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Free Speech or Safe Speech: The Neoliberal University's False Dilemma

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Abstract. The war between free speech and safe speech in universities has unleashed competition for victimhood among antagonistic groups whose battles empower administrators. Freedom versus safety is a false dilemma. Understanding its falsity and social origins can help us detect the forces deploying it for political control by fostering demands for patronage. In the "cancel culture" era, we should remember that the original purpose of the struggles for free speech was to empower the weak, not to shelter them. Universities should not become unfit-for-purpose social welfare agencies trying in vain to counter the ubiquitous insecurity neoliberal policies generate. The 2024 university campus protests against the Israeli atrocities in Gaza indicate a way out of the false dilemma.

DYSTOPIAN UNFREEDOM, AGAIN

"If liberty means anything at all, it means the right to tell people what they do not want to hear," wrote George Orwell in 1945 in what was meant as a preface to the first edition of his *Animal Farm*. Alongside Voltaire's adage "I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it,"[1] Orwell's dictum has entered the almanac of maxims conveying the political common sense of liberal democracies—the precepts by which we denizens of the "free world" measure not only what is desirable, but also what is normal for us—not some aspirational reality,

[1] Evelyn Beatrice Hall, writing under the pseudonym S. G. Tallentyre, attributed this saying to Voltaire in her 1906 book *The Friends of Voltaire.*

but the reality of the core institutions of our collective existence, from constitutions to parliaments and schools.[2]

When bits of indisputable wisdom sound trite—as Orwell's and Voltaire's statements in question surely do—it is because they have become truisms expressing a reality we take for granted. That is why when university administrators responded with force, often physical, to the pro-Palestinian protests on university campuses in the spring and summer of 2024, such a response felt absurd, , unnecessary, out of step with the spirit of the times.

Gaza has brought to light the dystopian character of our reality: university bosses sending armed police to disperse students and faculty protesting the indiscriminate killing of civilians (to use the least disputed depiction of the Israeli assault on Gaza, one given by then US President Joe Biden [PBS 2023][3]); academics losing their jobs for expressing views diverging from those held by the establishment; calls for accountable governance of financial resources (i.e., student demands for disclosures of university endowments invested in Israel's war machine) being met with physical violence and impunity. This trend has culminated in regulations aiming to *preemptively* constrain protest – from U.S. President Trump's pulling federal funding from universities for allowing allegedly 'illegal protests'[4] to courts' imposing injunctions against disruptions graduation ceremonies (Taft 2024, Betts 2025, Farmer 2025). Such actions in the self-described liberal democracies of the twenty-first century were supposed to be inconceivable in light of the legacy of the civil rights mobilizations of the 1960s and 1970s.

Yet, the illiberal turn in higher education is part of the ubiquitous autocratic turn in liberal democracies. The rise of arbitrary power in the former communist dictatorships of East and

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[2] This article originated from my guest talk in a webinar on academic freedom hosted by Mercy College (New York) on December 9, 2020, and subsequently published as a commentary in *openDemocracy* (Azmanova 2021b).

[3] Biden has been a resolute supporter of Israel since Hamas's attack in Israel on October 7, 2023, and throughout Israel's subsequent military retaliation, which was pronounced to be a genocide by Amnesty International on December 5, 2024 (Amnesty International 2024).

[4] The decision to pull aid from Columbia was criticized by New York Civil Liberties Union director Donna Lieberman, who called it an illegal move "to coerce colleges and universities into censoring student speech and advocacy that isn't Maga-approved, like criticizing Israel or supporting Palestinian rights" (quoted in Ahmadi 2025).

Central Europe has been well publicized, but it is also becoming commonplace in "mature democracies" such as the UK, the U.S., France, and the Netherlands (Pech and Scheppele 2017; Azmanova and Howard 2021). According to the World Justice Project (2024), a global recession of the rule of law began in 2016: Civil justice systems weakened; freedom of assembly and association, freedom of opinion and expression, and freedom of religion all declined widely. Tellingly, the assault on basic freedoms is performed not only by far-right actors but also by centrist governments; changes in policing and the law are used to curb the right to protest; overall, there is a more punitive approach to demonstrations.[5] Imprisonment is used as deterrent; policing is more aggressive; the state's response to discontent is simply to ignore, silence, or punish protesters. It was in the Netherlands, a country that prides itself on its reputation as a paragon of liberal tolerance, and under the watch of a centrist government, that student protests were met with the most extreme police brutality in Europe in the spring and summer of 2024 (Ngendakumana 2024). The autocratic use of power on university campuses inscribes itself well within the broader illiberal turn in Western democracies as the *rule of law* is being relentlessly replaced with *rule of law enforcement*.

To justify the restrictions that they impose on freedom of assembly and expression, university administrators have cast themselves as arbiters in the war between free speech and safe speech (communication that avoids the risk of causing harm, offense or distress to others). I claim that this is a false dilemma. Understanding its falsity can enable us to detect the social forces that generate this dilemma as a tool of political control.

