

Ralf Roth, Asli Vatansever (eds.)

SCIENTIFIC FREEDOM UNDER ATTACK

*Political Oppression, Structural Challenges,
and Intellectual Resistance in Modern and
Contemporary History*

NORMATIVE ORDERS

campus

Scientific Freedom under Attack

Normative Orders

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Edited by Rainer Forst and Klaus Günther

Volume 27

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July 2020 Ash Vatansever, Berlin, and Ralf Roth, Sinntal

Introduction

Aslı Vatansever and Ralf Roth

In early 2017, amidst a global wave of neo-conservative offensive against critical thinking, we came up with the idea for a conference on scientific freedoms during a virtual discussion among the members of the *Verein für die Geschichte des Weltsystems*.¹ This edited volume sprang from that exceptionally inspiring conference on the “Problems of Scientific Freedoms in Modern and Contemporary History”, which took place on 2–3 November 2018 at the Excellence Cluster on Normative Orders at the Goethe University in Frankfurt am Main, with the valuable support of the *Verein für die Geschichte des Weltsystems* and the editorial board of the *Zeitschrift für Weltgeschichte*.

The decision for the event could not have been timelier. At that time, not only had one of the editors of this volume, Aslı Vatansever, suddenly found herself in exile on political grounds, but the last couple of years leading to our conference had been a disgrace for scientific freedom worldwide. There had been a staggering rise in the documented cases of threats against scholars in a number of countries including Turkey, China, Iran, Serbia, Russia, and Hungary (Scholars at Risk 2017). Even in several Western contexts, which were thought to be the bulwark of scientific freedom, anti-intellectual outbursts had become a daily habit for conservative politicians—so much so, that the scientists saw it necessary to hold a series of rallies under the banner of “March for Science” in 2017.

Two years into our conference, the issue still has not lost topicality. On the contrary, anti-intellectual populisms seem to have gained even more

¹ *Verein für die Geschichte des Weltsystems* (Society for the History of the World-System) is a Hannover-based association of Social Sciences and Humanities scholars that aims at contributing to the development of a multifocal historiography and world-systems analysis in the German-speaking world. The main scholarly channel of the association is the biannual *Zeitschrift für die Weltgeschichte* (Journal for World History) that publishes original articles on topics related to global and universal history in German.

ground. Meanwhile, the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic reveals the discrepancy between the political decision-making mechanisms and scientific thought in many contexts even more brutally than before. The global health crisis brings to light a series of deep-rooted problems related to scientific production, ranging from various manifestations of anti-intellectualism to a hierarchization of research fields and politically driven misallocation of research funds. Unsurprisingly, neo-populist politicians and reactionary interest groups continue to refute scientific facts even amidst the pandemic.

To be sure, the modern and contemporary history is replete with examples of authoritarian transgressions and dogmatic positions against scientific thought. However, what distinguishes the current era is the unprecedented scale and simultaneousness of the attacks. The neo-liberal onslaught and radical conservative approaches seems to target not only specific individuals or particular lines of thought, but rational thinking *per se*. We are witnessing a double pressure mechanism consisting of political oppression and economic precarization. The former is more overt in the peripheral countries. The latter seems to prevail in the core countries of the capitalist world-economy. Yet they are certainly mutually reinforcing. For this reason, it is worth taking a wider look at the historical trajectory of scientific freedom and its antinomies.

Since the French Revolution 230 years ago, freedom of thought, freedom of expression, and freedom of press count—at least theoretically—as inalienable human rights. An important aspect of the freedom of expression has always been access to public discourse through available media of a given time, as well as access to education and participation in knowledge production. This includes the right to conduct research: research in light of the new findings, in line with the principles of humanity and Enlightenment, and with the purpose of expanding our understanding of the world understood as both the human society and the surrounding nature.

Obviously, it was a long way from the theoretical formulation of this principle to its political implementation in practice through national constitutions and transnational political charters of the United Nations (UN) and the European Union (EU) or similar organizations. Nevertheless, the Declaration of UN Human Rights is by now signed by 192 member states, although it neither guarantees nor promises an ideal world of scientific freedom unbounded by political or economic interests and inequalities. Even in the “enlightened” Western world, where academic freedoms are

legally safeguarded against politico-ideological oppression in theory, scientific production is being limited in practice through market mechanisms of resource allocation according to the needs of capital accumulation.

