

Rising Antidemocracy, Declining Academic Freedom, and Challenges to Evidence-Based Knowledge

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Abstract

Today, amid rising antidemocracy around the world, scholars across all sectors of higher education are again having to ask what the responsibility of the intellectual is. Drawing on the historical example of the German academy under Hitler's National Socialist regime, this article explores the challenges faced by Albert Einstein, who was forced to flee Europe in 1933. This historical example highlights the challenges in pursuing evidence-based knowledge under conditions of antidemocracy and intellectual censorship. Einstein's case not only reminds scholars today what is at stake when academic freedom is attacked but urges them to rethink their responsibility to students and the wider public and be proactive in resisting far-right political pressure and propaganda.

To save man from the morass of propaganda, in my opinion, is one of the chief aims of education. Education must enable one to sift and weigh evidence, to discern the true from the false, the real from the unreal, and the facts from the fiction.

—Martin Luther King Jr., 1947

Around the world—across the Americas, Europe, Asia, Africa, and the Middle East—antidemocracy is on the rise and a wave of far-right (and a few far-left) authoritarian politicians are taking control over societies (V-Dem 2022). Antidemocracy is present across diverse political systems, including obvious authoritarian and neofascist regimes as well as so-called liberal democracies such as the United States. As part of this global trend, higher education and academic freedom have increasingly come under attack, presenting a range of challenges to the production of evidence-based knowledge and scientific expertise (Douglass 2021; Dreiling and García-Caro 2023; Darian-Smith 2025). In some cases, knowledge is being censored, distorted, or silenced, particularly with respect to complex racial histories of the past (Mc Nulty 2022; Moreno-Nuño 2023). In other cases, new knowledge and disciplines are being produced that reflect the ideological and religious bias of the antidemocratic regime (Pető 2021). And in still other cases, such as the New College in Florida, scholars are being persecuted, prosecuted, and at times forced to leave to be replaced with loyal appointees chosen by extremist leaders (Barker and Turpin

2023). Together these challenges undermine academic freedom and its integral role in defending the professional and scholarly environments of universities and colleges. These challenges also threaten research, teaching, and the sharing of ideas in the pursuit of evidence-based truth and critical inquiry that serves the best interests of wider societies.

In the United States attacks on academic freedom have been extreme in Republican-led states such as Texas and Florida, which have introduced far-ranging laws limiting what can be researched and talked about in classrooms (Schoorman and Gatens 2023; Kamola 2024). Legislative attacks in these states have prevented teaching around issues of racism, sexuality, and gender and chilled discussion of topics deemed controversial, including the climate emergency (Phipps 2023; Caldwell 2023). In January 2024, Florida's state university system ruled that students can no longer take sociology classes to fulfill their core course requirements. These classes often explore social inequality, discrimination, and systemic racism, topics effectively banned with laws passed in 2023. Removing sociology classes from the required curriculum was met with dismay by many sociologists. Anne Barrett, a professor of sociology at Florida State University, wrote that the ruling would cause student numbers to fall and make sociology departments vulnerable to faculty layoffs and elimination. "The costs to society are higher still," she added. "Sociology students learn how to use empirical research and logic to assess the accuracy of claims made about the social world. They also gain skills to critique how power is distributed. In short, they are positioned to be engaged citizens, armed with the power to destabilize right-wing policy makers' agendas—and this is the threat these regulations seek to neutralize" (Barrett 2024).

Today, amid increasing state interference into university and college life on numerous fronts, educators across all sectors of higher education should be asking themselves what the intellectual's social responsibility is when academic freedom is threatened. This question confronted Albert Einstein, who was forced to flee Germany in 1933 when Adolf Hitler came to power. Einstein's story is both illustrative and inspirational. Given today's rising neofascism across Europe and other parts of the world, and the looming possibility of Donald Trump being reinstated as US president following the November 2024 election, Einstein's story is extraordinarily relevant to the current moment. It is also a horrifying reminder of what may lay ahead for everyone working in higher education in the United States.

Historical Responses by Scholars to Authoritarian Candidates

Scholars taking seriously their social responsibility to both students and the wider society has historically been common in countries in the Global South, particularly in decolonial movements for liberation and independence (Ngũgĩ wa 1986; Brandenburg et al. 2019; Kamola 2019; Choudry and Vally 2020). For instance, the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire wrote his book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1968) after being imprisoned and then forced to flee Brazil's military dictatorship that came into power in 1964. Freire's book examined how the dictatorship imposed "ideological

hegemony” in the classroom. Specifically, Freire objected to what he called “banking education,” in which the educator deposits certain knowledge in the student’s mind to be learned as the unquestioned truth. Under systems of political oppression, this banking system of education creates a singular way of knowing against which alternative worldviews and understanding are evaluated, delegitimized, and even silenced. At its core, Freire’s writings argued that literacy and education among everyone in society, including the working classes, were vital for all people to think freely on their own terms, create critical awareness and intellectual curiosity, and enable them to participate in democracy and governance (Freire [1968] 2017).