In what follows, I scrutinize the tendency of university administrations in Western societies to resort to autocratic styles of governance as part of wider societal dynamics enabling the growth of autocracy in Western democracies. I begin by tracing the positioning of the university as a bastion of intellectual freedom against the "vertical" top-down oppression the state exercises over society and the "horizontal" oppression of society over individuals. I then address the apparent paradox of the neoliberal university's use of autocratic power—a move that contradicts the neoliberal ethos of extreme personal freedom emulating that of unregulated markets. Finally, I discuss the sociopolitical dynamics that generate public demands for security

[5] To take one example: In the United Kingdom, the Public Order Act adopted in May 2023, also referred to as the "anti-protest bill," gave law enforcement agencies greater powers to prevent protest.

and safety within what I describe as the political economy of "precarity capitalism." This will open a view on the conflict between proponents of free speech and those of safe speech as two groups of victims fighting each other, while the culprit benefits from its power over both and uses that conflict as a source of its continuous empowerment.

THE UNIVERSITY VERSUS TWO VECTORS OF OPPRESSION

Orwell's original preface to *Animal Farm* was written in 1945 but only published in 1972, almost three decades later. The essay issued a stark diagnosis of an epidemic of intellectual oppression in Western societies, which editors in the 1940s deemed unpublishable, thereby confirming Orwell's diagnosis:

> There is now a widespread tendency to argue that one can defend democracy only by totalitarian methods. If one loves democracy, the argument runs, one must crush its enemies by no matter what means. And who are its enemies? It always appears that they are not only those who attack it openly and consciously, but those who "objectively" endanger it by spreading mistaken doctrines. In other words, defending democracy involves destroying all independence of thought.

While the public sphere has always been somewhat hostile to contrarian opinions, the university has long seen its vocation as a bastion of intellectual freedom, with free speech an indispensable tool in the pursuit of that vocation. I stress here academic freedom as an avowed commitment rather than social practice. As Steve Salaita (2019) notes, "academic freedom can do little to alter the fine-tuned cultures of obedience that govern nearly every campus around the world," while, even at its best, it is "capable of transforming human beings into instruments of bureaucracy." Moreover, academic free speech also functions as a tool of societal containment and control; it serves as a pressure valve in the sense that one is allowed to say in academia what remains banned in the wider society.[6] Notwithstanding these nefarious aspects of academic freedom as political tool and social dynamic, this freedom has enabled universities to function as venues of intellectual creativity.

[6] I am grateful to Azar Dakwar for articulating this point in feedback on an earlier draft of this article.

At around the time that Orwell wrote about the terminal crisis of free thinking in the West, the American Association of University Professors adopted a document that has come to be known as the "1940 Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure." It stated: "Institutions of higher education are conducted for the common good. . . . The common good depends upon the free search for truth and its free exposition." In 1970 an addition to the text explicitly stated that controversial speech should not be discouraged: "Controversy is at the heart of . . . free academic inquiry" (AAUP n.d.).

The conviction that unconstrained intellectual freedom is the engine of both scientific advancement and societal progress dates to ancient Athens (Bejan 2017). Although this insight of classical antiquity did not prevent its most celebrated educator, Socrates, from being convicted and sentenced to death for his contrarian views, it became a tenet of institutionalized scientific inquiry. It is thanks to this commitment that for some 2,000 years now our universities have thrived as places for experimentation—venues of creative freedom rooted in the uncodified right to be wrong in the search for truth and justice.

With the Enlightenment, free speech gained a novel validity. It came to be seen as a tool not just of information and discovery fostering scientific advancement, but also one of personal liberation from oppression—a means for obtaining *individual sovereignty*. Liberation from oppression aiming at individual sovereignty required that freedom of speech be not a matter of privilege bestowed by a benevolent public authority but an inalienable right. Only when codified as a universal right can freedom of speech empower the oppressed rather than their protectors. This is why the right to freedom of speech is a core element of the substantive content of the rule of law that, by fending off arbitrary rule, functions as a linchpin of the political edifice of liberal societies. The rule of law would lose its vocation of abrogating arbitrary rule if freedom of speech and other basic freedoms were reduced to mandates exercised by public authority for the purpose of (purportedly) protecting the weak. Thus, while freedom of speech empowers the weak, protection of the weak empowers those who claim the authority of bestowing that protection. Patronage is inimical to emancipation.

Freedom of speech and academic freedom have been weapons for fighting oppression emanating from two sources: central authority and public opinion. In his treatise "On Liberty" (1859), John Stuart Mill famously observed that the chief threat to free speech in democracies was not the state, but the "social tyranny" of one's fellow citizens. This is what Orwell (1972)

was alluding to when he decried "the general weakening of the Western liberal tradition" and "how easily totalitarian propaganda can control the opinion of enlightened people in democratic countries." The virility of state censure (the vertical, top-down vector of oppression) is often enhanced by, if not sourced from, the potency of social censure – the horizonal vector of oppression by public opinion. Tellingly, Orwell's controversial preface found a publisher (the *Times Literary Supplement*) in 1972: by then, the Free Speech Movement, within a broader wave of civil disobedience in the 1960s, had altered both the public policy and the public climate regarding intellectual freedom.

If a connection does exist between the vertical and the horizonal vectors of oppression—that is, between the broader public-political culture and the style of rule practiced by the executive powers at all levels of governance (including in universities)—we should expect universities, in the context of neoliberal capitalism, to absorb and enact the market logic of unbridled individualism. After all, didn't the neoliberal "new spirit of capitalism," as Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello (2005) called it, hijack the libertarian and hedonistic spirit of 1968, mobilizing it in the pursuit of profit?