The relatively long phase of expansion in terms of ideational and scientific freedoms from the late eighteenth to the mid-twentieth century seems to be losing impetus—or even coming to an end from a more pessimistic point of view—in current times. The signs are abundant: The global finance crisis of 2008 and 2009 led to a massive decrease in investment in research and development in many countries, which resulted in the growing precariousness of the academic labor force pretty much everywhere. In the peripheral and semi-peripheral countries, this financial bottleneck additionally led to a renewed wave of brain drain and, consequently, brought their planned process of “catching up” with the core countries to a halt (UNESCO 2015). Again in the semi-peripheral and peripheral regions, the economic constraints have been accompanied by blatantly authoritarian attacks against academic freedoms for the most part. In Turkey, the AKP government has been leading a massive purge at the universities that started with the crackdown on the signatories of the Academics for Peace Petition in January 2016 and escalated in the aftermath of the alleged coup attempt in July of the same year (Vatansever 2018).² In China, human rights activists are being detained. The Russian government continues to accuse scientists of working on “anti-Russian” motives or as “foreign agents”. The situation in Egypt and Iran is similarly dramatic.

As we said previously, the aspect of political oppression is more overt in peripheral and semi-peripheral regions. However, it does not mean that scientific production in the core countries is completely exempt from ideological interventions. We should not forget, for example, that it has only been a few years since the former Prime Minister of Canada, Stephen Harper, equated social science with a crime, and accused the intellectuals in his country of “committing sociology” for linking the increased attacks against aboriginal women to the entrenched racism in the Canadian society (Singh 2014). The Trump administration in the US has been systematically disregarding scientific facts, including climate change, since the start of their presidential term, which took even a sharper and more ridiculous turn during the COVID-19 crisis (Friedman and Plumer 2020). A similar anti-intellectual tendency characterizes the Johnson-government in the UK—a

2 AKP is an abbreviation of *Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* (Justice and Development Party).

former EU member. Equally alarming are the overt ideological oppression of scientists and universities in Hungary and the increased governmental pressure on History Departments at the Polish Universities (Kellermann 2016)—both EU member states.

In view of these concurrent incidents, the issue of scientific freedoms has found renewed interest in public debates in recent years. The economic impacts of austerity measures on the one hand, and the rise of conservative populisms on the other have been draining institutional power, funding, and infrastructure from scientific communities worldwide. The extensiveness of the current challenge demands a temporally as well as spatially holistic approach. The broad spectrum of this edited volume aims at responding to this demand. In a panoramic view, covering a wide geographic and historical span, this compilation reviews past and current incidents of latent and manifest oppression and resistance. It inspires the reader to rethink the discontents of intellectual production from a broader historical perspective. In the meantime, it urges us to question the meaning of scientific freedom not only in view of the suppression of scientists but also in terms of instrumentalization of science for political and economic purposes. And last but not least, it demonstrates how the issue of scientific freedom exceeds the purely ideological domain in the narrow sense: Through a variety of geographic and historical examples, we see the complex ways in which the sphere of academic or scientific production interacts with (and is affected by) socio-economic factors and power relations. Each individual contribution deals with the abovementioned issues within the context of a particular past or contemporary case. The case examples illustrate and concretize the phenomenon of scientific freedom through a specific incident of ideologically or economically driven intervention to knowledge production. Overall, the book intends to provide a glimpse into the rich repertoire of conflict in the sphere of intellectual production.

