Received: 7 July 2025 | Accepted: 7 July 2025

DOI: 10.1111/amet.70000

american ethnologist
JOURNAL OF THE AMERICAN ETHNOLOGICAL SOCIETY

INTERVIEW

Struggles for academic freedom (part 1)

AE interviews Hayal Akarsu and Heath Cabot on the fight against threats to free speech in Europe and beyond

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Funding information:
None

Abstract

In the first of two interviews on the issue of academic freedom, the editors of *American Ethnologist* interviewed Hayal Akarsu, president of the European Association of Social Anthropologists, and Heath Cabot, president of the Association for Political and Legal Anthropology, about the restrictions faced by scholars and students in Europe and beyond. In a wide-ranging discussion, Akarsu and Cabot consider historical cycles of repression, surveillance, and censorship. Police on campuses and legal attacks on protesters are creating atmospheres of fear; the academic precariat has new incentives to self-discipline. Safety rhetoric and accusations of anti-Semitism have been weaponized to silence legitimate criticism of the state and settler colonialism. More optimistically, Akarsu and Cabot see opportunities for systematic documentation and global community building to resist the suppression of academic freedom. Ultimately, they suggest, the distinction between free speech and academic freedom—knowledge based on research—is critical. Yet allowing all sides to participate in debate remains a critical element of changing minds and creating spaces of learning, not spaces of exclusion.

KEYWORDS

academic freedom, censorship, Europe, free speech, precarity, settler colonialism, student protest

How are anthropologists being impacted by the recent intensification of attacks on academic freedom? What can we do to protect ourselves? And how might disciplinary insights derived from research into topics such as migrancy, police surveillance, and state violence help us better understand both the nature of these threats and how to mobilize against them?

In the second of *American Ethnologist*'s new series of current events interviews, we asked Hayal Akarsu, president of the European Association of Social Anthropologists (EASA), and Heath Cabot, president of the Association for Political and Legal Anthropology (APLA), to share their perspectives on the current situations confronting faculty and students at universities across Europe.

Akarsu leads EASA's Working Group on Human Rights and Academic Freedom, which recently hosted a community check-in on issues relating to freedom of speech. An assistant professor of cultural anthropology at the University of Utrecht, the Netherlands, she studies policing, surveillance, and police reform and brutality in Turkey. Her current research explores the contested terrain of risk imaginaries, security threats, and technological affordances around environmental crimes, warfare ecologies, and orbital politics.

Cabot, who teaches at the University of Bergen, Norway, has led APLA's efforts to provide support and resources for academics whose free speech is under threat. Cabot has devoted nearly two decades to researching displacement, asylum, belonging, and violence in Greece, with a strong focus on law and advocacy. She is now completing a book on grassroots health care interventions, also in Greece, and is developing a project on the contested meanings of mobility and crisis in Norway.

Together, Akarsu and Cabot elucidate how police on campuses and legal attacks on protesters are creating atmospheres of fear (inspiring new incentives to self-discipline); how rhetorics of safety, the need to listen to "both sides," and accusations of anti-Semitism have been weaponized to silence legitimate criticism of the state and settler colonialism; and available opportunities for systematic documentation and global community building to resist the suppression of academic freedom.

The text of our discussion has been lightly edited. A list of references cited appears at the end.

Susanna Trnka: Thank you both for taking the time to meet with us. We thought we'd start with you, Hayal—could you speak in your capacity as president of EASA and what the organization is doing around issues of academic freedom? What sorts of situations have EASA members faced? Could you give us a sense of the European context?

Hayal Akarsu: Thanks for having me. Over the past year, we've witnessed systematic attacks on academics throughout Europe that have been truly unprecedented in scope. These attacks are targeting both faculty and students, particularly those calling for a ceasefire in Palestine, advocating for their institutions to cut ties with Israeli institutions, and opposing what they see as institutional complicity with genocide. What we're seeing is a troubling cycle of repression, surveillance, and censorship, coupled with violent attacks on protesters. Universities are actually calling police on their own students and staff. The European Legal Support Center, which monitors repression and provides legal support to advocates of Palestinian rights across Europe, has documented over 1,146 incidents of repression at universities since October 7 alone. In some countries, this situation is even more troubling. Germany, for instance, recently ruled that BDS [i.e., the movement to use boycott, divestment, and sanctions to try to influence Israeli policy] is unconstitutional while simultaneously investigating funding for research on "postcolonial and leftist anti-Semitism," as they call it. This represents a particularly stark example of how academic freedom is being systematically undermined at the state level.

But I want to emphasize that these attacks on academic freedom extend far beyond Palestine-related activism. We're also seeing waves of student-led protests against authoritarian and right-wing governments across Europe, from Turkey to Serbia, and academics involved in these movements are facing similar patterns of repression and censorship. More broadly, this is all happening within a context where right-wing parties throughout Europe—really, it's a global phenomenon—view universities as fundamentally attacking "societal values." This contributes to a growing anti-intellectualism that particularly targets Black and brown bodies, as well as political dissidents, in universities. There's another critical dimension here: all of these attacks are happening alongside significant budget cuts in higher education. Since most European universities are public institutions, these funding cuts have dramatic effects.

EASA responded to this wave of repression on academic freedom by establishing the Working Group on Human Rights and Academic Freedom. Our membership asked us to create this working group because of the intensity of attacks on academics over the past couple of years. We're monitoring violations, gathering evidence on academic freedom and human rights violations, and creating support structures, including organizing webinars and events. But beyond immediate response, we're working to archive and document these struggles because individual cases are usually portrayed as isolated incidents. What we're seeing, however, are clear patterns of systemic repression. That's why we are currently writing a comprehensive report to document such trends. [If you've experienced restrictions on your academic freedom, or if you've witnessed troubling institutional patterns where you work, we encourage you to share your experience through our monitoring form.[1]]

In addition, we recently held a community check-in with our members because there's a high emotional toll on academics that often goes unrecognized. Too often, these issues are framed purely in terms of legal or political rights, without enough focus on creating spaces for community building and mutual support.

