

Academic Freedom and the Transnational Production of Knowledge

Public debates on academic freedom have become increasingly contentious, and understandings of what it is and its purposes are contested within the academy by policymakers and amongst the general public. Drawing on rich empirical interview data, this book critically examines the understudied relationship between academic freedom and its role in knowledge production across four country contexts – Lebanon, the UAE, the United Kingdom, and the United States – through the lived experiences of academics conducting ‘controversial’ research. It provides an empirically informed transnational theory of academic freedom, contesting the predominantly national constructions of academic freedom and knowledge production and the methodological nationalism of the field. It is essential reading for academics and students of the sociology of education, as well as anyone interested in this topic of global public concern. This title is part of the ‘Flip It Open Programme’ and may also be available as Open Access. Check our website Cambridge Core for details.

Dina Kiwan is a comparative sociologist of education at the University of Birmingham, UK, educated at the University of Oxford, Harvard University, and University College London. She was previously the Centre for Lebanese Studies Fellow at St. Antony’s College, University of Oxford, and Associate Professor in Sociology at the American University of Beirut, Lebanon.

‘This is a powerful book by a distinguished scholar who has assembled a remarkable collection of compelling reflections on academic freedom and its relationship to the production of knowledge, and to (de-)legitimized and forbidden knowledge. Unlike Western-centric educational studies, this book uncovers many examples not only from the US and UK but also from Lebanon and the UAE of the violation of academic freedom that challenge us all to think through what it would mean for politics, culture and economy in academia.’

Sari Hanafi, Professor of Sociology, American University of Beirut and President, International Sociological Association

‘In this brave book Kiwan courageously lifts the lid on the seething cauldron of academic freedom. Armed with her weapons of searing clarity and academic rigour she exposes the political machinations of not only the left and right, but uniquely the gulf between the Global North and South. A much-needed compass in these times of “woke” culture wars on our campuses.’

Heidi Safia Mirza, Emeritus Professor UCL
University of London, Author of *Race, Gender and Educational Desire*

‘Breaking new ground by deconstructing the methodological nationalism inherent in debates about academic freedom, this text offers fresh insights and new research which de-exceptionalizes the presumed sites of liberal expression. Dina Kiwan has produced a masterfully synthesized account of how knowledge, and those who produce it, are continually under constraint, politically, materially, and institutionally.’

Jasbir K Puar, Author of *The Right to Maim: Debility, Capacity, and Disability*

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CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS



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Shaftesbury Road, Cambridge CB2 8EA, United Kingdom

One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA

477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia

314–321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre, New Delhi – 110025, India

103 Penang Road, #05–06/07, Visioncrest Commercial, Singapore 238467

Cambridge University Press is part of Cambridge University Press & Assessment,
a department of the University of Cambridge.

We share the University's mission to contribute to society through the pursuit of
education, learning and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781108490283

DOI: 10.1017/9781108780629

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When citing this work, please include a reference to the DOI 10.1017/9781108780629

First published 2024

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

NAMES: Kiwan, Dina, 1970- author.

TITLE: Academic freedom and the transnational production of knowledge / Dina Kiwan, University of Birmingham.

DESCRIPTION: 1 Edition. | New York, NY : Cambridge University Press, [2023] | Includes bibliographical
references and index.

IDENTIFIERS: LCCN 2023029675 (print) | LCCN 2023029676 (ebook) | ISBN 9781108490283 (hardback) |
ISBN 9781108748360 (paperback) | ISBN 9781108780629 (ebook)

SUBJECTS: LCSH: Educational sociology.

CLASSIFICATION: LCC LC191 .K559 2023 (print) | LCC LC191 (ebook) | DDC 306.43–dc23/eng/20230814

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2023029675>

LC ebook record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2023029676>

ISBN 978-1-108-49028-3 Hardback

ISBN 978-1-108-74836-0 Paperback

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978-1-108-49028-3 — Academic Freedom and the Transnational Production of Knowledge

Dina Kiwan

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To my parents Angela and Mageed Kiwan

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FOREWORD

Academic Freedom and Transnational Production of Knowledge

Ahmad Dallal

The freedom to teach, pursue research and produce knowledge, and communicate the findings of this research is a value we take for granted as a prerequisite for academic excellence and for the creative production of knowledge within the university space. The integrity of academic institutions is usually assessed in terms of their ability to uphold these values. Moreover, in contrast to free speech, freedom in the context of the academy is often coupled with the expectation of responsible, reasonably justifiable academic expression, within the boundaries of the self-regulating norms of disciplinary communities.

These basic verities notwithstanding, the question of academic freedom remains of interest today as it has been in previous years, and continues to be a subject of probing inquiry. In the last three decades, the intensified investment in knowledge economies and the attendant increase in the number of universities globally have renewed the interest in exploring the boundaries of academic freedom within evolving regional and global contexts. Questions of academic freedom are often amplified by reports of threats to academics. Needless to say, there can be no meaningful academic freedom without functioning academic institutions, and as such academic freedom is premised on the safety and mobility of academics and their ability to exchange academic knowledge, just as much as it depends on the absence of internal and external conditions that inhibit the exercise of academic freedom, from university closures to underfunding and job security.