Part I is concerned with the background of two historical cases of western semi-periphery: The Ottoman and Czarist Empires and how their contradictory intellectual heritage and complex relation with the European notion of scientific freedom extends to modern-day Turkey and Russia. Tatiana Artemyeva discusses how the teaching of philosophy at Russian Universities has been controlled by the official institutions throughout modern history. From the institutional development of philosophy education under the impact of Christian Wolff's view in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries to the Marxist turn in the aftermath of the October

Revolution, Artemyeva demonstrates how the Russian academic system functioned as a state institute throughout its history. In the second part of the first chapter, Aslı Vatansever discusses the historical background of Turkey's autocratic tendencies, which attracted considerable attention due to the recent crackdown on universities in the aftermath of the Academics for Peace Petition in January 2016. Vatansever argues that while the AKP era represents a renewed authoritarian intervention into the sphere of intellectual production, state control over universities and the oppression of dissident scholars are not a novelty in Turkey. The article traces the roots of the present-day anti-intellectualism in Turkey back to the socio-political fault lines that emerged during the nineteenth-century incorporation process of the Ottoman Empire into the capitalist world-economy.

Part II explores the contested relationship between state control and scientific production in the twentieth-century Eastern European context. Viktoriya Sukovata analyses the *sharashka*, a specific phenomenon in Soviet history referring to the secret research and scientific institutions in the *Gulag* system, where talented Soviet scientists and engineers convicted for various offenses were forced to work.³ Sukovata puts forth a bold case and explores the *sharashka* as a paradoxical space for creativity and research during the Stalinist era. In the second part, Timofey Rakov discusses the relationship between the Bolshevik regime and science in view of the Novosibirsk Akademgorodok as a scientific utopia, and attempts to offer an alternative view beyond the classic dichotomy of 'freedom vs. oppression'. Both authors draw the reader's attention to the dialectic relationship between oppression and resistance by bringing to light unexpected spaces of scientific production within an authoritarian regime. It is true, that no form of political regime can exert absolute power and exhaust all intellectual energies through its repressive mechanisms; even in the most absolutist regime imaginable there still remains some space for political opposition and the pursuit of knowledge production beyond the state's interests, albeit in an extremely limited degree. However, it is necessary at this point to expand the discussion and question our understanding of "scientific freedom": Does scientific freedom equal the sheer infrastructural capacity to conduct research? Can there be scientific freedom without freedom of expression? Or does scientific freedom necessarily imply an essential link

³ *Gulag* stands for *Głównoje upravljenije ispravitelno-trudowych lagerej* (Main Administration of Corrective Labor Camps)

between decent human existence, inalienable human rights, and knowledge production?

As the editors of this volume, we argue that an interpretation of scientific freedom solely as the material capacity to pursue research is a dangerously limited and utilitarian way of looking at intellectual production: it seems to focus only on the activity and its tangible outcomes regardless of the entire web of power relations within and beyond the laboratory, as if research can be done in a vacuum. Conducting (or being forced to conduct) research without having the liberty to choose the research subject or without being able to present research outcomes regardless of their ideological implications does not imply scientific freedom; it equals forced intellectual labor. We may wish to believe that the scientists in question were devoted to science to such a degree that they still loved their “golden cage” of research. Nevertheless, in a situation where the individual is forced to choose between forced labor and worse forms of punishment including physical torture, starvation and death, all assumptions regarding a presumed joy of doing research seem to become irrelevant, for in this case the beloved research activity represents first and foremost a means of sheer survival.

However, while we may or may not agree with the authors on certain points, we still believe it is important to rethink the relationship between freedom and oppression in a dialectical way. Thus, in the spirit of true scientific freedom we also defend the right to put forth controversial, thought-provoking arguments, no matter how offensive and challenging they might seem to our established opinions in the first place. Again, in this spirit, we very much welcome the reader to reflect on the contentious points in these chapters in an out-of-the-box way.