In *Dark Academia: Despair in the Neoliberal University*, Peter Fleming scrutinized the implications of neoliberal reason's penetration into higher education, concluding that "universities are no longer sanctuaries from market discipline, but one of its central expressions" (2021, 84–85). Similarly, Wendy Brown has observed that

> as neoliberal rationality becomes our ubiquitous common sense, its principles not only govern through the state but suffuse workplaces, schools, hospitals, gyms, air travel, policing, and all manner of human desire and decisions. Freedom is equated wholly with the pursuit of private ends, is appropriately unregulated, and is largely exercised to enhance the value, competitive positioning, or market share of a person or firm. (2018, 12)

Similarly, but more closely focusing on the psychological effect of financialization within globally integrated neoliberal capitalism, Arjun Appadurai (2024a, 2024b) has imputed the rise of far-right populism to a newfound popular appetite for risk transferred from the economy to politics, within a revolution of rising expectations that financialization has inflamed.

If our historical time is one of "neoliberal capitalism," with its infamous zeitgeist of unbridled individualism, why then are universities choosing to use the fist of punishment, rather than the invisible hand of the market, against the rebellious youth? Doesn't this suggest that the autocratic response of university administrations is enabled or emboldened by an autocratic turn in the public-political culture itself that tacitly grants them license to oppress?

<A> AUTOCRATIC DEMOCRACIES

In a recent commentary on the reactions to pro-Palestinian university encampments, Noëlle McAfee (2024) remarks, "This is not your old neoliberal university. To the extent that higher education is a handmaiden of larger political forces, these are signals of a new political era." She argues that "higher education is moving from being merely neoliberal to becoming outright authoritarian"; the battles over free speech are symptomatic in this regard because while "neoliberalism generally doesn't care what anybody says, this new phenomenon is laser-focused on the words people use." In line with my thesis of the mutual constitution between the horizontal and vertical vectors of oppression, between state censure and social censure, the increasingly autocratic response of university administrations is likely enabled, or at least emboldened, by a shift in the public-political culture—a broad public demand for "law and order" for which the autocratic (arbitrary, dictatorial) style of rule is better suited than the liberal, consensus-driven and norms-based exercise of power.[7]

Contemporary capitalism's anti-liberal penchant is by now well documented. Ian Bruff (2014) coined the term "authoritarian neoliberalism" to describe the way neoliberal forms of managing capitalism are challenging democratic governance as the state uses the law to insulate itself from social and political conflict. Over a decade ago, Bernard Harcourt observed, in *The Illusion of Free Markets* (2011), that the combination we are increasingly seeing between free markets and a Big Brother state, between economic laissez-faire and mass incarceration, is not accidental. The invisible hand of the market and the state's fist of punishment have been

[7] I prefer to use the term 'autocratic' rather than 'authoritarian' to describe the shift in the nature of political rule in Western societies. While autocratic power is arbitrary (rule by fiat, drawn from the will of the ruler), authoritarian power is not arbitrary – it is drawn from a source of authority, a set of values, outside the will of the ruler.

intrinsically connected since the birth of the idea of natural order in eighteenth-century economic thought, Harcourt reminds us. The separation between "freedom" as the legitimate realm of the market and "discipline" as the legitimate realm of the state fosters their mutual constitution as separate dynamics, with the two logics of discipline feeding and reinforcing each other. This process has come to engender what Harcourt calls "neoliberal penality."

More recently, Wendy Brown traced the paradoxical logic by force of which contemporary capitalism fosters a culture of "authoritarian freedom"—a simultaneous demand for freedom and oppression. In this context, freedom's meaning has been reduced to economic freedom; deregulation and privatization "become broad moral-philosophical principles extending well beyond the economy," while at the same time "statism, policing, and authoritarian power also ramify since walling, policing, and securitization of every kind are authorized by the need to secure this vast expanse of personal, deregulated freedom" (2018, 15, 23). In other words, the extreme privatization of freedom entails a societal collapse, which can only be countered by means of repressive political logistics—enter the police state and its pawns, including university administrators.[8]

Much as these explanations provide valuable insights into the warped logic of neoliberal reason, it is worth exploring further one peculiarity of the ongoing autocratic turn in the way public authority exercises power in Western societies. This peculiarity, well displayed in the recent conduct of university administrations in the context of student protests, is the following: The fist of punishment is raised not so much for the sake of safeguarding public order or maximizing market value (the former being a precondition for the latter), but in the guise of a "nurturing state" that purports to protect its most vulnerable citizens. On university campuses, especially elite liberal ones such as those of Columbia University and the NYU, restrictions on freedom of speech and assembly are typically enforced in the name of the diversity, equality (or equity), and inclusion (DEI) agenda—as part of affirmative action and equal opportunity policies that were introduced in the late twentieth century to counter pervasive structural inequalities.

[8] Let me note that alternative accounts exist. Thus, refuting claims that impute the autocratic style of governance in the US academy to its growing corporatization under neoliberal capitalism, Timothy V. Kaufman-Osborn (2023) has argued instead that US universities have been ruled by antidemocratic governing boards since their inception.