Trnka: So you mentioned the emotional toll and also the budget cuts. Can you expand on how these two are coming into play as part of questions about academic freedom?

Akarsu: Sure. Budget cuts typically target disciplines that are perceived as less valuable to society—humanities and social sciences bear the brunt of this. But there's also something more insidious happening with cuts to general funding structures. In Europe many academics rely heavily on major grants like European Research Council funding or national-level grants. What we're seeing now mirrors what's happening in the US, where there are investigations targeting grants that focus on inclusion, diversity, or gender and sexuality studies. Certain subjects are being deemed unworthy of academic inquiry. Removing this funding becomes a mechanism for punishing people doing critical work, but it also adds another layer of insecurity to an already precarious academic labor structure. Many people depend on their temporary or precarious postdoc, teaching, or PhD positions. Their entire livelihoods hang on these positions. So when you speak up against genocide, or even advocate for basic freedom issues like keeping police off campus, you're not just expressing your opinion. In some cases, you're literally putting your livelihood at risk. The repercussions extend far beyond having your speech policed. There are real threats of losing your funding, losing your job entirely. This is especially devastating for nonpermanent faculty, who make up the majority of academic workers.

This precarity is central to the emotional toll we're witnessing. There's so much gaslighting happening—victims being turned into perpetrators—and academics are engaged in this constant, systematic fight, especially around Palestine solidarity work. We've been living with this intensity for more than two years now (let alone the earlier periods), and it's creating genuine trauma, with an emotional and physical toll among our academic communities. During the EASA community check-in, members repeatedly told us they desperately need spaces to talk about the ethical, personal, and political challenges they have been facing; the moral weight of decisions they needed to make, et cetera. What's particularly painful—and I have to say, I've felt this deeply myself—is the profound disappointment many of us feel toward our colleagues, fellow anthropologists. I'm talking specifically about those who teach critical theory, decolonial studies, or similar subjects in their classrooms, who built their careers on critiquing systems of oppression, yet have failed to support their colleagues and students when it actually matters. These are tenured faculty members, people with permanent positions who have the relative power and

job security to take a stand and challenge these repressive systems within their universities. Instead, they remain silent or, in some cases, even become complicit in the very structures they "theoretically" oppose.

Trnka: It sounds like there's an incredible amount of fear among faculty and students.

Akarsu: Absolutely. There's also a deliberate *creation* of fear. Fear is one of the biggest weapons. This is basic analysis of power—you make people police their own behavior through intimidation, deploying fear at multiple levels simultaneously. Look at the US context, for example. Some international students are literally stuck inside their homes out of fear of being taken into custody. Students with Middle Eastern backgrounds, in particular, are terrified of losing their visa status. There is a genuine risk of being *abducted* on the street by officials—taken into custody without warning or due process. This brings back vivid memories from my childhood in Turkey in the 1990s—how the state's extralegal apparatus operated, especially against Kurdish and leftist dissidents, to generate that same pervasive fear of never knowing when they might come for you.

Trnka: Heath, you've been doing a lot with *PoLAR* and the website and various resources. What's your sense of the situation around academic freedom in relation to anthropology? And can you tell us about what *PoLAR* is up to?

Heath Cabot: I'm in an interesting position personally, because I'm based in Norway, which has a lot of protections for academics in general. A group of trade unions in the Nordic countries put together an extensive report in October 2024, and it seems like Norway is really doing pretty well in terms of academic freedom, even if here—as elsewhere in Europe—they have experienced the rise of the Right. So this is an incredibly privileged position.

But I'm president of APLA, and we've been trying to engage and mobilize around issues of academic freedom, even before the 2024 elections. Gaza has been a flash point, the starting point of the restrictions in the US, as well as elsewhere.

As an AAA organization, APLA has been largely focused on the US context, though when Ghassan Hage was dismissed from his position at the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology for his critical statements about Israel, academics and anthropologists globally told us that academic freedom was becoming an issue. In response to Hage's dismissal, APLA authored a statement in support of critical scholarship, which over 500 people signed.

We all knew with the November [2024] elections [in the US] that there would be restrictions on academic freedom. I don't think any of us quite anticipated it was going to be this bad and would happen so quickly, but Jessica Greenberg, who was a previous editor of *PoLAR*, well in advance of the Trump administration's crackdown on academia, said, "I want to organize something at the AAA around academic freedom."

It was an in-person event. We had Isaac Kamola, who has really been a leader around these issues. He runs a center for the defense of academic freedom at the AAUP [American Association for University Professors]. They've been working on this for a long time. Kamola gave a talk and led a brainstorming session and workshop. And then we also had our virtual business meeting, where we had a conversation inspired by the terrible firing of Maura Finkelstein, the Jewish professor who was fired from Muhlenberg College in Pennsylvania for making statements in support of Palestine that were targeted as "anti-Semitic." We asked people, "Hey, what do you want to see APLA do in the next year?"

And what we heard from people was that of all [the AAA] sections, *this* is the section devoted to the critical study of politics and law. We should be doing something! There were a lot of great ideas: tool kits, a legal defense network. That was a great idea, as an *idea*! People thought, "We must have all these JDs in APLA who can help people facing restrictions on academic freedom." So we started a task force, and we've been meeting monthly since then.

