universities (Connell, 2019). Slaughter and Leslie (1999) argue the neoliberal turn has led academic staff to behave like entrepreneurs, since they find themselves having to compete for funding opportunities and must respond to the growing demand for scientific productivity that follows the logic of a capitalist system,

where the main objective is profit rather than scientific advancement. They define this new approach as academic capitalism. This neoliberal turn, combined with the precarity of academic jobs, is particularly impactful for early career researchers and for researchers from marginalised communities (Loher and Strasser, 2019; Hartung et al., 2017; Veijola and Joniken, 2018; Araneda-Guirriman and Sepúlveda-Paéz, 2021). In this neoliberal context, it is interesting to look at how the concept of academic freedom is developed and discussed. The neoliberal turn has jeopardised core academic values, such as freedom, as researchers and professors are constrained by requests to comply with the managerial demands of the institutions and provide results that would bring funds and prestige to the university (Harris, 2006; Lynch and Ivancheva, 2015; Gasser, 2024). In addition, the recently renewed Israeli aggression in Gaza has escalated acts of suppression of free speech within the academic communities whenever researchers, professors and students dissented against Israel's actions in Palestine (Butler, 2025).

The aim of this contribution is to look at the process of defining academic freedom through the clash of different elements within what I define as an academia assemblage. To do so I first develop a framework to understand academia and academic freedom as an assemblage, thanks to a review of the literature. Then I move to look at two case studies from Italian academia to see how they dealt with requests of defunding and interrupting collaboration with Israeli universities, considering their contribution to the war effort in Gaza and their occupation of Palestinian lands. The case studies were chosen because they refused to interrupt their relations with Israeli universities tout court, using the necessity of protecting academic freedom as a motivation. While the two institutions used similar discourse to support their decisions, they differ in the way they decided to deal with Israeli universities and collaboration with Israeli researchers and academia. Institution A has decided to adopt a case-by-case approach examining every single proposal of collaboration with Israeli entities to determine if it would breach international law or the ethical code of the institution, thus refusing the notion of systematic violence perpetrated by Israel. Institution B instead committed only to a general condemnation of war and war crimes worldwide. The difference in response stem from the different assemblage of the two institutions, as for Institution B the military use of technology and military funding is prominent. Through looking at these two cases the article seeks to stimulate a discussion within academic circles to engage critically with the concept of academic freedom.

Academia as an Assemblage

An assemblage can be defined as a complex intersection of different elements that dynamically engage with one another: as such an assemblage is not a given, nor it is the result of a random interaction between elements, but it is instead a process of becoming (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987; Stivale, 2012). Assemblages are comprised of many different elements that change through time, but this does not exclude the possibility of assemblages forming what is perceived as a stable entity (De Landa, 2006; 2016).

Elements constituting an assemblage might be people, relationships, objects, data and, more importantly, codes and languages; languages often mark the boundaries between internal and external elements of an assemblage, as there are codes that are intelligible only to those who participate directly in it (*ibidem*).

Considering universities as an assemblage requires analysis around the historicity of constituting elements and practices of academia: a “romantic” view would imagine academia as a place of progress, where students and teachers share the same love for knowledge and where the institution fosters relationships of mutual respect between its components with the goal to strive for a better, more enlightened society. While this is, of course, an ideal view of what academia is, ideal perceptions of an object and discourse around it, nonetheless, are part of the assemblage constituting it. Ultimately, we could consider as elements of an academia assemblage the recognised functions of it – mainly teaching and research – the people participating in it – academic staff, researchers, teachers and students – and the organisational and bureaucratic practices they perform in their daily academic activities (Bacevic, 2019). Assemblages are dynamic and their elements are connected through relationships of power: considering academia as an assemblage, thus means to wonder how these relationships come to be and how they’re influenced by the neoliberal turn. For example, an important element of the academia assemblage in neoliberal times is its relation to the market and the way it shapes research.

There are many definitions of academic freedom: freedom of the individual researchers in doing and saying what they feel; freedom of the institution in pursuing whatever line of research it deems more beneficial to it; freedom as a communal value, inserted in a framework of values that posit academia as a space of intellectual curiosity for the betterment of society (Åkerlind and Kayrooz, 2003). In general, academic freedom, according to a critical definition of it, should represent a challenge to the status quo and strive for change (Boden and Epstein, 2011; Steinmetz, 2018). This last definition could be threatened by the neoliberal turn, as capitalistic approaches have a very specific definition of freedom based on the liberty of being able to participate in the market, that is however constructed around the needs of dominating classes who holds the means of production (Marx, 1887; Johnson 2023).

