



EDITOR'S NOTE

Alongside the freedom of expression and the freedom of information, academic freedom is one of the pillars of a modern democratic society. And scholar-run, open access, not-for-profit journals like *American Studies in Scandinavia*, as well as independent scholarly organizations like the Nordic Association for American Studies, are fundamental in promoting and ensuring academic freedom in the Nordic nations and beyond.

Simply put, academic freedom is the ability of those engaged in teaching and research in higher education to determine our own agendas independently of commercial or political influences, and to shape public debate through our teaching, research, and public dissemination, providing a sound and ever-growing knowledge base for society at large, ensuring a diversity of perspectives and viewpoints, and preserving a space for reflection and critique. The flipside of academic freedom is academic accountability; academic communities must establish and maintain their own autonomous means of ensuring that scholarly standards are met, and that teaching and research remain truth-seeking and not tendentious.

Thusly understood, academic freedom has recently been on the decline in both the US and, perhaps more surprisingly, the Nordic nations. The V-Dem Institute's Academic Freedom Index report for 2025 ranks Sweden fourth among the nations it surveys, but Denmark comes in at number 21, Norway at number 39, and Finland at number 45. The United States, by comparison,

ranks in at number 88.¹ A 2024 report on academic freedom by the Nordic trade unions representing academics in higher education found that academic freedom in the Nordics, once global leaders in independent education and research, was under pressure for a handful of related reasons. These included 1) diminished faculty and student involvement in governance due to a shift toward centralized models of university management; 2) external pressures as a result of funding dependence as researchers frequently find themselves adapting their research interests to the agendas of commercial or government funding bodies; 3) political and ideological influence that threatens researchers' and educators' ability to engage in independent analysis and critique; 4) the prevalence of forms of precarious employment associated with short-term contracts and positions contingent on external funding; and 5) perhaps most alarming of all, harassment and threats to free expression directed toward academics holding controversial or unpopular opinions (4-5).² While academic freedom in the Nordics fares better than its US counterpart (to which I will turn in a moment), it is clearly not without its challenges.³

Perhaps the greatest hurdle affecting academic freedom in recent years is the rise of anti-pluralist parties led by democratically elected leaders who, once in office, paradoxically pursue anti-democratic agendas. The question of whether, and to what extent, democracy itself can survive in such situations depends on the resiliency of the norms, values, and institutions supporting it—including its academic community. While

anti-pluralist parties typically pay lip service to democracy, they actively work to erode it. The democracy scholars Juraj Medzihorsky and Stefan I. Lindberg propose that this process of erosion occurs in four main ways: 1) anti-pluralist parties are typically unwilling to commit to the democratic process as a legal means of transferring power, often refusing to recognize the results of open elections; 2) they tend to deny the legitimacy of political rivals, often misrepresenting them as subversive or criminal; 3) they tend to condone political violence in the form of mob attacks and are willing to use the armed forces in support of their own agendas; and 4) they tend to promote laws restricting civil liberties, especially those of minority groups.⁴

Unsurprisingly, there is a strong correlation between the rise of anti-pluralist parties and declining academic freedom. According to the V-Dem report, this is due to the fact that once in power, anti-pluralist parties tend to “impose their political vision on academia, restricting free science and university autonomy,” and to normalize anti-pluralist discourse in ways that affect higher education policy (4). US President Donald Trump’s agenda bears a distinctly recognizable relationship with this anti-pluralist tendency, posing a number of clear threats to academic freedom in the US and abroad. His administration has pursued an aggressive agenda of intimidation, withholding of funding, and attempting to intervene directly in the autonomy of higher education. The administration has declared war on measures aimed at Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI), a framework intended to foster inclusivity, particularly among historically under-represented groups including racial/ethnic and sexual minorities and those with disabilities, claiming that such measures promote reverse discrimination.⁵ The administration has also sought to ban public criticism of the Israeli state for its treatment of the Palestinian people, which has been acknowledged by respected authorities including Amnesty International and Human

Rights Watch as representing gross human rights violations and fitting the definition of genocide.⁶ The Trump administration routinely denigrates campus protests against the Israeli state and its US and western allies as expressions of anti-Semitism.⁷ To be clear, there are credible accounts of anti-Semitism in contemporary US political discourse and DEI is not without its problems. Nor are wokeness and political correctness beyond critique. But shutting down public debate and threatening those charged with upholding it is a profoundly anti-democratic way of approaching such issues.