I have to say, it's been a real exercise in humility and a lot of work, a lot of research, a lot of solidarity being built through that work. We have been able to come up with some tool kits. We have been working on a report. But the things we'd hoped to materialize, that would be really concrete, that people could really use, like a legal aid network, are very complicated to make happen in any context. The panorama of legal protections for academic freedom in the US is especially complex and variable. They depend on the kind of institution you are in, where that institution is, your position—and academic freedom itself is not safeguarded formally in many contexts. And the threats that take place are not always overt in terms of like "Oh, let me check your syllabus" or "We're gonna dismiss someone because of a position they took on social media." Instead, campus police might turn up at a class event to check on regulations like whether you are allowed to use the space, other sorts of very banal things. All this can also materialize into a threat to academic freedom.

So it's been hard to come up with support networks. Lawyers are often unable to give legal advice informally, and it is difficult to come up with generalized advice and best practices for people since things vary depending on the context of the institution. Anybody who's worked in this field for a long time could have told me this at the beginning. But I also think it's important to keep in mind. When we, as anthropologists, say, you know, X or Y institution is not doing enough, I think it's very often true. I am very happy that AAA is now being active around these issues, but maybe I would have liked something sooner, right? At the same time, it does take time to build reliable resources. It does take time to come to terms with the limitations we have.

I do think that trying to take action and even just putting information on the website, however hard it was to come up with a curated set of links, showed people that we were thinking about this, that we were trying to be there [for our community of anthropologists]. But we also asked for participation from people, and even though people seemed to really appreciate our efforts, very few people reached out with concrete offers of assistance. I think that's also because people are maxed out on so many levels, just the bandwidth labor issue—which really spiked with COVID and never really recovered—gets in the way of organizing. I'm just very grateful that there are a few

people who have had that extra bit of energy, who have been able to sustain this work. They have shown me that organizing, activism, and advocacy are generative in themselves. We do build community and new ways of thinking through those actions, even if they don't end in a specific goal that we had set out for.

Akarsu: I should add that at EASA we created a forum to report academic freedom violations at both the individual and institutional levels, and we've received some very important responses. What was particularly valuable during the community check-in was enabling scholars from different countries—Italy, Germany, the UK, et cetera—to connect with each other. This work is incredibly energy intensive, so it's important to create collaborative tools and interfaces that help people sustain this effort. Members also need practical resources like the *PoLAR* tool kit for knowing your rights or getting updated travel advice. We can't assume everyone has access to this information, so we need to make these resources as widely accessible as possible. I'm deeply grateful to the APLA team for their crucial work on this.

Trnka: The situation that the two of you are describing is quite terrifying. Academics are facing explicit threats, alongside implicit stresses. They face the fear of losing funding or having their research critiqued for political reasons. People are stretched to the limit by all of the other demands on them. So, two questions. First, is there a specific threat to anthropology/anthropologists that differentiates us from scholars in other disciplines? And second, how are we to make historical sense of this attack on academic freedom? One of the things that really surprised me when I looked at the APLA page devoted to academic freedom was that the home page starts with a really powerful cartoon from 1970. It is such a powerful image—the "Academic Freedom Cartoon," which shows "the hammer of politics" wielded by a college that is identified as "an arm of the State." And then I get to the very bottom, to the caption, and see that it was printed in 1970! That made me wonder. I feel like we're in a really different place than we were, say, three years ago or five years ago, as so much has changed with the second Trump administration coming in, but also due to some of the other recent factors that you've been describing. So how do we understand the sorts of historical resonances exemplified by the cartoon? Is this history circling back on itself? Or is this something that's been escalating without us necessarily seeing it, like in that old saying, we're in the pot of water that's boiling, but we don't quite realize it until it gets too hot? In other words, how can we understand this in relation to the longer historical context?

Cabot: I'm no expert, but I think it's a little bit of both. The AAUP was founded in 1915, and from what I understand, this was in a context when the research of some academics came into conflict with the needs of industry, which then as now often financed universities. But in early cases, this also entailed the protection of white supremacy. There was, for instance, the dismissal of Edward Ross from Stanford, who was a eugenicist and who had taken aim at the employment of foreign workers by the railroad industry. If you read the AAUP's founding principles, there are a lot of things many of us may not get on board with right now. They are associated with an old-school conservative vision of academic freedom at almost all levels, as well as things like training people for public service.

But then during the First World War, there were dissidents speaking out against US involvement. And of course, then there was Vietnam and McCarthyism. So protest and resistance against state violence and colonial projects seems to be a pretty major issue that brings the fist down, in reference to the image you talked about.

What is the specificity of anthropology's role here? Speaking as a general layperson on this issue, something that seems quite specific to this historical moment is the targeting, at least in the US, of experimental science as a space to produce truth. I'm talking about [the current situation in] the US, but other authoritarian states have often drawn on their science machines as ways to produce armature to support the state. Whether we're talking Nazi Germany or authoritarian Russia, science, medical research, all of that was something that the state sought to showcase. I think this targeting of experimental science, the so-called hard sciences, and their overt politicization, is a bit new. I'm just speculating, but I think it would be a mistake to say "Oh, yeah, it's always been [this way]." I don't think you're saying this, but this isn't really quite a continuum, even if maybe it is a bit of a pendulum. But I think there's something new with this Trump administration's modes of attack.

When Trump first came to power in 2016 and issued executive order 13769, the "Muslim ban," I was editor of *PoLAR* at the time, and I co-organized a blog series with Jennifer Curtis [*PoLAR* associate editor and editor of *PoLAR* online]. This became the first in our ongoing "Speaking Justice to Power" series. I remember at the time thinking, "Wow, the thing that gives Trump and his administration this power is that they just don't give a shit, and are willing to test the limits of everything." It's just that sense of impunity that I don't think we've really dealt with before. I mean, the Bush administration got kind of close, right? They laid the groundwork, but that sort of overt, "we don't care what the courts say, just try and make us stop"—that is a new thing, I think. I'm talking specifically about the US now. And, you know, that changes everything, because you can't reason with them. Evidence doesn't matter. The rule of law does not seem to matter. That's combined with the utter flexibility of what truth means now, right? Which unfortunately seems to be part of the digital age, the social media age.

