

# Trump and Academic Freedom

Contribution to the debate

“Will Trump’s second presidency be good or bad for academic freedom?”  
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Tonight’s topic is Trump and academic freedom. But I feel obliged to say at the outset: with Donald Trump in power for the next 4 years, academic freedom is really the least of my worries. I’m much more concerned about truth, about democracy and the rule of law, and more generally about sanity — to say nothing of Trump’s appalling and very dangerous conduct of foreign policy.

Let’s start with truth. Of course, we all know that many politicians have a challenged relationship with truth; but Trump is simply off the scale. The problem is not just the hundreds of minor lies like those concerning the size of his 2017 inauguration or Haitian immigrants in Ohio supposedly stealing and eating pets; it is Big Lies like insisting he won the 2020 election and calling the January 6 riots a “day of love”. As one incisive 20th-century political thinker observed, condescendingly but at least in some instances accurately,

[I]n the big lie there is always a certain force of credibility . . . [T]he broad masses of a nation . . . more readily fall victims to the big lie than the small lie, since they themselves often tell small lies in little matters but would be ashamed to resort to large-scale falsehoods. It would never come into their heads to fabricate colossal untruths, and they would not believe that others could have the impudence to distort the truth so infamously. Even though the facts which prove this to be so may be brought clearly to their minds, they will still doubt and waver and will continue to think that there may be some other explanation. For the grossly impudent lie always leaves traces behind it, even after it has been nailed down, a fact which is known to all expert liars in this world . . .

(I’ll let you figure out who that thinker was.)

For the same reason, one may worry that Trump 2.0 will follow the playbook of Viktor Orbán and Recep Erdoğan in harnessing the power of the state to harass and economically cripple his opponents and critics, or simply to intimidate them into acquiescence<sup>1</sup>, while rewarding his allies; in packing the courts with compliant judges, and using those courts to prosecute and further harass his political adversaries — as his new FBI Director, Kash Patel, has openly vowed to do; in using executive actions to override duly enacted laws or even the Constitution, daring anyone to challenge him in court; and potentially in refusing to comply at all with court decisions when they go against him.

Last but not least, one may worry about the sanity of public discourse when the president muses openly, and out of the blue, about invading Greenland and Panama — comments that have not gone unnoticed by Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin — and renaming the Gulf of Mexico. Perhaps this penchant for bizarre public remarks reflects nothing more than a narcissist’s feeling of entitlement to blabber on about whatever crosses his mind. But maybe that underestimates Trump’s cleverness, and it is actually

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<sup>1</sup>**Note Added 22 March 2025:** In the 12 days since I gave this talk, the situation of civil liberties in the United States has dramatically worsened, and several key actors have indeed been intimidated into acquiescence. First the Democratic Party-aligned law firm Paul, Weiss, Rifkind, Wharton & Garrison capitulated to a legally dubious executive order targeting the firm, pledging \$40 million in pro bono legal services to causes Trump has championed. The next day, Columbia University capitulated to Trump’s demands for changes in the University’s internal disciplinary and academic policies — including putting a University department under direct administrative control — which the Trump administration had set as a *precondition for negotiation* over \$400 million in federal grants and contracts (mostly for medical research) that Trump had frozen, again in an order of dubious legality.

a calculated strategy to keep his critics off balance, flooding the news cycle with loony comments that divert everyone’s attention from the more serious actions being taken behind the scenes. Either way, it’s not exactly a socially beneficial way to exercise the most powerful office in the world.

Now, how does all this affect academic freedom? Well, for starters, the traditional liberal justification for academic freedom is based on a conception of scholarship and university teaching as committed to an honest search for truth, a respect for evidence and reasoned argument, and the valuing of good-faith debate and viewpoint diversity; moreover, academic freedom is buttressed in practice by robust legal guarantees for the freedom of expression. A president who disdains truth and the rule of law, and who routinely treats his critics with *ad hominem* insults, is unlikely to be an ally for academic freedom, to put it mildly.

But should we have more specific worries? What *does* the Trump administration plan to do concerning higher education in general, and academic freedom in particular? The truth, I think, is that no one today knows for sure — perhaps not even Trump himself.

On the one hand, Heterodox Academy president John Tomasi took — or at least pretended to take — a friendly and optimistic stance in his January 20 letter to Trump, listing a number of steps that Trump could take to promote viewpoint diversity in higher education and to require institutions to conform their free-speech policies to established Supreme Court jurisprudence. On the other hand, one may plausibly fear, along with *New York Times* columnist Michelle Goldberg, that Trump intends to use the power of the federal government to “crush the academic left” and remake higher education in a right-wing direction, following the game plan of Florida governor Ron DeSantis, right-wing activist Christopher Rufo, and their allies.<sup>2</sup>

For instance, Trump’s executive order on Ending Radical Indoctrination in K–12 Schooling mixes sensible efforts to end indoctrination in one ideology — namely, “woke” ideas concerning race and gender — with blatant attempts to impose indoctrination in a different ideology. On the one hand, the order purports to praise “critical thinking”; but it then goes on to demand that schools “instill a patriotic admiration for our incredible Nation” and a “celebration of America’s greatness and history”. Schools are told to provide “an accurate, honest, unifying, inspiring, and ennobling characterization of America’s founding and foundational principles” — overlooking that “accurate” and “honest” might in some instances conflict with “ennobling”. The order instructs federal departments to eliminate federal funding that “that directly or indirectly support[s] or subsidize[s] the instruction, advancement, or promotion of gender ideology or discriminatory equity ideology” — running roughshod over the key distinction between *teaching about* ideas and *indoctrinating in* ideas. One may worry that similar pressures will soon be brought to bear also on higher education, using once again the hammer of federal funding, on which most universities are utterly dependent.