Trump’s list of offenses against academic freedom is too long to be fully elaborated here, but a few key examples can suffice to convey the severity of the situation in the US. Citing the prevalence of DEI and the threat of campus anti-Semitism as its rationale, the Trump administration has assailed the autonomy of academic institutions. It has threatened to revoke elite universities’ tax-exempt status and withhold billions in federal funding, including two billion in grants to Harvard when the university refused to cede its autonomy to federal authorities, agree to police campus speech, revoke the study rights of international students deemed “hostile to American values and institutions,” and end DEI programs.⁸ Faced with losing 400 million in federal funding, Columbia University complied with similar demands.⁹ Yet Harvard has fought back. In retaliation, as of the time of writing, the Trump administration has decided to revoke the visas of *all* international students at Harvard, including those who have applied and those already enrolled.¹⁰ The administration has even weaponized DEI abroad; at my own university, UiT-The Arctic University of Norway, the Centre for Peace Studies received (and signed) an agreement calling on institutions that receive support from American funding bodies not to conduct research on topics the administration deems off-limits including climate, environment, diversity, gender and sexuality. (UiT, to its credit,

declared that the signing had been an “accident” and later withdrew its signature.)¹¹ Another, even more glaring example of this attempt to police the agendas of universities in the Nordic region is the fiasco that occurred when funding for an event at the University of Southern Denmark featuring Columbia University economics professor and Nobel laureate Joseph Stiglitz, who had been invited to speak as part of an ongoing, US State Department-funded lecture series, was abruptly canceled. The US Embassy inquired about the university’s embrace of DEI—which had been a requirement during the Biden administration, when the funding was granted—but even before the university could respond to that absurdity, the State Department canceled the grant independently of the embassy, apparently for other reasons. (With funding from the University of Southern Denmark, Stiglitz came in May in any case. His topic? Freedom.)¹²

Such measures are aimed not only at academia specifically, but at the broader public support networks designed to ensure access to the education and learning necessary to perpetuate a democratic society in the first place. Partially in retaliation for its presumed embrace of DEI, Trump has issued an executive order to begin dismantling the US Department of Education, prompting the abrupt layoff of 1300 employees and 12 billion dollars in proposed funding cuts. As of the time of writing, a federal judge has blocked the order and demanded that the fired employees be reinstated.¹³ The administration has also made deep funding cuts to the research budgets of federal science and medical organizations such as the National Institutes of Health, often targeting research topics with which it takes issue, such as climate change and gender. The National Science Foundation has undergone a similar process of budget slashing, termination of awards and grants, and reduction of staff.¹⁴ In March, the National Academy of Sciences issued a statement citing a “climate of fear” in the research community and describing a “wholesale

assault on US science.” The statement reads in part:

The quest for truth—the mission of science—requires that scientists freely explore new questions and report their findings honestly, independent of special interests. The administration is engaging in censorship, destroying this independence. It is using executive orders and financial threats to manipulate which studies are funded or published, how results are reported, and which data and research findings the public can access. The administration is blocking research on topics it finds objectionable.¹⁵

Nor are the humanities exempt from such attacks on academic freedom. The National Endowment for the Humanities, a body involved mainly in supplying grants to help run museums and libraries and support historical preservation, also saw its budget slashed, with the immediate result that it was forced to freeze its grants and place the majority of its staff on leave.¹⁶ The National Endowment for the Arts has been similarly affected, with much of its current grant funding withdrawn earlier this month, hours after Trump announced that he would seek to close the agency.¹⁷ In keeping with his authoritarian tendencies, and in violation of long-established democratic norms, Trump has signaled that he will continue to take a determining role in deciding the priorities of such cultural institutions, as in his recent interference with the presumably autonomous Library of Congress, where he abruptly fired librarian Carla Hayden over her woke views and replaced her with deputy attorney general Todd Blanche, whose only qualification for the post seems to be his loyalty.¹⁸ This admittedly incomplete list makes clear the authoritarian and anti-democratic tactics embraced by the Trump administration in its ideologically driven fight against the autonomy

of higher education and public scientific and cultural institutions.

There has even been at least one instance in which an academic journal has come under fire: *CHEST Journal*, a peer-reviewed scientific journal for chest doctors, was sent a letter by Ed Martin, acting US attorney for the District of Columbia, accusing the journal of being “partisans in various scientific debates” and lacking “viewpoint diversity.”¹⁹ Its obvious wokeness hectoring aside, the precedent suggests a clear threat not only to *CHEST*, but to academic journals in general, which are vital in maintaining academic freedom. From a journal editor’s perspective, it is interesting to note that the charge against *CHEST*—that the journal has failed to support a diversity of viewpoints and therefore contribute to public debate—is tantamount to saying that the journal has failed to protect academic freedom. The question of viewpoint diversity was clearly being weaponized in this case to promote a particular viewpoint—the Trump administration’s—but viewpoint diversity remains a legitimate consideration. As the editor of *American Studies in Scandinavia*, this realization left me asking: How does *ASiS* (or any other journal) avoid becoming partisan? How does it support a variety of viewpoints? There are various answers to these questions, all related to issues of academic freedom. For one thing, the journal embraces no specific politics and remains open to reviewing submissions by anyone on any topic related to its broad scope, assuming that such submissions meet the standards set and maintained by scholars in the field. Here is where anonymous, double-blind peer review comes into play: in the peer review process crucial to any credible academic journal, this one included, submissions are judged not on the viewpoints they express, but on the quality of their scholarship. Beyond that, the articles any given journal publishes, this one included, represent the topics and viewpoints of the scholars who submit their work to it and the national, racial/ethnic, cultural, and

