



City Research Online

City St George's, University of London

Citation: Azmanova, A. & Rossi, E. (2024). The Left Must Rediscover Free Speech and Academic Freedom. *Emancipations*, 3(1), 7. doi: 10.55533/2765-8414.1093

This is the published version of the paper.

This version of the publication may differ from the final published version. To cite this item please consult the publisher's version.

Permanent repository link: <https://openaccess.city.ac.uk/id/eprint/37234/>

Link to published version: <https://doi.org/10.55533/2765-8414.1093>

Copyright and Reuse: Copyright and Moral Rights remain with the author(s) and/or copyright holders. Copies of full items can be used for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge, unless otherwise indicated, provided that the authors, title and full bibliographic details are credited, a hyperlink and/or URL is given for the original metadata page and the content is not changed in any way. For full details of reuse please refer to [City Research Online policy](#).



April 2024

The Left Must Rediscover Free Speech and Academic Freedom

Albena Azmanova

University of Kent, A.Azmanova@kent.ac.uk

Enzo Rossi

University of Amsterdam, e.rossi@uva.nl

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsjunction.msstate.edu/emancipations>



Part of the Adult and Continuing Education Commons

Recommended Citation

Azmanova, Albena and Rossi, Enzo (2024) "The Left Must Rediscover Free Speech and Academic Freedom," *Emancipations: A Journal of Critical Social Analysis*: Vol. 3: Iss. 1, Article 7.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.55533/2765-8414.1093>

Available at: <https://scholarsjunction.msstate.edu/emancipations/vol3/iss1/7>

This publication is brought to you for free and open access by the Hosted Journals at Scholars Junction. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Emancipations: A Journal of Critical Social Analysis* by an authorized editor of Scholars Junction. For more information, please contact sct@library.msstate.edu.

The Left Must Rediscover Free Speech and Academic Freedom

Abstract

The conflict in Gaza has brought to a boil the systematic threat to academic freedom and freedom of speech in Western liberal democracies. This neo-McCarthyism can only be countered by a united front not only within the Left, but across the left-right ideological divide.

Keywords

freedom of speech, academic freedom, censorship, McCarthyism

The conflict in Gaza has brought to a boil the systematic threat to academic freedom and freedom of speech in Western liberal democracies. Repression is rampant. The brutal and uncalled-for police operations against the peaceful protests of students and faculty at Columbia University and elsewhere are just the tip of the iceberg. This neo-McCarthyism can only be countered by a united front not only within the Left, but across the left-right ideological divide—or as far across it as possible.

In recent years, part of the Left has been complacent about freedom of speech and academic freedom. Perceived dominance of left intellectuals in universities and other similar spaces led to mission creep and elite capture of the ‘diversity, equality and inclusion’ agenda. Too often this resulted in demands for ideological conformity, self-censorship, and outright censorship.

That gave the Right an opportunity to claim the language of free speech for itself—sometimes sincerely, often hypocritically. Many centre-right and right-wing champions of free speech are eerily silent in the face of the ongoing repression of pro-Palestine speech demanding peace, freedom and equality, when they aren’t actively cheering it.

But this repression makes it clear what anyone with even a cursory familiarity with the history of left politics already knows: the powerful have the most to lose from ordinary people’s ability to speak their mind freely. Recognising this fact means recognising that we need content-neutral standards of academic freedom and freedom of speech, supported by a broad coalition. This will require tolerating distasteful, sometimes appalling speech. Yes, even racist academics like Amy Wax or Nathan Cofnas, to name two recent controversies. This is the best way to confront and debunk racism. The alternative is to let it fester in obscurity and insidiously infect society. Besides, the present wave of repression shows that this difficult openness is a price worth paying for the freedom to articulate and defend our own ideas, on and off campus.

The recent disciplinary sanctions against Marxist professor Jodi Dean at Hobart and William Smith Colleges are a case in point. We republish here the [Petition protesting Jodi Dean’s suspension from teaching](#) over one of her essays on the Israel/Palestine conflict. The response to this petition signals the emergence of a

unified front for free speech and academic freedom. It serves as a call to uphold and strengthen this coalition against reactionary forces steering towards autocracy.

