

‘something is wrong’ – on protest at universities

Christiane Thompson

This article explores the complex relationship between protest and the university as both a site of knowledge production and a public sphere. Using recent examples, such as Harvard’s 2025 commencement and debates in Germany, it shows how protests are simultaneously disruptive and indispensable: they can strain institutional routines but also expose silenced histories and ignored injustices. Drawing on empirical research, the text analyzes student protest as a form of counter-speech that challenges academic practices and demands institutional reform, while also acknowledging the risks of polarization and violence in current conflicts. The article argues that protest, despite its contradictions, is integral to the university’s public role, complementing academic discourse by forcing attention to what is unspoken and unsettling established routines. Ultimately, it calls for nuanced analyses of how protest, conflict, and political intervention shape academic freedom and the future of the university.

Keywords: academic freedom, protest, public sphere, universities

On May, 29, 2025 Harvard University gathered for graduation day – and the New York Times titled that the graduation blended “protest and pride” when gathering with family and friends for commencement (Russell & Herszenhorn, 2025). Graduates brought globes and held them up in order to emphasize the internationality of their university and thereby demonstrating opposition as well as resistance against the most recent rulings of the Trump administration to block international students from enrolling in US universities. What is special with respect to the current situation is that an entire university stands up against the restriction and dismantling of the university by the state. Yet, the academic practices of political self-assertation and protest are far from unequivocal: While Harvard president Alan Garber received standing ovation at this year’s ceremony, he was indeed booed by students at last year’s occasion for Harvard’s response to campus protests over the war in Gaza (Russell & Herszenhorn, 2025).

University and protest – their relation is, as this current example shows, complex. Universities are sites of political action and of public deliberation. Correspondingly, universities are political agents – in the way they relate to what happens on their campuses. The complexity results from the multiplicity of agents (students, staff, politicians, other officials, etc.) and also different levels of political action (internal administration, international cooperations, various policy levels, etc.). However, the complexity also arises from the disputed significance that is given to protest in or at universities. In a recent survey¹ with German academics, we asked our colleagues to assess the role of protest for universities. While our respondents generally agreed that the university is a site where politically disputed topics should be addressed, they differed greatly in their assessment whether protest as a reaction to politically controversial lectures is *permissible*. The approval ratings varied strongly, i.e. the academic community has not a unitary position on whether protests are an adequate

means to go about politically disputed topics. Put differently, protests at universities are themselves controversial– just like the underlying topic being debated. Why is this so? In my short text, I will delve into the contradictory assessments of protest. What lies at the heart of the matter is the complex relation of science/academia and politics. Without being able to disentangle this complex relation (Speck & Villa Braslavsky, 2023), I will comment on the public dimension of universities – a dimension that comes to the fore when someone speaks up and utters “Something is wrong.”

<https://doi.org/10.53483/MOLL8949>

Let me return for a moment to the reasons why academics might hesitate to approve or even endorse protests at universities. First of all, protests mean disruption, which requires those affected and those in responsible positions to invest time and other resources in order to compensate for the disruption of research and teaching. The security measures that universities have to take in order to allow planned events to take place are a considerable expense. Protests also cause unrest, which sometimes escalates into aggression or even violence against people and property. Considerations of organization, function and security are accompanied by other aspects relating to the demarcation between science and politics. It is repeatedly argued that science is based on argumentative disputes *that are not* driven forward by protests. On the contrary, where protest gives the impression of *replacing* deliberation, the university loses sight of its academic mission and thus its credibility as institution that is committed to knowledge and truth. To conclude, protests are a burden, as it were, for universities in a practical and communicative sense.

However, it would be misleading to view the university as a place that is completely detached from political articulation. Looking back to the long history of the university, it has claimed its significance as being the site for public deliberation, famously put by Kant (1995). More precisely, the modern concept of science rests on the idea of unrestricted public deliberation. Universities bring that to public attention which has not (yet) received its proper attention – including the former academic treatment of the matter. The disparity and sometimes even disproportion between the processes of knowledge formation inherent in the university and the public relevance of topics that require academic penetration – is an important drive for academia. In other words, the constitution of the university includes self-critical revisions of the academic enterprise. These might not necessarily follow the established academic forms of discourse. Let me furnish this argument by visiting another site of university history – the protest movements around “1968.”