Trnka: I'm not a historian of science, but I find it fascinating how there have been some regimes that broadly target "the intelligentsia," positioning themselves as anti-academic—I'm thinking of broad-scale purges that took place in Cambodia or China—while others focus on redefining what is meant by science or the role that science is to play in society.

Akarsu: This reminds me of what I teach in my political ecology course about empire and ecology—how universities and our knowledge systems have always served various world-making projects, whether colonial, capitalist, or otherwise. What Heath mentioned is absolutely crucial—this systematic

attack on so-called liberal values: rule of law, facts, evidence, science, et cetera. When Trump was first elected, I had just completed two years of fieldwork in Turkey and returned to Tucson, Arizona, to finish my PhD. What struck me back then was the popular support that the Trump administration had. So we are witnessing something unprecedented: it's not just the university or the state as the hammer crushing the people. There's genuine public support for these repressive policies. This speaks to much larger forces at play: the global rise of right-wing politics, resurgent racism, and what I see as a general crisis of liberal democracy itself.

I don't want to paint an entirely bleak picture, but as Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish wrote, "Earth is narrowing around us / Forcing us into the last passage." We're experiencing the sense of the world contracting around us, of spaces for dissent and critical thought narrowing. But here's what's also significant: the Trump administration is exposing the deep hypocrisy embedded within liberal institutional frameworks, not just the hypocrisy of the US empire. This revelation might actually generate new momentum for people to fundamentally rethink our core values and reimagine what universities should be. Let's be honest—even before all these right-wing attacks intensified, the university was *not* a safe haven for so many people. It was already exclusionary, already complicit in various forms of violence and marginalization.

Trnka: Expanding on the issue of public response, we are really interested to hear from you about what is happening at the university campuses you are involved with, in terms of student protest. Last year around this time, the mass media was full of reports of student protests, as well as crackdowns, sometimes quite brutal crackdowns, on student activists. Today, it seems like quite a different landscape. Could you speak to this?

Cabot: The revocation of international students' visas, the very public targeting of people who have supported or engaged in protests, has created a very powerful climate of fear. There have been some very organized and overt ways of shutting down various forms of protest. Here in Norway, I have not really felt it, but my sense from my colleagues in the US is that there's a lot of fear.

Akarsu: On the one hand, there's this increasing climate of fear, as I just summarized. But what I have been observing in the European context, especially in some countries like the Netherlands, is that many universities are now in fact considering cutting, or have already cut, ties with Israeli institutions. This is directly thanks to sustained grassroots organizing by students and staff. These are late but very welcome developments. However, the path is not linear at all. Just two weeks ago, there was an encampment at my university, and once again the administration called the police on its own students and staff.

What's been particularly inspiring for me to witness is how different student movements have converged over these last years, especially at my university. Ecological activists, pro-Palestine student movements, LGBTQ+ movements—they've gathered and combined their power. Students aren't differentiating between these struggles. They're asking the fundamental question: Who owns the university? Who has the right to make claims on the university? What's been particularly striking is that some of these students, especially in the European context, still held somewhat naive ideas about democracy protecting them. But as someone who grew up in Turkey and has spent most of my adult life as an immigrant in the US and now in the Netherlands, I knew well that democratic institutions can be deeply violent when their authority is challenged. I think the disillusionment that some students faced during these protests—seeing police called on them by their own institutions—fundamentally changed how they think about what the university is and should be. They're inspiring.

Trnka: That's really interesting. My sense is that similar issues are raised by students here in Aotearoa/New Zealand, but the universities are so corporatized that there really isn't a space to push back. And when there is, it's for very small gains. The University of Auckland recently conducted a massive culling of courses that were deemed too small, and even entire programs looked like they might be disappearing. There was a sizable pushback from students and staff, and it was effective to some extent, in terms of saving some specific courses that were on the chopping block, but the overall questions of what a university is for, and whether it is even acting in the spirit of a public university or is it now a profit-generating machine, don't get dealt with. *Students* and *academic staff* are quite interested in, and very articulate and vocal about, these questions, but not the administration. It's almost like that ship has sailed, to use a cliché. It seems like every five or 10 years, these questions are dusted off and rearticulated, but if you look at the history of New Zealand's largest public university, it's getting progressively more corporatized.

L. L. (Lisa) Wynn: I agree 100 percent about this applying also to Australia. And so it's really interesting to think about some of those corporate practices and how they are being deployed to quash protest. I was thinking, as you were speaking, Susanna, about Gretchen Stolte's article "*Consultation* Is the New C-Word." She says consultation gets deployed really strategically. So the university administrators can say, "OK, we've listened to everybody," and then they just go and make whatever decisions they want to make. They've ticked a box. They've listened, but they don't implement the things we would like to see in university governance. The facade of consultation actually suppresses dissenting voices.

So I was thinking about how that connects with the work that both Hayal and Heath have been doing in terms of making resources available. Because this kind of back-and-forth between, on the one hand, efforts to quash dissidents and protests and inculcate an environment of fear makes people discipline themselves. It seems like the work you are describing, where academics create resources and a sense of community support, that's not just about providing resources. It's also creating opportunities for resistance and ways to push back.