The petition gathered over 4,500 signatures from academics around the world in less than a week. The signatories include many of the world's most prominent names in political and social theory as well as countless world-leading scholars across all disciplines, and beyond partisan divides.

Additionally, we are sharing a selection of commentaries of petition signatories. Some articulate the classic defense of free speech: "I may disagree with what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it." Other comments reject equating calls for freedom and equality within the space between the Jordan river and the Mediterranean sea with antisemitism, and challenge the flawed notion that safeguarding free speech and academic freedom compromises student 'safety'.

That concept of safety has long been bent out of shape by a liberticide corporate ideology that reduces education to customer satisfaction. More broadly, this ideology fights mere disparity rather than structural inequalities, and so fosters litigious oppression Olympics instead of genuinely equal social relations. It's time for the Left to disavow the culture of infantilisation and victimisation that accompanies this ideology. If nothing else, the repression of pro-Palestine voices goes to show how quickly the language of safety can be co-opted by reactionaries. To build our power we don't need safe spaces, but free spaces.

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>

16 April 2024

In a letter dated 13 April 2024, the President of Hobart and William Smith Colleges, Mark D. Gearan, announced that Jodi Dean, the Donald R. Harter '39 Professor of the Humanities and Social Sciences at the Colleges, has been relieved of teaching responsibilities. The reason provided for this decision was that in her article "[Palestine Speaks for Everyone](#)" (Verso blog, 9 April 2024) Professor Dean expressed views that might make students feel unsafe: "there now may be students on our campus who feel threatened in or outside of the classroom." That makes it clear that President Gearan's suspension of Professor Dean from teaching is viewpoint-based: the text of Professor Dean's article does not contain incitement to violence, is not directed at specific individuals, nor does it create a clear and present danger—standard tests for acceptable limitations to free speech as per U.S. law and traditions, and according to the guidelines adopted by the American Association of University Professors, endorsed also by Hobart and William Smith Colleges. Regardless of one's views on the Israel-Palestine conflict and of one's opinion of Jodi Dean's writing on that conflict, her suspension amounts to a grave violation of both freedom of speech and academic freedom.

We, the undersigned scholars, therefore urge President Gearan to rescind his order of suspension immediately, and to abstain from any further violations of the freedoms fundamental to any academic community.

Signed by:

1. Dr Enzo Rossi, University of Amsterdam
2. Prof. Albenaz Azmanova, University of Kent
3. Prof. Wendy Brown, Institute for Advanced Study
4. Prof. Raymond Geuss, University of Cambridge
5. Prof. Brian Leiter, University of Chicago Law School
6. Prof. Slavoj Žižek, Birkbeck Institute for the Humanities, University of London

7. Prof. James K. Galbraith, University of Texas at Austin
8. Prof. Sally Haslanger, Massachusetts Institute of Technology
9. Prof. Andreas Kalyvas, The New School
10. Prof. Anne Norton, University of Pennsylvania
11. Prof. Richard Sennett, London School of Economics and Political Science
12. Prof. Andrew Arato, The New School
13. Prof. Craig Calhoun, Arizona State University
14. Prof. Mieke Bal, University of Amsterdam
15. Sebastian Budgen, Editorial Director, Verso
16. Prof. John P. McCormick, University of Chicago
17. Prof. Alberto Toscano, Goldsmiths, University of London
18. Prof. Tithi Bhattacharya, Purdue University
19. Prof. Jason Brennan, Georgetown University
20. Prof. Nancy Fraser, The New School
21. Prof. Nadia Urbinati, Columbia University
22. Prof. Amia Srinivasan, University of Oxford
23. Prof. Peter Singer, Princeton University
24. Prof. Étienne Balibar, Université de Paris-Nanterre
25. Prof. David Ingram, Loyola University Chicago
26. Prof. Robin Celikates, Freie Universität Berlin
27. Prof. Paul Apostolidis, London School of Economics and Political Science
28. Prof. Regina Kreide, Justus-Liebig-Universität Gießen
29. Prof. Maria Aristodemou, Birbeck, University of London
30. Prof. Kennan Ferguson, University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee
31. Dr Layal Ftouni, Utrecht University
32. Dr Nasser Abourahme, Bowdoin College
33. Dr Ira Allen, Northern Arizona University
34. Prof. Steven Levine, University of Massachusetts, Boston
35. Dr Martha Palacio Avendaño, University of Alcalá
36. Dr Koshka Duff, University of Nottingham
37. Prof. Karl Widerquist, Georgetown University-Qatar
38. Dr James Pearson, University of Amsterdam
39. Dr Lorna Finlayson, University of Essex
40. Prof. Evgenii Dainov, New Bulgarian University