Thinking about how academic freedom relates to social responsibility to wider societies also has historical roots in Europe and the Global North. A notable example is Albert Einstein, who was giving talks at Caltech and other universities in the United States when Adolf Hitler came to power as chancellor of Germany in 1933. Within weeks Hitler promulgated laws that excluded Jews, socialists, and communists from holding positions at universities. Einstein’s house in Berlin was raided, his bank account seized, and a bounty put on his head (Sayen 1985, 17). Book banning and burnings of books written by Jewish and liberal authors also began, organized by radicalized students co-opted by Hitler youth programs and aided by university scholars who did not care, or dare, to protest (Neiman 2019). Hitler also demanded that scholars adopt a eugenics-based scientific program that would rationalize the idea of a racial hierarchy and give intellectual legitimacy to the mass extermination of minorities. These events began a massive exodus of intellectuals and university staff from Germany to Britain, France, and the United States (Newman 2020).

As a Jew and outspoken critic of Hitler, Einstein decided not to return to Germany and after a short period in Belgium took up a position at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton and became a US citizen. However, he was suspected of communist sympathies and investigated by Republican senator Joseph McCarthy. His phone was tapped and his mail opened (Jerome 2004). As noted by historian Jamie Sayen (1985, 269), the label “communist” was quickly broadened “to mean anyone whose beliefs and behavior did not rigidly conform to ‘Americanism.’ Those who did not conform—individuals, scholars, public intellectuals, foreigners, political nonconformists—saw their constitutional guarantees of freedom, justice, and equality under the law suspended.”

Einstein came under suspicion in part because he was a Jewish physicist and in part because he was suspected of communism. However, his social views also put him at odds with mainstream American values at the time. Einstein was a profoundly ethical man and felt it his responsibility to openly use his intellectual fame to protest the criminalizing of homosexuality. But even more controversial were his public condemnations of racism and discrimination against

African Americans.¹ Einstein was aware of the silencing of Black history and especially the cover-up of slavery within the US academy. He was also deeply outraged by the lynching of Black men, many returning GIs, throughout the spring of 1946 (Jerome 2002:70–76). It is in this context of ongoing racial violence that Einstein gave a public lecture at Lincoln University, a historically Black institution. There he denounced racial segregation, declaring, “The separation of the races is not a disease of colored people. It is a disease of white people. I do not intend to be quiet about it” (Jerome 2004).



Albert Einstein teaching a physics class in 1946 at Lincoln University, a historically Black institution in Pennsylvania. Reproduced with permission from the Temple University Libraries, the Charles L. Blockson Afro-American Collection.

For such views, Einstein was closely watched by J. Edgar Hoover, who led the FBI for decades (Jerome 2002). Einstein was also interrogated by McCarthy’s Senate Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations, which was emblematic of a national campaign against “disloyalty” among journalists, union members, actors and scholars (Schrecker 1986). Einstein was asked questions about the value of academic freedom and the role of the intellectual in a democratic society. And he answered that in times of rising authoritarianism, it is “especially important for intellectuals

¹ While living in Princeton, Einstein became openly agitated about racial oppression in the United States. Racism had long been a concern, and he had corresponded in 1931 with W. E. B. Dubois while still living in Germany and later became a close friend of Paul Robeson, whose illustrious career as a legal scholar, football player, and musician was brought to a halt when he was blacklisted as a traitor and “subversive” (Sayen 1985; Jerome 2004).

to do their duty” and refuse to cooperate with any political pressure that “violates the constitutional rights of the individual” (quoted in Reichman 2017).

Lessons for Today’s Antidemocratic Era

In our current post-truth age, when antidemocratic leaders openly denounce science, peddle propaganda and conspiracy theories, and are unapologetically racist, homophobic, and sexist, Einstein’s call to search for facts and disseminate truths about the past and present—despite risks of physical violence—is a powerful reminder of what is at stake in attacks on academic freedom. Certainly, there are significant differences between the current moment and earlier periods that experienced fascism and McCarthyism. The most obvious difference is today’s social media landscape that has created a completely new way to communicate extreme ideology, propaganda and disinformation to millions of people. Still, there are similarities between the past and the present that force scholars to again reflect upon how they should respond to far-right political interference in university education. Echoing Einstein, widely known linguist Noam Chomsky described “the responsibility of intellectuals to speak the truth and to expose lies” in times of deceptive and ideologically driven government action. According to Chomsky,