Different approaches to the definition of freedom within academia could clash: the way this concept is formulated and applied reflects on the identity of researchers and institutions and thus its definition is fundamental in defining what universities are and what researchers should do (Berger, 1971). Adopting an assemblage perspective means to look at this conflict between different ideas of freedom as part of the dynamic movement within it: it means to ask what definitions of academic freedom are brought forward by different actors and in what way this struggle between different ideas of freedom could change academia. This internal struggle in defining what academic freedom is can be particularly visible in the discussion developed within two Italian universities about their relationship with Israeli institutions.

Academic Freedom as a Mean of Control: Two Italian Case Studies

The debate around academic freedom and the request for a boycott of Israeli higher education institutions is not new, but it was sparked anew by the renewed effort in Israel to massacre Palestinians in Gaza, after it suffered an attack by Hamas in October 2023. The Boycott, Disinvest, Sanction (BDS) Palestinian-led movement reunites those who believe that due to its violation of international law and Palestinian rights [2] it is necessary to call for boycotting Israeli institutions complicit in the apartheid regime. This includes universities that collaborate with the Israeli state to develop technologies for military uses and those institutions – such as Ariel University – that are built on occupied Palestinian land. Different authors have looked at the way the resistance to the boycott movement was supported by a generic call to protect academic freedom (Butler, 2006; Knopf-Newman, 2008; Landy et al., 2020; Kagee, 2022), as detractors of the BDS movement denounced the reduced freedom of expressing a Zionist identity (Atkins and Elman, 2021) and the risks connected to the effort to “bring politics within university” (Fisher et al., 2024).

Through looking at two case studies from Italy on the discussion about academic freedom and the boycott of Israeli universities this article seeks to be inserted into the rich debate around these topics; moreover, I argue that the use of the assemblage notion could help to criticise both visions that want academia to be an “apolitical space” (ibid) – as the notion of assemblage captures the inescapable political and material reality of academic knowledge production – and narrow visions of academic freedom as a bourgeoisie concept.

The first case is that of Institution A. In 2024, after six months of Israeli war in Gaza, the Senate of the institution approved a motion that committed the university to advocate for the stopping of dual use technologies [3]; and in 2025, in light of the intensification of Israel brutality in Gaza, the Senate of the institution deliberated again on the matter, starting from a proposal coming from Social Sciences and Humanities faculty members, to cease every collaboration with Israeli universities and with Israel itself. Instead, it was suggested to rewrite the text of the proposal with a mandate to a special commission to do so. This resulted in the decision to evaluate on a case-by-case basis if a collaboration with a given institution could result in the institution’s complicity with war crimes and a renewed commitment to evaluate attentively the risks of dual-use research. The newly approved text also encouraged collaboration with Israeli entities and individuals critical of the ongoing attack. The reason behind this reworked position was to protect researchers’ freedom in pursuing research projects and in the promotion of dialogue and peace between institutions. Similarly, Institution B refused to adopt a similar proposition on the ground of protecting freedom of research. However, differently from Institution A, the compromise led to a simple statement of general condemnation for war crimes anywhere in the world and no commitment to stop dual-use research as requested many academics who authored the proposal.

In both these cases, static definitions of academic freedom as a core value of academia or as a tool used by the establishment to silence dissent fail to capture the nature of the struggle around the concept after Israeli aggression in Gaza and the call to boycott. Using the notion of assemblage to look at these cases could help us understand why the discussion, although similar, had different outcomes. At Institution A, the struggle resulted in an ethical commitment for the institution that recognised both a wider definition of freedom, rooted in the protection of fundamental rights and a fight against oppression, and a more specific one, as freedom for researchers to perform their job as they wish. Institution B is a technical university: in its assemblage the notion of what research is for is probably more often connected to projects that would have an impact in the market; technical universities and engineering departments within them play a fundamental role in the development of dual-use technology (Vossoughi & Vakil, 2018; Wolfe, 2022; Lancione, 2023; Porter & Siddiqui, 2024; Corgnier et. al., 2025). This means that the notion of academic freedom as “freedom within the market” within that assemblage is stronger. Using the notion of assemblage goes beyond the use of a discursive framework, as it requires a focus on the particular socio-material configurations of the two institutions that inform the notion of academic freedom and how it is implemented. Material and immaterial elements such as funding organisations, the role of the university within the industrial and military complex and the way research is governed and performed are key elements of the assemblage that define different approaches to academic freedom.