Thus, on many occasions pro-Palestine university campus protests and educational activities were curbed or shut down under allegations of antisemitism, despite the significant participation of Jewish students and faculty in these activities (Oliver 2024; Kane 2924; Ahmadi 2025) Academics were suspended from teaching based on allegations that their writing on the Israel-Hamas conflict *might* be making some students feel unsafe.[9] This autocratic gesture of preemptive curbs on free speech for the sake of protecting vulnerable students—who may have a legitimate grievance , as when Jewish students face actual antisemitism rather than when antisemitism is *attributed* to protests against the policies of an Israeli government —has for a while now propagated the free speech versus safe speech dilemma that has been haunting higher education.

The autocratic turn in governance is even more explicit at conservative universities that had doubled down on their commitment to free speech with the purpose to deflate "hate speech" rules and "safety rules" in order to secure the right of reactionary views (ranging from bigoted perspectives to neo-Confederate ideologies) to be expressed. Under political pressure, administrators in such universities broke their own rules in their response to the Gaza protests. The justification they offered, however, has been similar to that used by administrators in the liberal (pro-DEI) universities: to preempt activities that *might* become violent or involve anti-Semitic behavior. [10] This preemptive aspect in curbs to free speech, often enacted under political pressure, is the essence of the autocratic turn in university governance.

[9] This was the case, for instance, when Jodi Dean, professor of political science, was suspended from teaching at Hobart and William Smith Colleges in April 2024 following the publication of her commentary on the Israel-Hamas war. See details in the petition "Revoke Professor Jodi Dean's Suspension from Teaching at Hobart and William Smith Colleges," https://www.change.org/p/revoke-professor-jodi-dean-s-suspension-from-teaching-at-hobart-and-william-smith-colleges?recruited_by_id=bbd12c10-3d86-0130-ab9d-3c764e04873b.

[10] Thus, campus officials at the University of Taxas at Austin broke up the protest in April 2024 because the governor ordered them to. He sent in the state police and tweeted that the protestors belonged in jail (Bedigan 2024). The university administration justified their actions with concerns that the protest might become violent or involve anti-Semitic behavior (Freeman 2024). In its report, UT Austin faculty's

<A>THE DEMANDS FOR SAFETY AND THE POLITICS OF VICTIMHOOD

While the university has long sheltered freedom of speech from both the prejudices of public opinion and the intrusions of political authority, it underwent a transformation in the late twentieth century under new demands for being also a space of emotional safety, akin to a home —a phenomenon Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt (2018) discussed as the rise of "safetyism" on campuses.

The shift is significant and merits a more detailed articulation. Justifiable restrictions on freedom of speech have long been regulated by law (e.g. banning hate speech, libel, or incitement to violence) and limited to the prohibition of inflicting specific harm. However, since the turn of the century, university administrations have taken it upon themselves to interpret the "no harm" principle and adjudicate the boundary between free and safe speech. Demands on university administrators to assume such functions, which increased their power, originated in the rise of political correctness in the 1980s and 1990s when arguments proliferated that absolute freedom of speech on campus promoted a hostile environment that harmed minority students and hindered their ability to learn. University administrators were charged with a new duty to create environments where everyone, regardless of background, feels valued and supported. Calls for inclusive language and respect for marginalized groups influenced campus culture, and colleges began to adopt policies to combat discrimination and exclusionary practices. Thus, the focus began to shift from purely legal equality (e.g., antidiscrimination laws) and enforcing the established-by-law minimal limitations on free speech to actively promoting diversity by *protecting* vulnerable minorities in a variety of settings, including workplaces and educational institutions.

In the 2010s, growing awareness of the pervasiveness of systemic discrimination led to calls for "safe spaces" on campuses, where marginalized groups could engage in discourse free from harassment or harm. This period saw more explicit demands for creating campus environments that protect students from what was deemed harmful or "triggering" speech (i.e.,

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Committee of Counsel on Academic Freedom and Responsibility stated that the protesters' alleged violations of university rules lacked merit (CCAFR 2024).

language that provokes an intense emotional or psychological reaction, often negative, in the individuals who encounter it). Demands for prohibitions against giving offense thus invited university administrations to institutionalize forms of monitoring and censorship—introducing speech codes and trigger warnings on course materials or event advertisements, setting up physical or virtual spaces on campuses where certain discussions and viewpoints are limited, disinviting speakers or canceling events, moderating online content on social platforms or altogether banning certain materials and publications, and imposing disciplinary actions such as warnings, suspension, or expulsion for speech deemed to be harmful. The realm of free speech shrunk further as the power of administrators grew.

Transformed into a positive "equal respect agenda," the original nondiscrimination commitments of our liberal political culture thus gave way to a punitive administrative culture where offensive or disagreeable speech is prohibited and punished, the process is monitored through a thicket of disciplinary and grievance procedures, and "safe space marshals" patrol events looking for macro- and microaggressions. Eventually, mission creep and elite capture of the DEI agenda resulted in pressures for ideological conformity and censorship, which gave the Right an opportunity to appropriate the language of free speech for its own political goals. (Azmanova and Rossi 2024).

In such an environment where students' demands for safety endowed administrators with the duty and power to provide safety, a new strategy of social competition emerged—what Lilie Chouliaraki (2024) has called "the weaponization of victimhood"—the instrumental use of the language of pain to gain social power. Victimhood, as Chouliaraki observes, is not a single word in language use but a vocabulary that consists of two languages of pain: trauma (psychological suffering) and injury (social suffering). The languages of pain, she notes, have been a key site of social contestation in our societies. They are increasingly being used in public debates as weapons that can grant those who claim them the recognition and domination they seek in politics and culture.