41. Prof. Ghassan Hage, University of Melbourne
42. Prof. Sarah Bracke, University of Amsterdam
43. Prof. Miriyam Aouragh, University of Westminster
44. Prof. Banu Bargu, University of California, Santa Cruz
45. Prof. Jamie Mayerfeld, University of Washington
46. Dr Iain MacKenzie, University of Kent
47. Dr Clara Mattei, The New School
48. Prof. Carolyn J. Eichner, University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee
49. Prof. Federica Gregoratto, Freie Universität Berlin
50. Prof. Sandipto Dasgupta, The New School
51. Prof. Dimitris Vardoulakis, Western Sydney University
52. Prof. Sofia Näsström, Uppsala University
53. Dr Uğur Aytaç, Utrecht University
54. Jamie van der Klaauw, Erasmus University Rotterdam
55. Dr Omar Jabary Salamanca, Université Libre de Bruxelles
56. Dr Lillian Cicerchia, University of Amsterdam
57. Dr Bruno Leipold, The New Institute
58. Dr Polly Pallister-Wilkins, University of Amsterdam
59. Prof. Robin Douglass, King's College London
60. Prof. Darin Barney, McGill University
61. Dr Mai Taha, London School of Economics and Political Science
62. Dr Steven Klein, King's College London
63. Prof. Hagar Kotef, SOAS, University of London
64. Prof. Angelina Ilieva, University of Chicago
65. Prof. Ina Kerner, Universität Koblenz
66. Prof. Humeira Iqtidar, King's College London
67. Dr Ayça Çubukçu, London School of Economics and Political Science
68. Dr Peter Bratsis, City University of New York
69. Dr William Clare Roberts, McGill University
70. Dr Layla D. Brown, Northeastern University
71. Dr Mykolas Gudelis, The New School
72. Prof. Raymond Duvall, University of Minnesota
73. Dr Charisse Burden-Stelly, Wayne State University
74. Dr Nicholas Beuret, University of Essex

75. Dr Kai Heron, Lancaster University

76. Dr Joseph Choonara, University of Leicester

77. Dr Heidi Matthews, York University

78. Prof. Paul Passavant, Hobart and William Smith Colleges

Total signatures on 23 April 2024: 4690 16:30 CET

Commentaries entered by signatories on the petition website (selection):

“I support freedom of thought and discussion, even for those with whom I disagree most profoundly.”

Peter Singer, Ira W. Decamp Professor of Bioethics, University Center for Human Values, Princeton University

“I agree with the petition's message: the question is not about the wisdom of Dean's piece, but the academic freedom that is essential to higher education and democracy. Jodi Dean has a right to her opinion and a right to publish it. Suspending her is an egregious rights violation that threatens academic discourse everywhere-- and it is one of many such threats we currently face.”

Jeffrey Isaac, James H. Rudy Professor of Political Science, Indiana University Bloomington

“C'est une atteinte manifeste à la liberté d'expression et aux libertés académiques, quoi qu'on pense des positions de Jodi Dean”

Etienne Balibar, Emeritus Professor, Université de Paris-Nanterre

“I profoundly disagree with the content of the article, but that is beside the point. Academic freedom and free speech must be defended”.