Another worry concerns debate around Israel and Palestine. Already in his first presidency, Trump’s Executive Order on Combating Anti-Semitism directed “all executive departments and agencies charged with enforcing” the anti-discrimination provisions of the 1964 Civil Rights Act to “consider” the IHRA definition of antisemitism. That is already worrisome. A working group here at University College London — on which I was

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<sup>2</sup>**Note Added 22 March 2025:** Recent events make painfully clear that the latter is the case.

honored to serve — carefully analysed the IHRA definition and weighed the arguments of its proponents and critics; we provided what I think is a very fair and balanced report. We concluded that the IHRA’s core definition of antisemitism is confused and in many ways too narrow, while the claimed “examples” of antisemitism are too broad and threaten to chill legitimate debate about Israel and Palestine. We recommended against its use. Indeed, even the definition’s principal author, American lawyer Kenneth Stern, has argued that it should not be deployed in university settings.

But Trump’s latest Executive Order on Additional Measures to Combat Anti-Semitism is far more worrisome: it takes specific aim at “institutions of higher education” and instigates them to “monitor for and report activities by alien students and staff” — that is, anyone other than a U.S. citizen — that might render them deportable under existing law. That law covers any noncitizen who “endorses or espouses terrorist activity or persuades others to endorse or espouse terrorist activity or support a terrorist organization” — where the nature of “support” is never defined — or whose activities “would have potentially serious adverse foreign policy consequences for the United States”. The risk, once again, is that people will self-censor in order to avoid being accused of “supporting” Hamas — that is, self-censor far beyond what the law actually requires, were it to be tested in court.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, instilling that fear is presumably not a bug, but rather a feature. Even more appalling is Trump’s recent threatening tweet, taking literally the tone of an absolute monarch.

Fairness does, however, require me to point to one positive thing that Trump has done, which may perhaps have some indirect effect on academic freedom: that is Trump’s Executive Order “Defending women from gender ideology extremism and restoring biological truth to the federal government”. This document is an eloquent defense of both women’s rights and biological reality; it could easily have been written by a pro-science gender-critical feminist such as myself.<sup>4</sup> As the eminent biologist Richard Dawkins commented with his usual pithiness:

In my opinion Donald Trump is a loathsome individual, utterly unfit to be President, but his statement that “sex is determined at conception and is based on the size of the gamete that the resulting individual will produce” is accurate in every particular, perhaps the only true statement he ever made.

Of course, I don’t delude myself into thinking that Trump has any principled attachment to either women’s rights or scientific truth — indeed, he has repeatedly proven in the past his disdain for both women and science.<sup>5</sup> Quite simply, in this case Trump has

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<sup>3</sup>As a court here in the UK observed, “there is no more ‘chilling effect’ upon freedom of communication . . . than uncertainty as to the lawfulness of one’s actions”.

<sup>4</sup>In fact, it was written by May Mailman, who until recently was legal director of the conservative equity-feminist group Independent Women’s Forum. I personally disagree with nearly all of their political stances, but on this issue I think they are utterly right.

<sup>5</sup>One particularly egregious example of Trump’s disdain for science is his continuing espousal of the theory that vaccines cause autism, in the face of numerous careful scientific studies that refute this alleged causal link, including a cohort study that examined all 657,461 children born in Denmark between 1999 and 2010. Trump’s endorsement of this theory goes back more than a decade, and he reiterated it recently while promoting his nomination of Robert F. Kennedy, Jr. to head the Department of Health and Human Services.

accurately figured out the moderate and sensible position that most Americans support. I am deeply disappointed that the Democratic Party has resolutely refused to do this, and has adhered with religious fervor to a gender-identity ideology that is not only deluded and intellectually incoherent but is also deeply harmful to women and to gay people, especially gay teenagers — key Democratic politicians refused even to meet with left-wing gender-critical feminist women who implored them to reassess their position. It is depressing that sanity on this issue has to come from a Republican Party that is, in nearly all other respects, deeply insane.

It's not clear what effect, if any, this Executive Order will have on academic freedom. On the one hand, it might strengthen the hand of gender-critical feminists within the universities, who until now have been marginalized and sometimes ostracized — albeit do so through the unfortunate and wildly illiberal mechanism of making university administrations fear political retribution and the loss of federal funding. On the other hand, it could potentially encourage a backlash that emboldens the so-called “progressive” faction within the academy even further, giving them yet another excuse to label gender-critical voices as “right-wing” and thereby to avoid confronting their arguments. I'm unable to predict how things will play out.

That said, I should draw attention to one point in this Executive Order that could have a serious negative effect on academic freedom. Section 3(g) provides that

Federal funds shall not be used to promote gender ideology. Each agency shall assess grant conditions and grantee preferences and ensure grant funds do not promote gender ideology.

That is, I think, a sensible requirement concerning federal grants for the provision of social or health services; but if applied to research grants it would constitute a dangerous infringement on academic freedom. This concerns not only researchers in the humanities and social sciences who might wish to advocate aspects of gender-identity ideology; it also imposes an anti-scientific constraint on medical researchers who might wish to investigate, impartially and without preconceptions, the causes of and treatments for gender dysphoria. Indeed, scientists at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention have already been ordered to withdraw research papers “that promote or inculcate gender ideology *or that have been flagged as at risk for such*” [emphasis mine] — a blatant political interference with scientific freedom. And even with regard to the former group, I don't want to silence my ideological adversaries by defunding them; I want to defeat them in the court of public opinion by reasoned argument. This provision should be amended to exclude research grants. But I doubt that the Trump administration will do so, because the Trump administration does want to silence its ideological adversaries by defunding them.

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