Claims to victimhood have been deployed both from the left (e.g., with appeals to protect vulnerable groups by restricting free speech) and the right (e.g., with claims of being victims of "cancel culture") in a dynamic we might call a "competition for victimhood," where groups with legitimate claims to have suffered injustice oppose each other not as enemies, but as competitors. This situation arises when both sides have a legitimate claim to have suffered harm (concerns for

safety and freedom are equally legitimate), and therefore the conflict can be resolved not by negating one of the concerns but only by claiming a higher rank of validity for one's concern. Thus, the free versus safe speech dynamic on campus has taken the shape of two groups of victims competing for the recognition of one's superior claim to have suffered harm by deploying a language of victimhood (rather than, say, of public order or societal welfare). The adjudication of that ranking falls on various levels of public authority and to university administrations in the case of academia.

These politics of competitive victimhood that had taken shape during the culture wars of the late twentieth and the early twenty-first centuries gave some university administrators the formula of their reaction to the latest wave of student protest. Many responded to the 2024 campus protests against the Israeli atrocities in Gaza and the complicity of Western governments in those atrocities by launching the counterclaim that these protests amounted to antisemitism and thus inflicted suffering on Jewish students. They chose the path of conflict that I named "competition for victimhood" (Azmanova 2023) despite the availability of an alternative path—allowing pro-Gaza protest to proceed while penalizing specific acts of antisemitism or vandalism. [11] What were the advantages for university administrations in making that choice?

As Chouliaraki (2024) observes, claims to trauma and injury align the publics they address in tactical relationships of blame ("our" enemy) and praise ("our" savior) in order to conjure up communities of recognition and belonging ('us') and to exclude others ("them") from these communities. It is thus that the acts of claiming victimhood engage also dynamics of seeking patronage through which elites source their power. While these dynamics might effectively generate protection of those who claim victimhood, they certainly empower the patrons who act on the victims' behalf. At the same time, these patrons develop a vested interest in maintaining their clients' position of victim because this victimhood is a source of the patron's

[11] As Professor James Galbraith, chairman of UT Austin faculty's Committee of Counsel on Academic Freedom and Responsibility observed, the rules governing conduct on university campuses "are designed to sanction behavior which occurs, not behavior which might occur, or behavior that seems like it might be something that happened on some other campus." (quoted in Freeman 2024)

empowerment. This logic has been at work, for instance, in the seemingly absurd gesture of some university administrators' insistence on treating as antisemitism the condemnation, expressed by some Jewish students and faculty, of the Israeli government's atrocities in the Palestinian territories (e.g., the "Not in my name" stance of the organization Jewish Voice for Peace). As Stephanie L. Tabashneck, a Jewish student at Harvard Divinity School, put it, "Jewishness, and Judaism, and Jewish safety is being co-opted to justify acts by the administration" (Dziaba and Nakoulima 2024).

What compass can help us navigate the competition for victimhood? How can we distinguish valid claims of harm from strategic use of the language of victimhood? Chouliaraki (2024) notes that there is a difference between victimhood and vulnerability. The victimized self is not necessarily the systematically vulnerable self; victimhood as *communicative act* does not necessarily speak to people's *conditions of vulnerability*. It reflects primarily the *positions of power* people claim victimhood from. It is these social positions of power (and intersections across them) that tend to suggest who deserves to be protected as a victim and who should be punished as a perpetrator. In this sense, paradoxically, within the politics of competitive victimhood, those who speak from conditions of vulnerability are less able to weaponize victimhood as a tool of gaining social advantage, because they lack the requisite social power. Structural vulnerability (as is the case of the Arab and Muslim communities in Western democracies) impedes the successful weaponization of victimhood in political claims. As Innawa Bouba has remarked, "belonging to a dominant, privileged group that aligns with societal norms, as in the case of Donald Trump, seems to provide individuals with the structural power to claim victimhood in political discourse—without actually being or becoming subject to structural disadvantages."[12]

In the case of the campus mobilizations in defense of the Palestinians in Gaza, administrations successfully weaponized some Jewish students' grievances about experienced or anticipated antisemitism—valid and serious claims—because they could draw on the structural power the Jewish community had accrued through the active solidarity with the Jewish people that has been built in Western democracies following the Holocaust. The Arab and Muslim

[12] Innawa Bouba, a student in my postgraduate module Advocacy for Political Change at City, University of London; email correspondence on Oct. 15, 2024. Quoted with permission.

minorities lack such structural power, and hence they are at a disadvantage in the competition for victimhood even when their claims to suffered injustice are indisputable. The injustice of prioritizing, be it inadvertently, certain forms of victimhood is evident —it violates the principle of equality that DEI policies purport to uphold. Moreover, while these autocratic safeguards against antisemitism "can make many Jewish people feel safer in the short term, it gives life to a competitive victimhood that further pulls apart the horizontal alliances and broad political coalitions required to confront all racism." (Feldman, Gidey and McGeever 2025)

The issue, then, is not to perpetuate the toxic dynamic of the competition for victimhood by taking sides and ranking the validity of competing claims to justice but to countermand that dynamic altogether. To do this, we must explore the reasons for its vitality.

