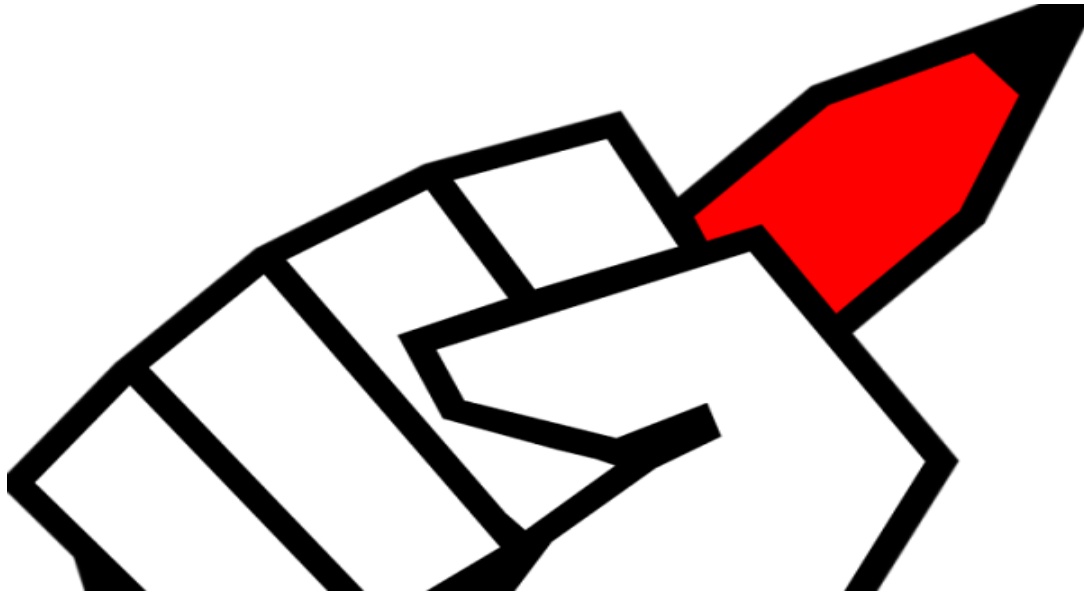


# Introduction: Academic Freedom in Crisis

Daniel Nehring and Dylan Kerrigan |

First Published on <http://www.socialsciencespace.com> September 2, 2016



*This essay is the first in a series on Academic Freedom in Crisis curated by socialsciencespace. In the current context of the apparent retreat of academic freedom across the world, the series of short essays appearing in the coming weeks explore this question in a variety of contexts and consider contemporary issues of academic freedom from a range of perspectives, focusing both on British and international trends. eSS is reprinting this and selected contributions with permission. For the entire series please follow [www.socialsciencespace.com](http://www.socialsciencespace.com).*

The past eight years, beginning with the collapse of Lehman Brothers in 2008, are commonly described as a time of global crisis. Some outstanding explorations of the term notwithstanding (e.g. 1, 2, 3), it has become overused in public life and politics, and it now seems practically meaningless. Amongst all the cacophonous crisis talk, however, a growing and troublesome predicament has been largely overlooked. Academic freedom – scholars’ ability to engage the intellectual exchanges of their discipline without restraint and fear of punishment – seems to be in retreat across the world.

This claim refers as much to authoritarian states that limit freedom of speech on the whole as to liberal democracies that ostensibly guarantee freedom of scholarly inquiry. This crisis of academic freedom might be usefully understood in the context of broader transformations of universities and academic life at the international level. Over the past two decades, universities across the world have begun a transformation from scholarly institutions, concerned with intellectual pursuit in terms of their own merits, into an industry, concerned with the pursuit of measurable contributions to economic life. In other words, academic work and culture has been thoroughly financialised, through [shifts in governments’ policy](#), the efforts of international organisations, and the growing importance within universities of a new class of managers who view academia as business.

Academic labour is thus increasingly driven by the rigours of competition for resources – grant

funds, publication universities, other sources of money and indicators of prestige – between rival academics and universities, rather than the desire for intellectual conversations for their own sake. The success or failure of academic labour is today measured through sets of standardised quantitative indicators that express academic labour in terms of a rigid hierarchy, from global university rankings to national league tables to individual academics' performance in customer satisfaction surveys.

Conscious of the value of their brand, commercially minded universities have begun to regulate academic speech – British universities' [tone of voice](#) policies are one particularly egregious example of this trend. Within this new commercial regime, instrumentally useful disciplines – finance and economics, the natural sciences, and so forth – have come to dominate, and scholars across the humanities and social sciences find it increasingly difficult to justify their work.

At the same time, scholarly voices are gradually disappearing from public life and political conversations. Britain's debate about its departure from the European Union was marked by wholehearted anti-intellectual defamations of 'experts' and claims about immigration that contradict published research. In Japan, the government recently undertook a sustained effort to close down humanities and social science departments across the country ([1](#), [2](#)). All these changes, of course concern these academics who are still employed in positions that allow them to engage in scholarship and take part in academic conversations in a meaningful way. In many countries, academic labour is becoming increasingly precarious, and in some, short-term, part-time work on the outer fringes of academia is all a majority of PhD graduates may hope for ([1](#), [2](#), [3](#), [4](#), [5](#), [6](#)). How, under these conditions, is it still meaningful at all to speak of academic freedom?

The following series of short essays to appear in the coming weeks explore this question in a variety of contexts and consider contemporary issues of academic freedom from a range of perspectives, focusing both on British and international trends.

These trends and questions include:

- 1) exploring the censorship of ideas and the erosion of universities as places of debate. What are the long-term effects of preventing alternative ideas from being aired and how does this impact the diversity of ideas essential to a university's purpose as a space of academic freedom?
- 2) The more general question of what is academic freedom is also considered. What are its limits, what actions impose force on its possibilities, how does it shape our individual behaviours, where and when does power curtail scientific distance, and when did academic freedom move from insubordination toward control and what sorts of (emotional) people must academics become to function in this new academic world?
- 3) Providing a more historical lens an account of what really happened to the British university system between the late 1960s and today is also provided. What were the changes that took the system from its gains in the post social movement era to its situation today of the neoliberal university and how did the changes emerge?
- 4) In a similar vein we also tackle what happened to universities during the Thatcher era as they were subjected to processes of the competitive accumulation of Capital, and how as a result the Soviet-esque 'command economy' is a useful analogy for the neoliberal transformation of the university.
- 5) We also look at the financialisation of the academic book publishing industry and raise questions about changes in the production cycle and ethos of academic publishing in the 21st century. What does the emergence of a franchise system within academic publishing suggest has happened to the traditional purpose of academic knowledge

production, academic disciplines and academic authors themselves?

6) And finally, in this new academic marketplace of academic entrepreneurs, competitive labour and audit cultures what happens to academic lecturers? How are they controlled, how is the precarisation of their labour used to shape and tame them in line with managerial demands, and who wins in the battle between bureaucracy and academic knowledge production?

Taken together we hope these various contributions to the question of academic freedom in the 21st century raise questions, provide context and stimulate thinking.

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