Akarsu: Yeah, I know well all these consultations, dialogues, bringing parties together so they can talk. We had an event at my university, and at some point, students just said, "OK,

we've talked enough. We have concrete demands, and we need clear answers from you about how you are going to address them." The university keeps trying to portray students as overly emotional, as if they just need a space to vent their feelings to the administration. No, actually, most of the time, students are extraordinarily clear about what they want and what they're demanding.

All this reminds me of this old saying in the Turkish bureaucracy: "If you don't want to solve a problem, just set up a commission," which becomes a kind of institutional loophole, a dead end. It also connects to a broader critique we have been making, not just at my university but across the board, about how universities hire people with tremendous expertise—for example, Palestine scholars with deep knowledge of the Middle East, anthropologists working on political violence, or people in the Education Faculty who understand pedagogical tools for productive dialogue, et cetera. But when the university administration decide they need to "consult," they don't even consult their own faculty who are literally the top-ranked experts on these very issues. This also reminds me of Sara Ahmed's work on complaint, where she describes administrators as institutional plumbers—people whose job is essentially to keep the institutional machinery running smoothly, to manage the flow and prevent blockages, but not actually address the fundamental problems that are causing the system to malfunction in the first place.

Wynn: Yeah, it always brings me back to the anthropology of bureaucracy, which I think is so important and so exciting because it analyzes the way that people in power use systems and bureaucracies to make something look like that's just "the way it is." "This is the process. This is how it works." They make things seem mundane and boring, when what they're really doing is political. And you're quashing people's voices through these "Well, that's just how it works" and "Oh, we've done this consultation."

Cabot: It's interesting thinking about Norway in this context, because it's one of the last bastions against massive neoliberalization of the academy, and this makes it a really special place. I do not want to paint too rosy a picture. We too are experiencing austerity in academia, and of course the state is financed through oil, but it's a free university in all senses of the term. Students do not pay for their education, and there are also significant stipends for students. For academic staff, there is support for research and huge labor protections. Precarity is strongly discouraged. I have only been in Norway for a few years, but there is also a strong sociocultural pressure to conform, also in the university, as well as a general sense that things are overall OK institutionally. This makes for better conditions but also less outrage and more complacency around the issues that do exist—racism, limited support for diversity.

It's an interesting thing to think about: What happens when you think the state is your friend, and collaborating with public entities of different kinds is actually deemed appropriate? I confess to sometimes wishing I saw more overt forms of counterprotest and counterspeech, particularly among students and academics, since in the Norwegian academy everyone has so much privilege to speak as they would like. At the same time, Norway has an extremely strong tradition of engaged and public anthropology.

Wynn: So many times I've heard colleagues in Australia complain about how, as part of the corporatization of the university, we are treating students increasingly like customers instead of students. I've complained about it too: "They're here to learn. They're not customers," right? But watching all these protests play out, seeing it all at a distance [from Australia], one thing that really strikes me is when universities like Columbia are calling the police on their own students. It's like, Wow, they are not treating them like customers. I don't know what your sense of this is in Europe and New Zealand.

Akarsu: Some students are still treated like valued customers when police are called in because it is the *other* students [the ones protesting] who are framed as loiterers, as radicals, troublemakers, et cetera. According to this twisted logic, police are needed to protect the "real" customers—and university property, always—from the so-called dangerous ones. It's a deliberate divide-and-conquer strategy: "good" students/customers who deserve protection versus "bad" students who deserve repression.

Trnka: Heath, you've told us about the situation in Norway, where you live and teach, but you've done some amazing work on asylum, citizenship, and migrancy elsewhere in Europe. I wondered, when you're looking at some of the current situations academics are facing, do any of your research insights inform your understanding of these issues?

Cabot: My earlier work was about asylum and advocacy in Greece, a long time ago. I did a lot of research on the anthropology of bureaucracy and documents, and one of my findings was that bureaucracy and these more formal processes can be used for both exclusionary and socially transformative ends. Bureaucracy can certainly, as Hayal said beautifully earlier, be a way to stall and limit action. But I definitely found people who did work that was quite radical or, at the very least, transformative, within very conservative institutions, even state and public offices. I have colleagues, many colleagues I love and respect, who *do* think the state is inherently evil and that bureaucracy is inherently conservative. But I certainly found that interesting, important things can happen within existing systems. So, engaging in some of those decision-making processes in university-level governance, as much as I dislike it, or in our wider communities, can be something positive in terms of building safeguards, also around issues of asylum and migration.

And that's something that cuts across every place I've lived and worked. So many people seem to hate migrants. People hate border crossers, and that hatred is legitimized by the state. I have taught Jason de León's really powerful first book about death on the US-Mexico border both in the US and in Norway. Most students (even more conservative students) would get on board with the argument that "yes, we need to combat racism among ourselves." But as soon as the issue of what happens

to people crossing the border would come up, many students would be like, "Well, it's very sad, but people crossed illegally." Or even worse: "these people" *chose* to cross illegally. You hear the exact same arguments everywhere in Europe, even if there are so many studies that show it is almost impossible to make an asylum claim before actually entering the EU, and other studies that show that it is not easy to separate so-called economic rationales for migrating from political or religious violence, for instance.

There's always hatred for the "migrant Other," and I always put "migrant" in quotes because I have a lot of problems with the term. But that's a finding that I don't think is going away. It expresses itself in everything from on-the-ground attitudes and convictions to more formal and apparently objective decision-making processes. Right here in Norway, the borders are bureaucratic and very highly moralized, and you have to show yourself to be the right kind of person to be here. There is a pretty strict moral economy around who can and should access this very well-endowed social state. In the US, though, the Trump administration has taken away the sugarcoating: the US is now like, we just simply aren't going to let people come here, and we're going to get people out. And then there are more diffuse and generalized forms of hatred that people sign on to, even people with a migration background. That's something that I would say is pretty terrifying. I, like a lot of migration scholars, want to look beyond the nation-state to recognize other forms of community, which I do believe exist. But it is also important to remember that hatred is also transnational. For instance, I saw this Norwegian guy wearing a MAGA hat the other day. People wearing MAGA hats, people *everywhere* wearing MAGA hats. What does that show? That shows the defense of global whiteness and hatred of the Other. Right? That would just be my very sad takeaway.