<A>PRECARITY CAPITALISM AND THE COMPETITION FOR VICTIMHOOD

What are the enabling conditions that make the competition for victimhood a potent strategy of governance? Chouliaraki notes that victimhood as a politics of communication in the struggle for power is so potent because communicative acts of claims to victimhood operate within late modern cultures that are centered on the suffering self. In other words, our current sensitivities regarding justice have been shaped by the history of struggles against injustice through which Western democracies have emerged and matured—from the struggles for decent working conditions in the nineteenth century, the suffragettes and the civil rights movement in the twentieth century, to Black Lives Matter and the MeToo movement in our century (Chouliaraki 2024; see also Azmanova 2024).

Yet, I believe there are additional social conditions that enhance the political purchase of appeals to safety and protection—appeals that energize the frame of victimhood within which struggles for justice are increasingly positioned. These conditions have to do with what I've discussed as peculiarities of the contemporary political economy of precarity capitalism (Azmanova 2020; 2021a, 2022, 2023).

A trademark of contemporary capitalism is not so much its spectacular economic inequality, which has been indeed well recorded and much discussed, but generalized social and economic precarity—a condition of vulnerability rooted in the insecurity of livelihoods. Our livelihoods are insecure not simply when our employment contracts are short or our remuneration so low that we are forced to look for other sources of revenue. They are insecure

also when we cannot perform our job-related duties because we lack the requisite resources—time, money, or skills. This condition has now spread broadly across differences in skills, education, gender, age, and income levels. On the personal level, precarity is experienced as an incapacity to cope (hence the rise in anxieties and other work-related mental health disorders). On the societal level, it engenders the inability of our societies to govern themselves and especially to cope with adversity.

While precarity is often understood, mistakenly, as insecurity, its essence is vulnerability, disempowerment, lack of agency. The Latin etymology of the term refers to something obtained by prayer or begging—that is, to be at someone's mercy. In this sense the opposite of precarity is not security, certainty, predictability safety, or resilience, but empowerment, personal sovereignty. Importantly, precarity is an endemic feature neither of modernity nor of capitalism. It is a *politically generated disempowerment*—produced by specific politics and policies—and can therefore be undone. What are these political mechanisms? In the context of the digitalized economy and planet-wide market integration, the pursuit of competitiveness in the global economy has become a top policy priority. The imperative of competitiveness has reshaped the political economy of capitalist democracies, especially by means of the deregulation of labor markets and cuts to social spending.

In my diagnosis, this has generated two fundamental contradictions within the political economy of capitalist democracies—contradictions that are acutely felt in higher education. I have named the first contradiction "surplus employability." This refers to the tension between, on the one hand, the rising potential for decreasing our dependency on paid work thanks to automation (i.e., decommodification of labor) and, on the other hand, the intensification of commodification pressures—we are all increasingly dependent on holding a paying job. This in turn relates to the second antinomy—that of "acute job dependency": The economy does not produce sufficient good jobs, yet our reliance on paid employment keeps rising as wages stagnate, and cuts to social spending make us increasingly reliable on personal sources of income for essentials like healthcare and education (Azmanova 2020, 146–51).

A key political technique used in the production of precarity is that of individual responsibilization: Public authorities increasingly offload responsibility to individuals and society, without giving them the resources to cope—be it skills, financial resources, or time. In universities, budgets have been balanced in two ways. In some cases, administrative layers and

ranks have been added while academic staff has been reduced. In other cases, administrative staff has been reduced and academics asked to take over administrative duties. In both cases, the increased teaching charge is managed by making academic staff teach beyond their expertise. Students are accumulating degrees in the hope of becoming or remaining hirable and often as an alternative to being unemployed. Individual responsibilization entails a misalignment between growing responsibility and decreasing power and thus results in disempowerment (i.e. precarity).

Largely due to these two contradictions of contemporary capitalism, as well as the erosion of institutionalized social safety, the competitive pressures of capitalism are now engulfing society, generating a massive sense of incapacity to cope—an epidemic of precarity that is radically disempowering ordinary citizens. Precarity nurtures appetites for instant stabilization. Hence, the growing public demands for security and safety and the increased expectation from university leadership to provide nurturing and patronage. In other words, the grievances of those calling for a ban on offensive speech because it deepens existing injustices are valid, but they are valid because our societies have been subjected to massive precarization that has left many feeling vulnerable.

In a context where resources and opportunities are scarce and competitive pressures are high, the competition for victimhood emerges as a core dynamic of social conflict because claiming victimhood is the only apparent path for obtaining ever diminishing resources of stability and safety, as well as opportunities for social advancement. . This game of competitive differentiation is void of solidarities and empathies—it is purely strategic. It is played not for the sake of remedying injustice but for the sake of obtaining social advantage, hence the weaponization of victimhood as a will to power, per Chouliaraki's take on the politics of victimhood.