Richard Ashcroft, Lecturer in UC Berkeley's Department of Political Science

“I am an alumna of William Smith College, and I find the suspension of Professor Dean to be misguided, alarming, and just plain wrong in every way. Professor Dean neither celebrates nor advocates for violence, though she rightly points out that the events on October 7th are a historical development of an oppressed people rising against their oppressors. It is clear that her suspension is politically-motivated; Mark Gearan dislikes Professor Dean's point of view and wants to discredit her perspective. Have any professors been suspended for voicing support for the state of Israel? If not, there are no grounds to remove Professor Dean from the classroom. Opposing Israel is not anti-Semitic, because the state of Israel does not represent all Jewish people; the existence of organizations like Jewish Voice for Peace prove that. Professor Dean is being punished for the thoughtcrime of having an opinion that the HWS administration doesn't like. Furthermore, Mark Gearan and HWS have a long and sordid history of ignoring genuine threats to student safety on campus. The idea that Professor Dean poses any threat to student well-being is ludicrous.

I am disgusted at the suspension of Professor Dean. My personal education was shaped by her and the Fisher Center, which allowed me to explore social justice in the field of education. If the suspension of Professor Dean is not revoked, I will NEVER donate or contribute to HWS in any way and I will actively dissuade my classmates from contributing to the Colleges as well.”

Stephanie Kenific, Syracuse, NY, United States

“This is a shameful departure from the well established norms concerning academic freedom. Of course, it is the responsibility of the University Administration to provide security for its students, faculty, staff and other employees. But to remove a faculty member from their regular teaching responsibilities on the pretext of maintaining campus security is a tacit admission that the Administration is not fulfilling its obligations to defend academic freedom and provide a safe environment for all members of the academic community.

I read what Professor Dean's article. There is no call for any action that should lead any student to "feel unsafe" on the campuses of Hobart and William Smith Colleges. Nevertheless, I grant that some students might "feel" unsafe. But that is a completely unwarranted reaction to what Professor Dean wrote. Such unwarranted reactions provide no basis for the removal of a faculty member from their teaching

duties. Indeed, it is the responsibility of the Administration on those campuses to assure students that they are safe and to counsel them. They might come to understand why academic freedom is essential. And, they might even come to understand Professor Dean's point of view. They can do that even if they firmly disagree with that point of view. Wouldn't that be an important part of what they should be learning?"

Peter Klein, Emeritus Professor, Rutgers-New Brunswick

"McCarthyism is anti-intellectual. Any institution that engages in it, is completely void of any intellectual integrity."

Kevin Kowal

"I believe that professors who oppose what the ICJ has ruled as plausible genocide in Gaza should be able to express their views openly without retaliation from their employer."

John Claborn

"I disagree strongly with the rationale in the essay by Prof. Dean that led to her suspension from teaching. However, the principle of academic freedom must rule in this case. People who disagree with her rationale should respond to it and criticize it. The administration's action in fact runs the risk of backfiring by ratifying Prof. Dean's rationale. It also runs the risk of limiting open discussion in the future on issues of consequence."

F Cox

"I am a Hobart Alum ('77) and political theorist at a nearby University. I know Jodi Dean some. The views she voices in this post are naive & misguided to the point of being cartoonish. But folks at HWS - faculty, students, administration, alums - should be answering back not suppressing speech. (And no, disagreeing with Jodi Dean here in no way excuses the policies of the Israeli government and military. How about we all try entertaining multiple thoughts at the same time?)"

James Johnson

“I am an alumnus, spouse of an alumna, and parent of an alumna and a current student. To me, the knee-jerk reaction of the school appears counter to the mission of a liberal arts institution. It seems to be aimed at placating the sensitivities of the donors, which is troubling.”

Edmund Rogers, Little Falls, NY, United States

“Without academic freedom, the university ceases to exist. It is risible and dangerous for administrators to punish scholars for taking political positions. What's next? Loyalty oaths?”

Kristofer Petersen-Overton

“Academic freedom is a fundamental freedom and a bedrock public good in a free society. It is crucial to the production and protection of knowledge. History also provides ample evidence that it is counterproductive and dangerous for scholarly inquiry, and the health of democracy for colleges and universities to attempt to suppress controversial views.”

