Academic Freedom in the University Democracy

CALL FOR PAPERS

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The « **University Democracy» mission** of Nantes Université, in collaboration with **the ERC *BildungLearning*** of the UCLouvain Saint-Louis Bruxelles, the **Université de Bordeaux** and the **Université Paris-Est Créteil** and with the support of the **France Universités** and **L'Initiative** networks, invite you to discuss **academic freedom in University Democracy** at an international symposium to be held in **Nantes on November 17 and 18th, 2025**.

→ Presentation

Is academic freedom the founding principle of every university? In principle, the notion is recognized as central in many university constitutions. In reality, however, the answer is probably much more mixed, or even negative. The 2024 Academic Freedom Index compiled by the V-Dem Institute reveals that almost half the world's population lives in countries where academic freedom is not recognized at all. At the other end of the spectrum, only 14.6% of the world's population in 2023 lived in countries where academic freedom was fully recognized, including most Western societies. And even in these countries, academic freedom today faces the development of multiple threats that are fuelling the concerns of the academic world. In response, petitions, public statements, symposia, scientific articles and books are multiplying on this subject. Another illustration of these concerns is the fact that the French Political Science Association and the French Sociology Association have jointly set up an "observatory of attacks on academic freedom" in 2023 to record these, help victims, raise awareness and support research on this issue.

This symposium, aims to **explore the links between academic freedom and university democracy**. The university is a singular institution, since it is the only one to be run by an elected authority within the framework of a principle of self-government. Is academic freedom not therefore the structural condition for any genuine university? Doesn't the democratization of the university require a stronger defense of academic freedom? Conversely, if academic freedom implies, among other normative requirements, the institutional autonomy of the university and the self-government of members of the academic community, does it not require the development of an academic democracy in order to be strengthened?

The notion of academic freedom is subject to a certain amount of vagueness and terminological vacillation. Our vocabulary bears witness to this: should we speak of academic freedom, academic freedom in the plural, academic freedom in the singular, "akademische Freiheit" as the Germans do, or "Academic Freedom" as the Anglo-Saxons do? These terms are not equivalent.

Academic freedom is also a composite term, encompassing a wide range of freedoms, including freedom of research (including publication), freedom of teaching, freedom to study, university autonomy and freedom of self-governance. But the contours of these freedoms vary widely from country to country. The status of this freedom is also extremely variable: a constitutional norm in Germany (article 5 §3 of the Basic Law), Italy (article 33), Spain (article 20), Greece (art. 16 paragraph 1), Finland (art. 16), a legislative norm in Canada and Quebec, a creation of jurisprudence and legislation in France and Belgium, a simple declaration enshrined by the professionals of the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) in the United States... but also a fundamental human right in the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union (art.13). To this body of law, we must also add "soft law", such as the recommendations made by UNESCO and the Council of Europe in this area.

The quality of this norm is itself a matter of debate: is it an exclusively legal norm, or a general norm with a legal component? Should it be understood first and foremost as a "professional freedom" specific to a profession, or as a fundamental right, or even as a structural condition of any democracy?

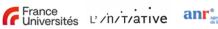## AXIS 2 - Academic freedom: the need for justification

Classically, academic freedom is referred either to the German tradition of "neo-humanism" from Kant to Humboldt, or to the American tradition of pragmatism. Indeed, the 1915 American Declaration of Academic Freedom was largely inspired by the philosopher John Dewey. The two traditions do not justify academic freedom in the same way. Insofar as academic freedom is under serious threat today, it is useful and important to return to the question of its foundations and justification. Let's listen, for example, to the philosopher Paul Ricoeur in a lecture at the Catholic University of Louvain in 1970, when he had just resigned from his position as Dean of the Faculty of Letters at the University of Nanterre because he felt that academic freedom there was under threat (something he had experienced personally):