The turn to force in the management of precarity is a new feature of capitalism. The replacement of the invisible hand of the market with the fist of violence has been made necessary by the fact that a growing multitude, across the capital-labor divide, is being negatively affected by the dynamics of the competitive pursuit of profit. The precarious and disenchanted multitude can no longer be seduced through the usual mechanisms for manufacturing consent—from consumerism to promises of social advancement through hard work. Neither can it be appeased through the redistributive strategies of compensating the losers of neoliberal globalization that the center-left has advocated, as it has effectively centered its economic policy on fighting

inequality (Kuziemko, Longuet-Marx and Naidu 2023). Rather than eliminating the roots of precarization—those politics and policies that generate ubiquitous disempowerment—authorities have responded to the growing social anxiety with autocratic shortcuts from increasing surveillance measures to deploying speech marshals and armed police into schools and universities. The default reaction has been to censor offensive speech—from disadvising the use of certain terms as containing microaggression (e.g., addressing women as "guys" or calling a flawed performance "lame") to banning controversial speakers and restricting the public space for protest in the name of safety (see DiPierro and Burke 2024). And the use of force and autocratic rule by university administrations is paying off. The eruptions of outrage on campuses we saw in the spring and summer of 2024 in protest of the atrocities in Gaza lost much of their vigor when classes resumed in the autumn of 2024, even as Benjamin Netanyahu's regime continued its murderous course of action and expanded it over larger territories—the West Bank, Lebanon, and Syria (Human Rights Watch 2025; UNHR 2024; Atkinson and Burgess 2024).

The commitments of university administrators to provide above all physical and emotional safety have ultimately altered the function of universities. Rather than expose students to the risks of unsanctioned intellectual exploration or political activism, universities are now operating as mini welfare states whose mission is, on the one hand, to provide students with marketable skills and, on the other hand, to safeguard their physical and psychological safety. However, universities are unfit-for-purpose as social welfare agencies [13]—they do not have the capacity to shield their 'customers' from the massive precarity governments inflict through neoliberal policies.

Moreover, the solutions offered in the framework of universities-as-welfare agencies, though effective in the short term, incur long-term damage of five types. First, when some views are excluded from public debate for being dangerous and unsavory, this precludes the opportunity to rigorously contest these views. They will, however, fester in private safe spaces and will continue to poison society.

Second, policies of mandated safe speech inhibit a culture of diversity. Civil rights law in the United States and many European countries prohibits discrimination based on characteristics

[13] I owe to Arjun Appadurai this formulation of the shift in the university function, which he suggested in feedback on an earlier draft.

such as skin color, religion, national origin, sex, disability, or familial status. On this basis, school regulations often codify the protection of certain groups, identified in terms of race, religion, gender, and so on. The problem is that, as the number of recognized identity categories proliferates, this apparent increase of cultural diversity does not, in fact, foster a culture of diversity. Instead, these designated collective identities entrap individuals into boxes of belonging, which deepen divisions in society. Cultural identity becomes a prison—not despite, but because of the effort to allegedly protect that culture.

Third, it is worth adding here, as we canvas the harm done by politics of "safe speech" the familiar liberal argument that when sheltered in this way, packed in categories of protected groups, students are infantilized and develop the habit of being patronized. They fail to learn the skills to stand up and defend their positions with solid arguments, which perpetuates their precarity. Of course, this argument does not consider the fact of structurally embedded power differentials I discussed above. The distribution of life chances in modern societies, including in liberal democracies, is not programmed to operate according to what Jürgen Habermas (1996, 306) has called "the unforced force of the better argument," , but rather according to hierarchies of validity that structure the social order. The problem with safe speech is that the ascribed identitarian categories of protected groups reproduce that hierarchy while aspiring to undo it. This is the case because when a category gains recognition as warranting protection, it already has accrued the social power to make that claim, often at the expense of less visible forms of systemic discrimination. For instance, as the fight against discrimination has taken the shape of visible categories such as gender and race, it erases from view discriminations based on geographic origin such as East, Central, and Southern Europe.[14] The structuring power of decisional elites consists in their ability to define the discursive ground on which claims to disadvantage gain validity.

Fourth, efforts to replace free speech with safe speech open the door to autocratic rule. There is no limit to what any individual might define as disrespect. Who is to decide what exactly is to be protected? And so, we pass this judgment to administrators and hand them the keys to discretionary power.

[14] Within Europe, the hierarchy of social status goes top-down from North to South and from West to East.

And finally, the biggest harm of all: The policing of speech eventually generates self-censorship, which nurtures intellectual cowardice and, eventually, a societal decay. This is the foundation of a totalitarian outlook that festers now in Western societies—a world where, as per Peter Fleming's (2025) latest intellectual surgery of these societies, all critical creative energies have been depleted to produce a pathological state of active inaction, of performative thoughtlessness and its attendant political and ethical vacuity.

<A>EMPOWERMENT, NOT SECURITY AND SAFETY

The enemies of free speech are unlikely but faithful bedfellows: the bigot who attacks vulnerable groups and, paradoxically, the militant or the civil servant who tries to protect these groups. The war between safe speech and free speech pits two groups of victims against each other, while the culprits—university administrators, pundits, politicians—draw their power from the patronage they bestow on both groups, while perpetuating the dynamics of competitive victimhood as a source of their own social power. To resolve the deadlock between safe speech and free speech, we must remember the original missions of free speech. It was not meant as a tool of information, but one of liberation; it was conceived as a political weapon—a weapon meant to boost our personal sovereignty against the oppression of social dogma and the abuse of power by ruling elites.