My earlier work on asylum was very critical and explored both the informal factors that went into shaping asylum cases and decisions, and the violence embedded in refugee regimes themselves. I am not sure I would do that kind of work now. My earlier work entailed a really critical breaking down of the Greek asylum system to show how the category of "the refugee" was constructed legally, socially, aesthetically. But now I worry that some of my arguments in that book *could* be incorrectly interpreted as questioning the legitimacy of people's need for protection or the legitimacy of asylum systems in general.

I love the critical approach that anthropology brings. But I think we have to consider carefully how we use our critical tools and amend them based on the needs of the time. We do, of course, also tell stories, and these can be employed to make various kinds of arguments. If I were to do this work again in the current climate, I would want to try to tell a story that defends and preserves the imperfect but still very important tools that we have, like asylum regimes. They're messed up in so many ways, yet they are crucial. We cannot get rid of them.

Wynn: Back in 2012, Sherryl Kleinman and Matthew Ezzell argued that universities were using this "we have to listen to both sides" argument as a way to control whoever they perceived as a little bit radical. They were trying to make their interventions look like they weren't about power, but what they were really doing was trying to shut down what one side was doing on the grounds that "well, we have to listen to both sides." I think that has only gotten more relevant right now, when there are attempts to say, "Well, we have to listen to both sides on this debate." "Well, sure, Russia's invading Ukraine. But let's listen to Russia's point of view when it comes to whether Ukraine belongs to them."

That's an extreme example. But we do see this "both sides" language being applied pretty widely, sometimes to quash what one side might be saying. And yet this idea of both sides, the idea that we need to listen to multiple points of view, is also a basic tenet of the way we think about intellectual freedom and academic debate.

So what's your view here? Do we always need to listen to both or all sides on an issue? Is arguing against the legitimacy of both sides a different kind of attack on academic freedom?

Cabot: I have a number of conflicting thoughts on this. The "both sides" argument, in addition to what you describe in your analysis, is also used as a reason to overrepresent already-overrepresented groups. Like, you know, when people from overrepresented groups in the academy complain of feeling left out or silenced when people from minoritized groups are—finally!—given the floor. When people from majority groups complain that it is their turn to speak, I want to say, "No, actually, you need to stop speaking." That is really uncomfortable and hard to do also in academic spaces, even with people who are very open, at least in principle, to a more diverse and inclusive academy.

The "both sides" argument can also be mobilized in overtly highly problematic ways to legitimize violence. In the Gaza context, it's often like, "Well, let's first hear from the Zionists." Then, on the other hand, it's like, "No, it's a genocide." And the urgency of recognizing that genocide trumps the "both sides" argument.

But "both sides" can also help with the protection of academic freedom, which is also often couched in the language of freedom of expression. These are not the same, but they are related and certainly overlap. There are people out there, lawyers, advocates, who actually probably would fall on the quite-conservative spectrum, but who might be important allies right now because of their stance on free speech and academic freedom and their insistence on preserving space for all sides. I'm not ready to get on board with everybody who makes that argument because I am not ready to support hate or research that legitimizes hate. At the same time—I'm not speaking for APLA, I'm speaking for myself—I *do* think we need to have space to hear from different perspectives, even if it's exhausting. And even if we really do not agree.

I heard a story at my previous institution about a student who had asked a question about race, and they'd used uninformed terminology—something about capacities in sports. One of my students wrote an essay about this event. It had happened in an introductory anthropology class. Other students apparently shamed the student who asked the question on a group chat and referred to him as the racist in the class. And I was really sad because I think that students should be able to ask uninformed questions. And teachers as well! I should be able to teach on

topics that are risky and use language that, you know, I can learn to use better. I really do think that there does need to be space to learn. Of course, we also must want to learn and put in the effort and energy to do so.

People also have to be allowed to change their minds. And we can't really change our minds unless we are engaged in conversation. And of course, conversation is never equal. That's a major problem, right? But we still have to try to create those spaces of dialogue. The *AE* forum "I Was Wrong" was very interesting. The prompt was amazing—being able to look at what went wrong and how we might do things differently and learn from that. That needs to be celebrated as well—the idea of knowledge as emergent.

Listening to both sides is political and strategically useful, too, in that it makes people feel included. "Come on in. Have your five minutes, of course, say what you need." I think it's important for people to feel like they're at the table. The problem is, how do we make a conversation that is not a space of hate, not a space of exclusion, not a space of making other people feel like they don't belong? We need good practices of dialogue, and we need good faith.

The last thing I would say is that even as we carve out space for multiple sides, we do have to double down on diversity. And I'm going to use that term because Trump hates it. I freaking love it! Anthropology is the study of human diversity. We need to make a case for that. OK, the bureaucratization of diversity through checklists and other such things—maybe that's a problem because it is surface level and does not necessarily produce real and lasting forms of change and inclusion. But it's better than not being there at all. People worked for years to get DEI into administrative spaces in the US. I do think multiple sides are possible only if you create institutional protections for people who would otherwise be excluded via the status quo of the university.

Akarsu: Some things are not complicated, to be honest. There are no "both sides" of genocide. There are no "both sides" of calling in the police on your students and staff. There should be moral and ethical clarity when it comes to basic principles of academic integrity.