There is an abundance of photographs, pamphlets, and other documents that depict the public claims of the student movements worldwide. In Germany, the public meaning of protest is, among other things, related to the refusal to deal with the past of Nazi Germany (Kraushaar, 2001). The academic world has remained silent when the first Nazi legal regulations dismissed Jewish academics and students from the universities. What is more, a number of academics were part in the Nazi extermination politics and as we know today, there were inconceivable continuities in the inhuman practice of science far beyond the end of National Socialism, such as the drug experiments on foster children until the 1970s (Wagner, 2020). The student protests around ‘68 made this refusal of confrontation *visible* at the university. More precisely, they *testified* to a *public task*, a task that affected everyone.

At this point, I argue that the articulation of protest is of paramount importance for the public sphere of the university – symbolically and discursively. With Arendt, one could formulate that appearance is central (Arendt, 2013). It is only through appearance that a democratic claim can

become manifest: Something that was previously ignored, omitted or talked away in the context of institutional routines and academic discourse no longer remains unspoken. The emergence of university protest forces the academic discourse out of its routines. Academics are called to critically evaluate their work and its leading epistemological as well as institutional frameworks. Although the student protests deviated from the rules and forms of academia, they had an important role to play. The concept of testimony is linked to an embodiment of rebuttal and dissent, which demands and requires a reaction toward the manifested dissent. Seen from this perspective, protest is a complement to freedom of speech. It also opens up alternatives for academic discourse to evolve, e.g. by being more inclusive. How is protest at universities seen today? I will turn to another recent empirical research project that investigated this question.

In the project “Academic Freedom in the Educational Space of the University,” we² encountered various appearances and controversies surrounding protest. First of all, we recognized that protest affected us differently in the project, depending on how we experience the university as a discursive space (in our roles and tasks). When talking about “the university”, this complexity and diversity of the university – that was already mentioned at the outset of this text – is often not recognized. There are various subject areas and academic disciplines, different status groups (students, academic staff, non-academic staff) and diverse functional tasks, as well as different interests and political orientations towards academic policy and more general. This is of utmost importance for the topic of academic freedom, as the latter is particularly linked to the question of who is given the opportunity to speak at the university – and to be heard.³

Since students are assigned the position of being responsible for restrictions of academic freedom in many public statements, we were particularly interested in student articulations on the matter (Thompson & Koppotsch, in press). Striving through our empirical material (i.e. interviews and documents), we analyzed the forms of student protest and the self-positioning of the protesters. Our analysis demonstrates that students tend to “speak as if from the outside.” That is to say that their words appear as delayed – always following, as it were, the institutional practice. Student protest, then, takes up a responsibility for institutional reforms of the university (as an institution that is permeated by power structures). A second result of the analysis is that the student protests exhibit elements of elaboration. Students counter public reporting and plead for close reading and good academic work – with an ironic undertone. Despite all the refusal that can always be found in student protest practices, the formation of elaborative counter-speech is worth mentioning, as it addresses a task that is a crucial responsibility for universities, i.e. to establish thinking in the wider public and build trust in the power of deliberation.

This is not to say that (university) protest is always productive, helpful or good. The disputes and protests surrounding the Middle East conflict make it clear what the challenges of protest are and how important it is to deal with them. Taking up a book title by Kenneth Stern, these protests can be summarized under the cipher of a “conflict over the conflict” (Stern, 2020). Criticism and protest communications interlock with the underlying conflict in such a way that communications become violent: There are threats of violence, denunciatory accusations or even the use of violence in a very basic sense (as with the case of the Jewish student who was beaten up his fellow student in Berlin). Accordingly, there are experiences of vulnerability, of fear and aggression, of denied recognition of loss and grief.