gender/sexual backgrounds from which they write. Additionally, *American Studies in Scandinavia*, like other open access journals, is published on a not-for-profit basis by scholars themselves. *American Studies in Scandinavia* is not beholden to any funding body, governmental or commercial, that could determine its agenda. Nor is it reliant on article processing charges or commercial publishing interests. Finally, the content published by *American Studies in Scandinavia*, and other open access journals like it, is free and open to anyone with an internet connection, meaning that it will be available to help shape public dialogue and furnish credible and accurate information on the many topics its articles and book reviews address.

As the US walks away from its global role as a leading light in promoting academic freedom, the Nordic nations must pick up the slack. For the reasons I outlined above (and many others besides), the culture, politics, history, and literature of the Americas (and the US in particular) will remain an important research area globally. And as one colleague recently put it, Europe—and the Nordic nations in particular—might well represent the “last best hope” for American Studies worldwide. Recent dialogue suggests that they are up to the challenge: following its April board meeting, the European Association for American Studies issued a statement commenting on recent events that makes its position clear. The statement reads in part:

As scholars of American literature, history, politics, culture, and society—and as educators and researchers across multiple disciplines—we see it as our responsibility to critically examine and contextualize the broader implications of these developments. In our conferences and publications, we aim to provide a constructive space for informed discussion on the fu-

ture of American democracy and on relations between the United States and Europe.²⁰

The EAAS statement echoed a similar statement by the British Association for American Studies in proclaiming: "American Studies is as vital as it has ever been."

In the interest of promoting the free production of socially relevant knowledge and proving the vitality of American Studies, the current issue of *American Studies in Scandinavia* includes articles on a variety of timely topics. Leading off the issue, Mark C. Miller's article, "State Attorneys General: Agents of Partisan Polarization," takes a legal studies approach as it examines the ways state attorneys general in the US often use their elected positions to promote political agendas, both Democratic and Republican, increasing US political polarization. Following this, Michal Kleprlík's article, "'1619' versus '1776': History as a Battleground in America's Culture Wars," addresses projects such as the *New York Times's* 1619 Project and the (first) Trump administration's 1776 report, as well as others, that construct highly motivated representations of US history governed by their guiding ideologies, a process that, like the politicization of the legal system Miller describes, works to further polarize the US public. Next, Hilde Løvdahl-Stephens's article, "When God Spoke American: Norwegian Pentecostalism and the North American Healing Revival, 1947-57," addresses the bi-directional nature of pentecostalism as it circulated between Norway and the United States in the post-war period and shows how the success of US pentecostalism in Norway fueled debates about freedom of speech and religion. Finally, Kyoung-Min Han and Yonghwa Lee's article, "The Transformative Power of Love in John Williams's *Stoner*," addresses Williams's under-studied novel as an expression of *love* as a phenomenological concept rooted in being.

In addition, the issue contains four reviews of recent books representing a salutary range of issues in American Studies. The first is Reetta Humalajoki's review of two recent books in Indigenous studies: David R. M. Beck's *Bribed with Our Own Money: Federal Abuse of American Indian Funds in the Termination Era* and Mary Klann's *Wardship and the Welfare State: Native Americans and the Formation of First-Class Citizenship in Mid-Twentieth-Century America*. The second review, by Marianne Kongerslev, focuses on Heidi Siegrist's *All Y'all: Queering Southernness in US Fiction, 1980-2020*. The third, by Nina Öhman, addresses Timothy D. Taylor's *Making Value: Music, Capital, and the Social*. The fourth, by Dirk van Rens, takes on Daphne Lamothe's *Black Time and the Aesthetic Possibility of Objects*.

The Nordic Association for American Studies will also soon meet for its 28th biennial conference, hosted jointly by the John Morton Center for North American Studies (JMC) at the University of Turku and the Finnish American Studies Association (FASA). Organized around the theme of Aspirations, the conference will take place in Turku on June 4-6, and will bring together scholars from regions around the globe whose work addresses important topics related to American Studies. On behalf of the journal, I would like to extend my deepest thanks to the organizers of the conference for their hard work in organizing what promises to be a deeply engaging and intellectually provocative event.

In addition, I would like to thank all of those who contributed to this issue including the anonymous peer reviewers who continue to work to help the journal maintain its scholarly standards. I would also like to thank the current members of the Nordic Association for American Studies executive board: Jørn Brøndal (president), Nina Öhman, Stephen Darren Dougherty, Kim Khavar Fahlstedt, and Alf Tomas Tønnessen, as well as past board members Jenny Bonnevier and Lene Johannessen. In addition, I would like

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