Open letter: In defense of academic freedom in Switzerland

27. February 2024

As scholars working at Swiss universities and beyond, we write this open letter [1] with grave concern regarding the erosion of academic freedom and the increasingly anti-intellectual climate in Switzerland. In particular, we wish to address the phenomenon of intensified attacks by segments of the media and political officials on the social sciences and humanities. This is a global development that predates the ongoing war in Gaza, but has intensified since 7 October 2023.

Thus far in Switzerland, the post-October 7 climate has led to two administrative investigations of entire university institutes that engage in critical scholarship and teaching in academic fields such as gender, critical race, migration, border, postcolonial and settler colonial studies. While this letter is not the right place to address in detail the specific cases [2], we nonetheless see a dynamic emerging that has implications beyond these specific incidents. We are deeply concerned that this development could set a problematic precedent for other disciplines, departments, and universities in Switzerland.

We are worried that through administrative investigations in Basel and Bern, universities have indirectly accepted and legitimized a scientifically unqualified and politicized media framing of critical scholarship in the social sciences and humanities as “ideological” and unscientific. In our view, academic research has a responsibility to address social phenomena, particularly those that are marginalized in the public debate or politically highly sensitive. Engaging in socially relevant research also places responsibility on scientists to make a clear distinction between their normative positions and their scientific analysis. Yet, it is not up to the press and politics to decide where normative positioning within academia begins and scientific analysis ends. This distinction is based on the critical standards of scientific disciplines and academic pluralism. We are therefore highly concerned when academic, educational or cultural institutions sanction individuals and departments based on public pressure.

It is also important to emphasize that these attacks on academic freedom are symptomatic of a broader political climate characterized by anti-intellectualism and hostility towards scientific inquiry. As in the US, UK, France, Denmark, and Germany, the vilification of scholars and the delegitimization of critical scholarship in Switzerland further polarizes public discourse and undermines the credibility of academic institutions. Through the so-called "anti-woke" agenda, particular strands of scholarship that inform and reflect on democratic processes of social and cultural change (such as gender, postcolonial and critical race studies) have been misrepresented as unscientific by political forces opposing such change. Influential segments in the media have continued to provide distorted, simplistic and in many cases factually wrong representations of what institutions, scholars and entire disciplines stand for and what they actually do. Arguably, these misrepresentations are meant to hinder the development of entire scientific disciplines which have been responsive to political, social, and cultural change. Importantly, all scholarship across the natural sciences, social sciences and the humanities - be it medicine, law, history, economics, biology, urban geography or Islamic studies - is based on negotiation of diverging positions and intellectual pluralism. Consequently, scholarship across all disciplines must be debated and critiqued based on academic terms and merit, rather than moral panic, ideological resentment, or political leanings.

The chilling effect of the media attacks and misrepresentations as well as administrative measures cannot be overstated. Beyond the two investigated departments, it has already created an atmosphere of self-censorship, fear, and intimidation among academics working in Switzerland. Scholars are increasingly hesitant to speak out on matters of their expertise for fear of retribution or professional consequences. This can be felt especially strongly by members of visible minorities who often experience academic environments in Switzerland as hostile and alienating. The ability of all scholars to engage in critical analysis and pursue knowledge of social relevance in line with
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International standards of academic excellence without fear of reprisal is at stake. This not only stifles academic inquiry but also undermines the foundational, democratic principles of free expression and open debate in Switzerland. In a highly complex and dynamic global society, Switzerland needs the critical insights from scholarship and teaching on politically sensitive topics to have a more nuanced democratic debate.

In a highly polarized climate, we have also observed a disconcerting trend of instrumentalizing accusations of antisemitism [3] to silence and delegitimize critical scholarship and teaching, and efforts to diversify academia. Such accusations appear to be directed primarily at any scholarship associated with postcolonial and settler colonial studies, and affects anyone with expertise on the Middle East, particularly Arab, Muslim, Palestinian and Jewish scholars. It is imperative to emphasize that criticism of the policies and actions of any government are fundamental components of academic freedom and free expression. Weaponizing accusations of antisemitism not only undermines the credibility of legitimate efforts to combat antisemitism as many critical Jewish scholars and writers affirm all over the world. Weaponization also trivializes the very real and harmful effects of different forms of racism, including antisemitism, Islamophobia, and anti-Palestinian racism.

As academics living and working in Switzerland,

- we urge the media to critically engage with our scholarship and expertise in good faith, instead of distorting our views and theoretical approaches in order to fit a particular political agenda.
- we call upon universities, academic associations, and funding bodies to uphold the principles of academic freedom, intellectual pluralism, free expression, diversity and inclusion.
- we urge university administrators to resist external pressures to censor or suppress critical voices and to create an environment where all scholars, including highly visible racialized minorities, feel safe to engage in rigorous intellectual inquiry in line with international standards.
- we ask our universities for institutional support and protection against external attacks by media and politicians in order to pursue our work without fear of reprisal or intimidation.
- we invite university leadership to work with us to devise collective strategies against external political pressure.
- we ask civil society and governmental bodies to actively defend the autonomy and integrity of academic institutions, recognizing them as vital spaces for the advancement of knowledge and the promotion of diversity, inclusiveness, and democratic values.

Only by respecting the principles of academic freedom will Swiss universities and society be able to adequately deal with the major challenges of our time in a democratic way.

Endnotes

[1] This letter was co-authored by several members of University of Bern in collaboration with colleagues from Universities of Basel, Lausanne, and Zürich.

[2] As of 22.2.2024, members of Urban Studies at University of Basel have issued an open letter in response to these accusations

[3] Various definitions and guidelines for how to detect and combat antisemitism are circulating. The two best-known guides are the Working Definition of the IHRA and the Jerusalem Declaration (JDA). The JDA can be understood as a reaction from scientists to the IHRA Working Definition, which has been widely criticized by scholars with expertise on antisemitism (including the lead author of the Working Definition, Kenneth S. Stern), for conflating criticism of Israel’s actions against Palestinians with antisemitism.

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