Intellectuals are in a position to expose the lies of governments, to analyze actions according to their causes and motives and often hidden intentions. In the Western world, at least, they have the power that comes from political liberty, from access to information and freedom of expression. For a privileged minority, Western democracy provides the leisure, the facilities, and the training to seek the truth lying hidden behind the veil of distortion and misrepresentation, ideology and class interest, through which the events of current history are presented to us. The responsibilities of intellectuals, then, are much deeper than . . . the “responsibility of people,” given the unique privileges that intellectuals enjoy. (Chomsky 1967; see Allott, Knight, and Smith 2019)

Today many scholarly communities take their responsibilities very seriously, despite conditions of oppression and terror (Özkirimli 2017). For example, enormous bravery was demonstrated by students and faculty during extensive protests across Turkey over the past decade in response to Recep Erdoğan’s criminalizing scholars, appointing his own university leaders, and dismantling Turkey’s higher education sector. These protests illustrate the collective strength needed from those inside and outside the university to fight back and resist repression. Following attacks on Boğaziçi University in 2021, an international solidarity movement formed, with 2,340 academics from fifty countries signing a joint statement demanding academic freedom and university autonomy (*Turkish Minute* 2021). Ultimately, however, such efforts could not stop Erdoğan from appointing new administrators and effectively gutting the university, forcing many scholars to flee (Özdemir, Mutluer, and Özyürek 2019; Vatansever 2020; Doğan and Selenica 2022). According to Zeynep Gambetti (2022, 186), a professor of political theory at Boğaziçi University from 2000 to 2019, we must “rethink the role of intellectuals in dark times. The ivory

tower has collapsed. We can no longer claim to be outside the political field. . . . Given the material and structural conditions of post-truth, constituting a new regime of truth, one that is inclusive and collective, calls for the labor of communing.”

Academic Freedom as Social Responsibility

Albert Einstein’s story is a lesson in bravery and suggests that academic freedom, perhaps above all else, is an ethical practice of social responsibility to pursue evidence-based facts for the betterment of wider societies (see Darian-Smith 2025). This includes fighting against propaganda and racially biased research such as Hitler’s push to prove eugenics. It should give everyone pause that Einstein, who received the Nobel Prize in Physics in 1922 and enjoyed enormous fame as one of the world’s greatest physicists, could then be subject to state censorship and violence under the Nazi regime and forced to flee. If he had stayed with his scientific colleagues in Germany, he undoubtedly would have been imprisoned and possibly sent to a concentration camp. But perhaps even more remarkable is that seeking refuge in the United States had its own costs and challenges. In the supposedly “free” country he wasn’t persecuted so much for being a Jew, though many universities at the time had quotas limiting the number of Jewish scholars that could be hired (Leff 2019). Rather, Einstein was subjected to political surveillance over his concern and teaching about racial equality, constitutional rights, anti-imperialism, and pacifism. His views were deemed potentially “traitorous” under McCarthyism and by the Republican Party.

The challenges Einstein faced illustrate lessons of enormous relevance today about the academy in times of rising antidemocracy, propaganda, and disinformation. Across the Americas, Europe, Africa, Asia, and the Middle East, repressive governments and far-right political leaders are already in power or mobilizing to assume power. In 2022, Italy elected a far-right prime minister, and in 2024 the Netherlands did the same. France and Germany, two countries that vowed “never again” to allow the horrors perpetrated on Jews, Romani, and others by the Nazi regime, have both shown a considerable political swing toward neofascism in recent years. And across all European countries, societies are experiencing rising Islamophobia and antisemitism. In the Americas, Argentina elected to the presidency Javier Milei, an extreme far-right figure, in late 2023. He joined a growing cadre of authoritarian leaders, such as former Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro, who continues to influence his country’s politics despite no longer being in office. And in India, the largest democratic country in the world, Narendra Modi, the Hindu nationalist far-right leader, was reelected in mid-2024 for a third term as prime minister.

Against a backdrop of rising antidemocracy, the world turns to the United States and its presidential election in November 2024. If Donald Trump is reelected president of the United States, it will undoubtedly usher in a period of national political and racial repression. This will include attacks on scholars, students, university leaders, and the entire higher education sector. The MAGA Republican party platform clearly states that it intends to close the Department of Education, defund schools that reach about racial discrimination, and reinstate the 1776

Commission that promotes a white supremacist curriculum. Political repression will prevent scholars—wherever one lives in the country—from pursuing evidence-based research, teaching, and critical thinking that challenge the status quo for the foreseeable future.

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