To quote Orwell (1972) again, freedom of speech is a right to express "what one believes to be true, without having to fear bullying or blackmail from any side." Exactly because the original vocation of free speech is to fight dogma, it should not become another dogma. And to ensure this, we must consistently use it as a tool for fighting oppression. Whenever speech is used to oppress, to bully, or to humiliate, it is no longer free speech because it violates the very spirit of the concept. But we might do well to remember also that the original purpose of free speech was to *empower* the weak, not to shelter them. The imperative of empowering the weak has become even stronger in the context of precarity capitalism. Let us also recall that the essence of precarity is not insecurity, but disempowerment. The university should empower the vulnerable, not protect them via safety measures.

What are the available pathways of such an empowerment? First, rather than banning it from public spaces, granting bigotry the right to free speech would erect a tribunal at which it can be exposed and refuted through rigorous questioning. Even though all positions have the

right to be heard, not all deserve equal respect or merit our solidarity (Cavendish 2020). Respect is gained, not granted; solidarity is built, not prescribed. The judgment on the merits of a stance is not a matter of normative confectionary; it is not readily available prior to the process of justification to which all positions should be exposed. We need content-neutral standards of academic freedom and freedom of speech that are applied consistently.

Second, university administrators should not impose preemptive restrictions on the freedom of speech and the right to protest. We need rules about the conduct of debate, but these should not prevent behavior that is lawful. Campus officials should apply sanctions only when rules are actually violated and only to specific individuals who violate them.[15]

Third, we should abstain from placing people into the rigid boxes of collective identities that are to be protected. The "protected characteristics' approach to fighting discrimination perpetuates the competition for victimhood by creating a limited number of acknowledged, and fixed, social positions of victims who merit protection. Rather than of "identity," we should speak of a "sense of self" that is multidimensional and constantly changing. That means we should build a culture of diversity, not diversity of cultures, as Arjun Appadurai has argued (1996, 26–30). Importantly, targets of our struggles for justice should be actions and practices of injustice, not groups that lay claim to special protection.

Fourth, universities should be equipping students with the knowledge and skills to create the kind of society that does not generate precarity, social inequalities, and exclusion—a society that does not create victims in need of protecting. Only then would students not be compelled to demand that the university be a home; they would prefer it to be a laboratory—a place for experimentation and learning where we practice our right to be wrong, rather than a shelter from a society infested with injustice.

This is a more difficult, and a slower, road to take than imposing prohibitions as shortcuts to stability and safety. But this is the only path that leads away from the covert harassments of self-censure and the overt cruelties of political oppression.

CONCLUSION

[15] As recommended by UT Austin's Committee of Counsel on Academic Freedom and Responsibility (CCAFR 2024).

The reflections offered here took off from a puzzle. Our historical time is said to be one of neoliberal capitalism, whose zeitgeist of unbridled individualism has infused our institutions, our practices, "all manner of human desire and decisions," as Wendy Brown put it (2018, 12). And yet, in their reactions to the outrage that erupted on campuses against the atrocities that were being committed in Gaza by the Israeli government in the course of 2024, university administrations chose to use the fist of punishment, rather than the invisible hand of the market; rather than pay lip service to free speech and ignore the student protest, the universities' leaders chose to respond with force. They justified this course of action with a discourse about duties of guardianship and pastoral care, a commitment to student welfare, thus elevating physical and psychological safety above intellectual freedom. This insidious transformation of academia into an unfit-for-purpose welfare institution, we noted, has much to do with the advance of mass precarizsation in contemporary capitalist societies. As entrenched political logics perpetuate the policies generating ubiquitous precarity, educational institutions have been placed in the role of final safeguards against individuals' radical vulnerability—a role they neither are equipped to play nor should be performing.

The campus protests of 2024 have been a radical, emancipatory breakthrough in two ways. First, they defied the "competition for victimhood" logic in the struggle for identity-based patronage that precarity capitalism engenders. The protesters' demands for ending their governments' and their universities' complicity with the carnage in Gaza were not phrased as demands for protection of groups rights, but as grievances against actions and practices that violate core values and norms of humanitarian law. These were not calls to protect religious or ethnic minorities, but for safeguarding human life and dignity. Importantly, the rebellious students risked their personal well-being fighting for the rights of others—as the great majority of those who protested did not have a personal connection to, nor any possible claim for collective identification with, the victims of the Israeli military assault.

Second, in a larger sense the campus mobilizations shattered neoliberal reason. Unbridled individualism indoctrinated by neoliberal rationalities is premised on the prevention and elimination of collective response against the social order that the reigning hegemonic classes devise. This is why, in their *collective rebellion* against official policy, the youth mobilizing at university campuses against the atrocities in Gaza are an embodiment of what neoliberal rationality is supposed to prevent—the coming together of allegedly free individual monads the

free market purports to generate.[16] This is an act of radical questioning of the form of freedom neoliberalism champions—a gesture of emancipation from the disempowering freedoms on which the whole edifice of the neoliberal order rests.

AFTERWORD

Watching, in bewilderment, the violent reaction of university administrations to student mobilizations in defense of human rights in the spring and summer of 2024 felt like a horrific déjà vu. Thirty-five years ago, under the pseudo-communist dictatorship in my native Bulgaria, at the start of my studies at Sofia University, I became involved with the student protests for political liberties and academic freedom. We drew some strength, some sense of safety, from the belief that if we got into trouble we could always emigrate to the "free West." There is no such option now. There is nowhere to run. We must fix this.

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[16] I am grateful to Azar Dakwar for suggesting that I add this trajectory of analysis.

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