Lisa Rivera

“While I don't agree with Dean's logic and apparent support of Hamas's terroristic attack, which I find unconscionable ---like Butler, I find both the Netanyahu government's violation of human rights and Hamas's as toxic toward securing peace---I would like to sign the letter on behalf of Dean's right to free speech and academic freedom. The argument that Dean's blog post poses any kind of risk to the safety of students appears groundless to me.”

David Ingram, Professor of Philosophy, Loyola University.

“I regard Professor Dean's statements as detestable. But a core principle of a liberal society --and of academic freedom -- is that detestable speech be protected. If there were evidence of Prof. Dean treating students in the classroom with hostility or contempt based on their identities or views, H&WSC's rationale for suspension from teaching would be justified. No such evidence, however, has been provided. Given

this, I see no way to justify this action, consistent with a commitment to academic freedom and an open, free society.”

Joshua L. Cherniss, Associate Professor | Associate Chair & Director of Graduate Studies, Georgetown University

“According to decades of case law related to the first amendment, free speech includes freedom for speech that upsets, aggrieves, frustrates, or even frightens, some listeners.

There is always a chance that political speech on difficult issues will make some feel upset or even unsafe.

However, unless (as mentioned in the letter), the speech contains components indicating an objective level of unsafeness, things such as 'true threats', harassment, incitement to imminent lawless action, and so on, this feeling alone is not an adequate reason to stifle the speech.

There are a number of these 'carve outs' within first amendment law and these determine and delimit those cases where speech CAN be suppressed.

For other cases, under the first amendment, speech MAY NOT be suppressed.

Jodi Dean's speech contains none of these elements, and would be perfectly acceptable under first-amendment law.

The first amendment applies to cases where it is the government that is attempting to suppress speech. Private parties are not subject to the same strictures, and may under some circumstances disallow whatever speech they see fit to.

Thus, not all educational institutions are required to hold to the first amendment - if they are privately owned, they do not need to follow first amendment law.

I am unsure whether Hobart and William Smith College is bound by the first amendment - I am guessing not or this might not have come up as an issue.

However, regardless of the actual legal status of this censorship attempt, Hobart and William Smith College has endorsed this approach to free speech in the

past, by virtue of endorsing the speech guidelines adopted by the American Association of University Professors.

Unless those currently in charge of the institution are the kinds of people who crumble as soon as things get difficult or complicated, they ought to continue to have the courage of their convictions and refuse to censor Jodi Deans speech, on the grounds that doing so would constitute, as discussed in the letter, .a grave violation of both freedom of speech and academic freedom'."

Wendy Langer

"Supporting Palestine does not equal anti-semitism"

Amy Carver, Long Creek, Canada

"In my youth, I fought for academic freedom and political liberties under the dictatorship in my native Bulgaria in the 1980s. At the time, emigrating to the 'free West' was always a reassuring, empowering option. There is nowhere to run now. The cradle of liberalism should not become its grave.

Apart from a violation of academic freedom, suspending Jodi Dean from teaching is also a violation of students' right to learn. It prevents them from challenging their professors' views in the safety of the classroom.

I do not share Jodi Dean's interpretation of the dynamics of the conflict -- being part of the problem in the cycle of violence, can Hamas be part of the solution? And I cannot admire and rejoice at acts of terrorism. There is a difference between armed struggle, which the UN recognizes as a right, and the terrorist acts of 7 October. The international community is also guilty of tolerating and even enabling the systematic injustices happening in the region. These issues should be debated in the public sphere and in the classroom, freely.

The academic leadership has a duty to ensure the safety of the students, but also to uphold academic freedom. Academic freedom is in fact constitutive of students' wellbeing because it helps them learn, it empowers them. Jodi Dean's article threatened no-one. Speculations that students might feel threatened by the reasoned, though controversial, views expressed by their professor in an article, cannot be grounds for punitive action. Such statements serve as justification in using

arbitrary power for the purposes of censorship -- in violation of rule of law, due process and basic rights. Such practices are an assault on the very foundations of the liberal order that our societies have been building since 1215. The academic leadership's vocation and duty is to safeguard this order, not demolish it."

Albena Azmanova, Professor of Political and Social Science, University of Kent

*** *** ***