Conclusions

This article seeks to understand the concept of academic freedom within what can be described as the assemblage of academia. While the focus is on the discourse around the boycott of Israeli institutions, the reflections it offers can be applied in general to the role of academia in supporting war. We can observe different elements that define academic freedom: freedom of individual researchers; freedom as a process inscribed in a larger definition of human rights and the role of universities in upholding them; freedom to participate in a market and generate economic value (Åkerlind and Kayrooz, 2003). In the case of Institution A, the clash between these elements led to a hybridization of the concept of academic freedom that resulted in actions that can be described as a soft boycott that protects both individual freedom and the recognition of universities' leading role in advocating for peace through concrete action. Institution B has a different approach that can be explained by the presence of stronger economic relationships in technical universities with institutions that produce knowledge used in war processes (Vossoughi & Vakil, 2018; Wolfe, 2022; Lancione, 2023; Porter & Siddiqui, 2024; Corgnier et. al., 2025). In both cases the risks – which I argue as sociologists we are called to consider – are that of using the protection of academic (individual) freedom as a mechanism through which universities and people within it avoid facing the ugly truth of the role academia is having in funding and supporting brutal military aggression in Palestine. In the case of Institution A, the case-by-case evaluation could reinforce the idea that the Palestinian oppression is not systemic; in the case of Institution B, the general

call to stop wars everywhere could be too general indeed, resulting in making it difficult to engage critically with the role of universities in specific wars and in the Israeli oppression of Palestine. The difference between the two cases is not simply a matter of ideological differences but of the complexities recognisable in the assemblage of the two institutions: relationship with research, funding opportunities, the role of the military complex in supporting technical research, these elements contribute to the development of different definitions and implementation of academic freedom.

This article tries to advance the discussion on the role of academia in time of wars, to go beyond a shallow definition of it as an “apolitical space” (Fisher et al., 2024), recognising that the discussion around academic freedom is political in nature and that individual and institutional positions around Israeli attack in Gaza are all political as well, whether they call for a boycott or not. Future research could further deepen our understanding of the academia assemblage and engage in comparative studies between countries and between general and technical universities in dealing with dual use technology regulation in general.

Footnotes

[1] The two cases presented in this article, while interesting for many reasons, cannot offer a general picture of the debate on the topic within Italian academia. Many Italian institutions and research centres, as well as individual researchers, have expressed opinions and presented policies on the collaboration with Israeli universities since 2023. As such this contribution should be read as an example of how discussion around academic freedom and Israeli boycott can develop within academia and how these issues can be understood through the notion of assemblage. Future contributions could study more closely the Italian case or offer a comparative look between countries, starting from empirical research.

[2] The violations committed by Israel are detailed by different NGOs such as [Amnesty International](#), [Human Rights Watch](#) and [B'Tselem](#). They are also detailed in numerous scientific contributions such as Abdelnour (2013), Farsakh (2015), Rasheed (2016), Handel et al. (2017), Shafir (2017), Barakat et al. (2020), Baconi (2022).

[3] Dual-use refers to the technology that, while developed for civilian use, is also implemented in military effort. Mahfoud and colleagues (2018) argue that the term should be revised as the distinction between civilian and military technology development has become increasingly blurred.

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Author

Luca Falzea

Faculty of Socio-political sciences, Scuola Normale Superiore

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Speculative, slow, and critical research also constitutes legitimate knowledge production

Frederik Boris Hylstrup Olsen

This article offers a theoretically grounded and personally reflective account of how academic freedom is increasingly constrained by neoliberal logics in higher education, particularly within the Danish context. Focusing on the delegitimization of critical, Marxist, and normative research, it explores how institutional pressures, such as demands for impact, efficiency, and neutrality, produce subtle forms of...

Knowledge Production, Academia, and ‘Anti-Gender’ Mobilisations

Roberto Kulpa, Toni Kania, Adrianna Zabrzewska

Across the globe, researchers in gender and sexuality have identified a significant shift in knowledge production driven by ‘anti-gender’ mobilisations. Movements opposing LGBTIQ+ rights, trans rights, reproductive and sexual health rights - most often also voicing xenophobic, anti-migrant, and racist views - increasingly assert (pseudo) scientific evidence against what they label ‘gender ideology’,...

Militarization and Its Discontents: How Wartime Pressures Threaten Academic Freedom in Ukraine

Anna Ivanova

The war that Russia waged against Ukraine almost four years ago poses a threat not only to the state of Ukrainian democracy in general but also seriously endangers academic freedom in Ukraine. On one level, the academic infrastructure faces the risk of destruction, including universities and research facilities, and individual scholars are forced to leave their homes and grapple with the manifold...

Marija Vasić’s Public Sociology and the Cost of Struggle

Kristina Pejkočić

Sociologist Marija Vasić recognizes that, in a society with weak institutions and a polarized public sphere, it is not sufficient to practice sociology solely through the publication (see Vasić 2017; 2021) or within the confines of a school curriculum. The socio-political situation in Serbia has been particularly tense since November 1, 2024, when the collapse of the canopy at Novi Sad Railway Station killed 16...