But I also believe that democracy is not just rules and procedures. It's also about learning to live with difference—building genuine spaces for mutual teaching and learning. It is really important to create spaces where people can actually talk and, as Heath mentioned, allow people to change their minds.

However, I am not very optimistic about how universities are implementing this. When universities invoke the "both sides" framework, they are actually not creating these kinds of platforms for real engagement. This is mostly a kind of managerial tool to deflect criticism. My suspicion is that this "both sides" argument is invoked without any genuine intent to create the kind of critical, safe space necessary for people to truly listen to different perspectives.

Another crucial point: we need to distinguish between free speech and academic freedom. What we keep forgetting is that academic knowledge is based on rigorous research and expertise. The "both sides" argument completely undervalues all this research and expertise, saying, "Oh, yes, you might be an anthropologist who's been studying policing for more than a decade, but we brought in this random guy who thinks he knows more than you." This is very important for understanding why anthropology in particular is under such attack, and there's another profound irony here that I want to double-highlight. Historically, disciplines like anthropology were dominated by white men studying non-Western societies. Today, anthropology, along with other critical disciplines, is increasingly populated by Black and brown bodies, international faculty, people from different ethnic and class backgrounds. And *now*, precisely when these scholars are providing crucial historical and political contextualization, their scholarship is being dismissed as not objective, partial, emotional, irrelevant. Overall, the "both sides" argument systematically undermines these scholars and the vital knowledge they produce, right at the moment when their expertise is most needed.

Trnka: What you're saying reminds me of the feminist response to the postmodern critique, when feminist anthropologists came along and said, "Oh, this is a really nice time to suddenly be saying that knowledge is not objective, that it's all partial and situated. Just when we finally get feminist anthropology off the ground, suddenly the male scholars are saying it's all relative and there is no objective truth to argue over."

Hayal, how does your work on policing inform your perspective on these issues of academic freedom?

Akarsu: That reminds me of a dark joke from civilian faculty at the Turkish police academy, where I spent almost a year studying the science behind institutional violence. These academics used to say they came to reform the police academy—to make it more like a civilian, democratic university. Instead, other universities in Turkey have become like police academies. I did this fieldwork from 2015 to 2017, during Turkey's authoritarian turn. Now I feel like many universities in the US and Europe are becoming like the Turkish police academy—and perhaps even worse. At least with the police academy, you knew explicitly that it was an institution designed for policing. But universities continue to operate under liberal promises of dialogue, "both sides," safety, and critical thinking, while simultaneously implementing the same policing practices. There's a fundamental dishonesty in maintaining the rhetoric of academic freedom while deploying police tactics.

Take the weaponization of safety discourse, for example. We're witnessing this across university campuses in Europe and the US, particularly targeting politically charged academic events dealing with Palestine. Universities now routinely conduct security background checks, impose limits on audience sizes, and assign security personnel to academic events. Even at our library at Utrecht, they installed wooden barriers to force single-file entrance. More and more buildings now require ID cards. Remember, these are technically public spaces, but they're being transformed into highly controlled security sites.

We're also seeing the weaponization of safety rhetoric to portray certain students and staff as dangerous radicals. This connects directly to processes I wrote about in *American Ethnologist*, where I examined how Turkish citizens were turned into informants—encouraged to report on each other when

asked to behave as "responsible citizens." We're seeing the same dynamic now in universities, where community members are asked to inform on each other as "responsible members of the university community."

We also see this reversal of victim and perpetrator: those calling for justice and accountability are positioned as threats, while institutions implementing repressive measures present themselves as protecting safety and order. Administrators constantly claim they don't feel safe. But who has the final say on safety? Who determines which bodies are seen as threatening and which are not? These are all questions related to policing, but also to larger processes of othering certain bodies from certain spaces—processes that are happening intensely in universities right now.

Wynn: In Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and Israel's invasion of Gaza, and in these student protests around the world, we're seeing the strategic deployment of the term "anti-Semitism" to silence opposition. Heath said earlier that what we're seeing is unprecedented in some ways, but has historical resonances in other ways. I feel like the strategic deployment of the term "anti-Semitism" seems to be happening at a whole different level. For example, as a way to justify one country in invading another—completely, spuriously, to justify invading another country whose president is Jewish! Astonishing! What strategy should we use to counter this? Should we be worried that this dynamic of dismissing people's arguments as anti-Semitic might actually be contributing to anti-Semitism in the world?

Akarsu: In the Ukraine case, many institutions immediately cut ties with Russia, and at the individual level, they even boycotted academics working in Russia. Meanwhile, in the case of the BDS movement—which doesn't even call for boycotting individuals, only institutions—people are calling it anti-Semitic. I want to underline this stark hypocrisy. When you put these two cases side by side, you can see we are witnessing the strategic weaponization of anti-Semitism accusations to silence legitimate criticism of state violence and settler colonialism. It's profoundly ironic because there are many Jewish people loudly denouncing the genocide and challenging Israel's actions by proclaiming "Not in my name." Yet, there is still this persistent accusation that when you criticize the Israeli state as a colonial entity, or Zionism as a settler-colonial ideology, it constitutes anti-Semitism. One argument we must keep repeating is that criticizing Israel as a political entity, criticizing Zionism, is not anti-Semitism. People like me have long been criticizing the violent practices of our respective states in Turkey, India, Brazil, and elsewhere, and no one had a problem with that until criticism turned to the Israeli state. We should ask, as true anthropologists, what forms of epistemic violence are operating to police even criticism of the Israeli state and transform that criticism into accusations of anti-Semitism. This also explains the strange, perhaps not surprising, alliance we're seeing in Europe and the US between actually anti-Semitic Christian far-right groups and Zionist supporters of Israel's ethnonational settler project. We see similar support from Modi's Hindu nationalist government in India.