Hans-Heinrich Nolte follows up on the Soviet example and discusses the case of Mikhail Jakovlevich Gefter, the former head of the Methodological Department of the Institute for History of the Soviet Academy of Sciences in the 1960s and co-editor of the Samizdat-Journal *Poiski* from 1977 to 1981. In view of Gefter’s case, Nolte demonstrates the methods of enforcing the party line on historiography. In the last part of this chapter, Dariusz Adamczyk depicts the political instrumentalization of history-writing in post-revolutionary Poland. Based on the assumption that “every revolution needs a reinterpretation of concepts and ideas and a transplantation of collective consciousness”, Adamczyk illustrates how the Order

and Justice Party (PIS) set out to create an image of Poles as a “heroic and morally inoffensive nation that arises from its knees” after 2015.⁴

Part III tackles the issues of exile, intellectual migration, and brain drain *versus* brain gain, which gained increased topicality in the recent years again. On the background of the persecution of social scientists before and during the Second World War in Germany Roth’s contribution focuses on problems of scientific freedom in combination with forced emigration by examining the fate of refugees. His case study focused on the forced emigration of the Frankfurt School, specifically in view of the less explored case of Frederic Pollock. Roth argues that Pollock went through the same painful experience of forced emigration as his somewhat more renowned colleagues Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer. But, his research in the US followed a distinctly socio-economic trajectory in contrast to his colleagues who focused solely on philosophy and who wrote the famous socio-philosophical essay “Eclipse of Reason” in this period. But Pollock returned from exile with a study which impacted the socio-economic development of the Western part of Germany more powerfully than the study of Horkheimer and Adorno ever could, because at the center of his research stood the consequences of modern capitalism in the age of second industrialisation and the the impact of computers on society—the beginning of what we call digitalization today, a process that has transformed societies at breakneck speed and will continue to do so. This is why Roth argues that Pollock’s research should have received more attention.

Pascale Laborier, on the other hand, takes up the issue of intellectual migration from the perspective of the receiving end, i.e. the country of destination. Laborier provides an overview on the various programs designed to welcome displaced and/or at-risk scholars in the past and now. Focusing particularly on the French case, Laborier’s contribution aims at interrogating the limits of the existing “rescue programs” and their efficiency in protecting academic freedoms.

As the individual contributions in our edited volume so far testify as well, the entire discourse on academic freedom revolves mostly around the political aspect. The rise of anti-intellectual policies and threats against scholars worldwide is certainly more shocking at a first glance. Yet, there is another, structural factor which is not less threatening for the future of knowledge production: the increasing precarization of academic labor

⁴ PIS stands for *Prawo i Sprawiedliwość* (Order and Justice Party).

force. The commodification of knowledge and the privatization of higher education in the last few decades have radically transformed the academic landscape (Slaughter and Rhoades 2009, Brienza 2016). Universities have been forced to eliminate non-profitable research and degree programs to become “market-smart”—and not surprisingly, this argument is often used to eliminate critical strands like Marxist Theory or Gender Studies (cf. Zemsky et al. 2005). Meanwhile, the cost-cutting mentality came to shape the academic employment relations (Lessinger and Wojcicka-Sharff 1994, and Leslie and Slaughter 1997). We can see it in the steady elimination of tenure and its replacement with contingent employment practices (Deresiewicz 2011, and Donoghue 2008). The drastic cutback of public funds in higher education rendered researchers and institutions overly dependent on third-party funding (Sander 2012). The overdependence on external funding increased the influence of the market massively, as can be seen in how the business-oriented rhetoric of “excellence” infiltrated the entire academic world. Under these circumstances, we need to ask what is left of academic freedom even in countries hitherto seen as the bastion of scientific liberties.

For this purpose, the last part specifically addresses the transformation of academic labor relations under the impact of neoliberal higher education policies in various core countries. Thomas Clark discusses the legal and institutional constraints affecting the sphere of knowledge production in the United States. Contrary to popular belief, academic freedom there does not have deep historical or constitutional roots and turns out to be surprisingly fragile behind its robust facade. His contribution suggests that one major reason for this is its construction as a positive liberty within a framework of republican ideology emphasizing virtue and the public good. While proponents of academic freedom emphasized its virtuous republican character, dominant ideologies and power structures such as anti-intellectualism, racism and capitalism have successfully truncated academic freedom in the name of core American virtues, which democracy, white supremacy and the unlimited power of capital were believed to represent. While the Constitution emerged as a protector of academic freedom after the devastating wave of McCarthyist repression, it does not shield scholars from the institutional power of university administrations. As agents of neoliberal policies of precarization and control they have emerged as a key factor in determining the de facto limits of scholarly liberty, which remains a susceptible good in the Twentyfirst-Century US.