One result from the survey with academics, mentioned at the outset of this text, can be cited here. A much higher proportion of the academics surveyed preferred *not* to comment on the controversial

topic of the Middle East conflict (8%).⁴ Where protests are completely drawn into conflicts and there is an increasing pressure of expectation *to have taken* a stand on the conflict, dissociations of the public sphere are the result: shouting activists who are irreconcilably opposed to each other, university administrations under permanent pressure without the possibility of gaining ground in the conflicting constellations of protection and openness, politicians who instrumentalize this conflict to destroy academic freedom, as we currently experience in the US. There are also people who take refuge in a supposedly apolitical sphere and no longer take any part in what is happening. In the spectrum between apathy and totalitarian closure, a rhetoric of suspicion and confession, of accusation and imputation becomes dominant. It hardly seems possible to reach a level of rebuttal and response, let alone encounter.

What follows from all this? – The promise of academic speech is that it is not easy to say what follows from all this. Its strength lies in setting the structures and orders of knowledge in motion in order to create space for the articulation of the unthought, to question what is taken for granted. Macfarlane once described the university as an “independent think tank” (Macfarlane, 2021). I take this expression as a signpost for an openness that is not forgetful regarding the entanglement of the scientific and the political (Speck & Villa Braslavsky, 2023). The title I have chosen for this short contribution, “something is wrong”, picks up on an intuition of disagreement that will be taken up by an independent think tank. To exclaim that “something is wrong” is to direct the public attention to what is of public relevance. The expression simultaneously underlines the importance of academic freedom *and* the possibility of organizing protests at universities. My plea to turn toward the entanglements implies a rejection of the position of retreating into the academic ivory tower, as well as a rejection of an attitude that completely identifies academic concerns with activist ones.

What is needed are analyses of what current protests are doing to the public university, what conflicts are doing to protests and universities, and what guidelines and bans (coming from the political sphere) are doing to the relationship between university and protest – and thus to the shaping of academic speech (academic freedom) in the context of politically controversial issues. It may be true that an effect of post-democratic constellations in the present can be recognized here, but to state this is by no means sufficient. It takes time to differentiate, and it takes time to consider how differentiations can be communicated to the wider public sphere. And finally, we need strategies for where and how public spaces can be opened up in the first place, because it is hard to overlook the fact that hostility towards science does not only refer to the hostile speeches and attacks that colleagues from various areas of academia have been experiencing for several years (in the areas of research on gender, climate change, the pandemic). Antiscience is where speaking spaces are closed through bans, where universities are brought into line through the withdrawal of funding and where people who work in science (no matter in which field and in which function) are signaled that their work is dispensable. At the end of my contribution, I hope that academics will find ways to do what they do best: to ask questions, describe the situation and determine exactly what is happening. I call on everyone (not just academics) to be prepared for the moment when protests take shape.

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Recommended Citation

Thompson, C. (2025). 'Something is wrong' – On protest at universities. *On Education. Journal for Research and Debate*, 8(22).

https://doi.org/10.17899/on_ed.2025.22.2

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1. This survey was a cooperation between the ZEIT STIFTUNG BUCERIUS, the DZHW, a group of DIE ZEIT journalists and academics. It is based on a sample of more than 9.000 completed questionnaires. See Fabian et al. (2024).
2. Anke Engemann, Judith Mahnert and Johanna Weckenmann worked as researchers in the project led by Christiane Thompson. Lenz Koppotsch, Sören Meyer and Clara Paulus worked as student assistants in the project. In this project we worked with interviews and documents surrounding the theme of academic freedom and its restrictions or political contestations.
3. In Germany, academic freedom protects anyone in his academic quest for truth, not just professors or lecturers. In our project, we use a wider concept of academic freedom: It also concerns the deliberation on and about academic freedom as well as about its essential conditions
4. The numbers for other controversial issues were lower, e.g. 4% for animal testing and 5% for climate change denial.