Last year at EASA, we published a statement against the genocide in Gaza, and some members were uncomfortable with this. I was even invited to join a panel where I was asked, "Do you think EASA's statement on Gaza has increased anti-Semitism in Europe or around the world?" I answered somewhat jokingly, "Please don't take EASA or anthropology that seriously. We probably don't have the power to increase anti-Semitism around the world." As Hannah Arendt said, "The greatest enemy of authority is contempt, and the surest way to undermine it is laughter."

I'll be very honest—I personally try not to engage with or invest time and energy in people making bad-faith arguments who could simply go online and find numerous pro-Palestine sources, including groups like Jewish Voice for Peace, that explain repeatedly why criticism of Israel's state policies is not anti-Semitism. These groups are against any forms of racism, including both anti-Palestinian racism, Islamophobia, and anti-Semitism. Of course, this doesn't mean there is no anti-Semitism—it absolutely does exist, and we should do everything to fight against that too. But in my experience, the term is often weaponized as a tool to police dissent.

I know that navigating these accusations is emotionally exhausting. Speaking humbly from my experience as EASA president and as an ordinary concerned academic, I want to say this to those who feel worn down by such accusations: You have to decide where to spend your energy and on whom. As a scholar—especially as someone who doesn't fit the traditional academic mold, whether as an international scholar who wears a headscarf like myself, or othered in different ways—they constantly demand that you justify yourself. They want you to apologize and say, "Oh, I'm not this, I'm not that." They want you to prove that you've actually earned your place and that you're a "good liberal subject" worthy of speaking on certain issues. But I think it's crucial to be unapologetic about fundamental principles. I'm proudly unapologetic. But that's also thanks to my great colleagues in the EASA Executive Committee and in the EASA Working Group on Human Rights and Academic Freedom. That's the pure beauty and power of solidarity, fueling me.

Trnka: Much of the focus in the English-language press on academic freedom has been on the US and also Europe, but obviously this is an issue that is being grappled with by anthropologists and other academics all around the globe. What can we gain by looking at these issues through a global framing? And what kinds of possible solidarities might be forged by scholars internationally?

Akarsu: The current crisis has profoundly unsettled many academics in the Global North who felt secure in their tenured positions at well-funded institutions like Harvard. But there have been sustained attacks on academics in different contexts in places like Turkey, India, or across Latin America. The current realization among academics at prestigious northern institutions is important: anyone can become a scholar at risk at any point. This has shifted how we understand academic vulnerability. In my university, for instance, I'm co-organizing a film series titled "Reimagining the University," bringing in examples of student protests from South Africa, India, and Croatia. These places have rich repertoires of resistance and solidarity that we need to learn from and build upon. Many anthropolo-

gists have built careers studying violence and state repression in non-Western contexts. But when those same dynamics unfold in our own institutions, what kind of ethical position are we taking as anthropologists, as scholars, as human beings? We can't analyze violence abroad while turning a blind eye to it on our own campuses. As anthropologists, we've been preaching about decolonization, diversity, and inclusion for years. When our students actually implement those ideas in practice and the university calls police on them, our silence becomes complicity, raising fundamental questions about our code of ethics.

Trnka: So if we put it in a global framing, what specifically can we learn if we build those solidarities with colleagues who've been in situations where freedom of speech and freedom of protest have been much more tenuous over a longer period of time?

Akarsu: First, people in those contexts have developed a historical archive of how to fight for academic freedom and preserve the dignity and integrity of academic work. Most of the time, when we respond to attacks on academic freedom in the Global North, we are trying to reinvent the wheel. But we can actually learn from these different experiences, and although they emerge from different contexts, we can identify clear patterns: the policing of dissidents, the withdrawal of public funding, the weaponization of safety discourse. We can build meaningful alliances with people working in different contexts who've faced these challenges for much longer.

For instance, in most non-Western contexts, universities are far more integrated with their communities, with academics actively raising issues that directly resonate with and are supported by the public—social and economic justice, environmental justice, decolonization. In the Global North, we constantly talk about "public" or "engaged" anthropology while remaining deeply disconnected from the larger public, living in our institutional bubbles.

The question becomes: How can we break out of our academic isolation and translate our work for our own relatives, for people in our communities who are directly affected by the issues we study? There are already powerful examples of this engaged scholarship that we can learn from.

I've been reflecting recently on Audre Lorde's powerful insight that in our world, "divide and conquer" must become "define and empower." For me, "divide and conquer" is a classic policing technique. But "define and empower," as I understood from her, means taking control of our own narratives, building alliances, and amplifying our collective voices. That's why I want to thank all of you for doing this interview. I've been asking myself: How can we reappropriate and strategically use our institutional power? What can we do with the influence of our professional associations, with your roles as journal editors? We occupy relatively privileged positions. Of course, we're still within the "system," and that doesn't absolve us of complicity since, well, we're paid by these same universities. But within that complexity, how can we repurpose all these resources? I'm still a romantically optimistic person, I suppose, and I believe this is not the time for pessimism or saying, "Oh, I'm not going to do anything." We have that responsibility to act.

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ENDNOTE

[1] The form can be accessed here: https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSfB7Rhu8hicQqgF3KNvw6uskMvpM2EM2EIxVFjDZNGsdKBSZg/viewform.

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How to cite this article: Akarsu, Hayal, Heath Cabot, Susanna Trnka, Jesse Hession Grayman, and L. L. Wynn. 2025. "Struggles for academic freedom (part 1)." *American Ethnologist* 1–10. https://doi.org/10.1111/amet.70000