Giuseppe Acconcia, Paolo Graziano, and Asli Vatansever provide an overview on academic labor precarity in Italy, France, and Germany respectively. Contextual nuances notwithstanding the section in its entirety points to a simultaneous neoliberal reform process that has been working negatively on the quality of higher education, job security of the academic workforce, and research ethics in the leading countries in scientific production over the past two decades. The main aim is to complement the general discourse on academic freedom with the much overlooked yet crucial economic aspect that eventually spills over scientific liberties as well. Historically, the idea behind “tenure” had been to provide a safety zone to intellectual workers by offering them lifelong job security and, thus, protecting the sphere of scientific production from politico-ideological interventions. In this sense, the contemporary attack on tenure and academic job security should also be seen as an offense against critical thinking and intellectual freedom.

Expanding the discourse from a labor market perspective is also vital for future discussions on intellectual migration. Paradoxically, the above-mentioned core regions, especially the ones discussed in the last chapter of this volume, represent the favorite destinations for displaced scholars from conflict zones and authoritarian regimes, although their domestic academic labor markets are already suffering from structural oversaturation. The increasing dependence on external funding and the consequent abundance of third-party funding options that characterize their academic systems attract migrant, displaced or endangered scholars from peripheral regions who are in urgent need of exit opportunities. However, the structural shortage of long-term occupational perspectives that marks the academic labor markets in those core countries, combined with the influx of foreign academics, is turning them into a global reservoir of devalued, dispensable, precarious academic labor force in the long run. This contradictory market dynamic is likely to pose an additional challenge in the near future which will need to be addressed sooner than later.

On the whole, scientific production is now faced with an enormous challenge that urgently demands a collective and concerted response from the ranks of the intellectual community. As we argued in the beginning, the scientific community worldwide is now exposed to a double pressure mechanism consisting of overt political oppression and a more subtle apparatus of economic precarization. Treating these dynamics as isolated phenomena would mean to turn a blind eye on the systemic interconnec-

tions. And yet, the individualization and isolation of interrelated phenomena is indeed paradigmatic of the logic of late capitalism. The atomistic frame of mind is so artfully imposed upon the public discourse that it infiltrated the academic discourse as well. The great Fredric Jameson has once described the spirit of our times as the “shrinkage of time to the present” (Jameson 2015, 105). He argued that the neoliberal *Zeitgeist* perceives the social world as a fragmented set of detached singularities, as if all occurrences are merely “one-time unrepeatable formal events” (Jameson 2015, 110). What we see here is the neoliberal logic in operation that aims at dis-embedding the individual from the historical, and the political from the economic. But those who claim to defend academic freedoms and critical thought should not have the luxury to take problems at face-value. We have to insist on seeing the big picture in all its complexity and in all its dimensions. This requires a holistic approach both in the historical and analytical sense. It would be an easy way out to simply condemn authoritarian regimes and certain political figures, or the predominance of capital as a reified entity, but it sure would not solve the main problems in the long run. At the end of the day, both the authoritarian regimes and the tyranny of the markets are maintained by the actions (and non-actions) of all of us.

Obviously, this imposes a task upon those who perceive and describe themselves as “scientists”. Especially in our times where the civic imagination is increasingly dominated by reactionary ideas, it is crucial to reclaim the role of the intellectuals as socially and politically active subjects. In this sense, perhaps the real battle for the academic community involves a struggle against the epistemological pillars of domination as well as against its political manifestations. After all, as one of the most inspiring scholars of the twentieth century who belonged to a now-extinct breed of truly engaged intellectuals, Charles Wright Mills, had said:

I do not believe that intellectuals will inevitably ‘save the world’, although I see nothing wrong with ‘trying to save the world’—a phrase which I take here to mean the avoidance of war and the rearrangement of human affairs in accordance with the ideals of human freedom and reason. But even if we think the chances are dim, still we must ask: If there are any ways out of the crises of our epoch by means of the intellect, is it not up to the intellectuals to state them? (Mills 1959, 133)

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