« *In the liberal conception of the university, academic freedom has no origin other than the right of mankind to pursue the search for truth somewhere without constraint. Academic freedom is therefore not a caste privilege, neither of the institution as such, nor of teachers as a corporation, nor of students as a union, corporate, political or ideological organization; it proceeds from the university's right to pursue the search for truth somewhere. It is the request of this 'somewhere'. It cannot be reduced to a simple right of extraterritoriality that would allow teachers and students to evade common law; academic freedom does not guarantee immunity or impunity from the law (...). Precisely because the law of the academic community is founded in its relationship to truth, and is founded in a law of humanity, it is neither anarchic, nor oligarchic,*

nor corporative. The rejection of political censorship is, in fact, only the other side of the coin, the negative. Academic freedom is defined positively by responsibility for knowledge. The students' right to protest, the professors' freedom of expression in their teaching, the university's pedagogical, administrative and financial autonomy, are all expressions and organs of this responsibility towards knowledge».[1]

It is this relationship to scientific truth and collective responsibility for knowledge that distinguishes academic freedom from freedom of expression. But how far does this responsibility for knowledge and truth extend? How does it fit in with the deliberative openness demanded by liberal democracies? Can it extend to the field of action, to the point of justifying changing society, or even simply governing it, in the name of science?

AXIS 3- Academic freedom: the challenges of application

Academic freedom - like any other freedom - has its own limits. Determining the legal contours of this freedom is a first task. A comparative perspective can reveal dissonances, specific arrangements and borderline cases.

A second area is the study of threats and the responses they can incite. A first series of threats are external, and cover both the practices of illiberal regimes (Trump, Orban...) and the consequences of neoliberal measures (for example, the exorbitant control of data or research results by funders, particularly when these are companies). How can academics respond to these external threats from powerful players? A second type of threat is more internal to the university itself. Recent literature mentions the risks posed by the bureaucratization of universities on the academic freedom of academics, as well as the deployment of research deemed ideological and militant, and the risks linked to the intervention of academics in the public arena as "experts", which often leads to tension between the freedom of expression guaranteed to all citizens and academic freedom, which could be subject to ethical rules and scientific integrity. How should these different situations be regulated? Should we consider self-limitation, such as the formulation of deontological rules when intervening in society?
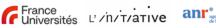
Contributions may address these questions from a reflexive and theoretical angle, but they may also bear witness to practical measures deployed or tested to regulate academic freedom, or to concrete experiences of how academic freedom has been jeopardized.

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[1] Personnal translation from French.

→ Suggest a paper

To apply, please send the documents below to the following address: mission-democratie@univ-nantes.fr **until May 30, 2025**.

- An updated CV with list of publications (or short biography)
- A paper proposal (500 words)

Papers may be submitted in **French or English**. You will be informed of the outcome of the call in early June.

A publication of the conference minutes is envisaged.

→ Fees

Candidates selected to take part in this symposium will have **no accommodation or transport expenses**.

The following expenses will be fully covered by the organizers: hotel accommodation, round-trip rail travel (or **air travel if the train journey takes more than 7 hours**), lunch and dinner on the days of the symposium, and hotel breakfasts.

→ Scientific committee

- ❖ **Arnauld LECLERC**, professor of political science at Nantes Université and head of the "university democracy" mission
- ❖ **Quentin LANDENNE**, FNRS-qualified researcher, professor at UCLouvain Saint-Louis Bruxelles, Principal Investigator of the ERC *BildungLearning*.
- ❖ **Sandrine RUI,** senior lecturer in sociology at the University of Bordeaux
- ❖ **Émilie FRENKIEL**, senior lecturer in political science at the University of Paris-Est Créteil
- ❖ **Guillaume CUNY**, post-doctoral researcher in educational science at the Mission Démocratie Universitaire of Nantes Université.
- ❖ **Susanna ZELLINI**, postdoctoral researcher on the philosophical mutations of academic freedom with the ERC BildungLearning at UCLouvain Saint-Louis Bruxelles.

→ Contact

For further information about this event, please contact:

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