But physical safety is not the only prism through which academic freedom can be assessed. In this timely work, Dina Kiwan provides a compelling argument for a contextualized understanding of academic freedom and, considering the conditions under which it is exercised, further makes a case for an understanding of academic freedom that accommodates the often-assumed conflicting principles of diversity and inclusion. Kiwan's book approaches the topic of academic freedom from four perspectives:

- 1) Academic freedom within university space: By examining competing conceptions of the mission of a university, as a producer of 'true knowledge'; a contributor to the economic growth of the nation; or an agent of social change, Kiwan questions the notion that the university is a separate autonomous space in which objective knowledge is produced, independent of social contexts and constraints. She also underscores the role of the university in contextualizing academic freedom.
- 2) Academic freedom and the production of knowledge: Kiwan shifts the focus from a simple consideration of academic freedom as an unfettered form of free speech to an examination of the conditions for the production of knowledge in socially and institutionally diverse national, regional, and international contexts. She interrogates the conditions under which certain kinds of knowledge are legitimized and others are considered forbidden, and argues that legitimate knowledge is not an absolute value but is itself negotiated. And in turn, she maintains, academic freedom is constrained or enabled by these varying constructions of knowledge.
- 3) Academic freedom and inclusivity: One of the most compelling parts of Kiwan's book is her interrogation of the presumed irreconcilability between principles of academic freedom and principles of diversity and inclusion. By contextualizing academic freedom in relation to other rights, including the right to not be dehumanized, she argues that the complementarity of the principles of academic freedom and those of justice and inclusion is a 'necessary requisite' for the inclusive production of knowledge.
- 4) Academic freedom in an international context: Most work on academic freedom focuses on the United States and United Kingdom, and discussion of academic freedom in a global context often frames the approach in binary terms, 'contrasting the Global North as a haven for academic

freedom with the Global South as a context that punitively infringes on academic freedom.’ In contrast to this one-dimensional narrative, Kiwan takes into account the complexities of globalization and underscores the agency of countries from the Global South in the drive to internationalize higher education. She examines ways in which academics in a global context experience academic freedom, and how this experience affects their lives and impacts their research and knowledge production.

Dr. Kiwan is personally invested in issues of academic freedom in an international context. She builds upon her earlier research and publications on inclusion and citizenship, and draws on her rich experience studying and working in institutions of higher education in the United Kingdom and the Middle East, and on original empirical data from Lebanon, the UAE, the United Kingdom, and the United States, to outline a transnational theory of academic freedom and the production of knowledge, and to offer compelling and original insights on this crucial topic.

PREFACE

I have wanted to write this book for some time. Intellectually, I conceive of it as growing out of my interests in inclusion and citizenship that I have been engaged with over the years, starting with my doctoral research that led to the publication of my first book *Education for Inclusive Citizenship* (Routledge, 2008). On a personal and professional level, having studied and worked in higher education contexts in the United States, the United Kingdom, and the Middle East, I have been struck by how discourses of academic freedom are shaped by the sociopolitical, geographical, historical, and broader geopolitical contexts. Issues deemed to be ‘controversial’ and broaching the limits of academic freedom in one context are championed in another, challenging discourses as well as quantitative indices of academic freedom that tell a story contrasting the Global North as a haven for academic freedom with the Global South as a context that punitively infringes on academic freedom.

This book aims to problematise this binary, illustrating the range of complex positionalities that arise and, fundamentally, how this links to the production of knowledge . . . or not: what knowledge is legitimised and what knowledge is ‘forbidden’. It also recognises academic freedom and the production of knowledge as transnational – crossing national boundaries and contextualised in relation to the globalisation of higher education, our societies, and our mobilities across borders as students and faculty. As I started to engage with the academic literature as well as policy and media publications on the topic of academic freedom, four issues struck me. First, the majority of literature is centred on the United States and the United Kingdom, with a dearth of work on academic freedom in the Global South. Second, there is little empirical literature, and where there is, it is predominantly data

collected in the form of surveys, rather than more in-depth sociologically informed ethnographic approaches that are able to engage with the socio-political, geographical, and historical contexts informing the nature and state of academic freedom and academics' lived experiences of academic freedom in relation to their research and knowledge production. Third, much of the preoccupation with academic freedom is elided with freedom of speech and related ideological debates between the political Left and Right as to the purposes academic freedom should serve, pitting freedom of speech against respect for diversity. Finally, the link between academic freedom and the politics of the production of knowledge is under-researched and is not typically addressed within a transnational frame.

So I have been driven to challenge the methodological nationalism prevalent in the academic literature and to take the empirical approach of ethnographic interviewing in order to hear the contextualised stories from academics working across a range of 'controversial' fields in the social sciences, humanities, and sciences in a range of country contexts – Lebanon, the UAE, the United Kingdom, and the United States. A number of these academics had worked in more than one of the four countries and/or had experience in conducting research in one of the other country contexts. The choice of these four countries was both intellectually and personally driven: I have been a student in both the United Kingdom and the United States, an academic in the United Kingdom and Lebanon, and my current university has a branch campus in Dubai, and I grew up in the Gulf from 1971 to 1990.

I started this research in 2019, when I collected all the empirical data and then produced a first draft by March 2020. It was at this point that the global COVID-19 pandemic hit, and long COVID, ill health, and homeschooling in lockdown put paid to my plans to submit the manuscript as I had planned in May 2020. It has taken me two years to find the time and intellectual strength to return to this manuscript. Paradoxically, I have also reflected on whether it is the right time for me to write this book on the topic of academic freedom or whether I should wait until I retire, given the range of contentious views and controversial topics addressed throughout the interviews. However, it is not the purpose of the book to engage in the granular arguments within the different controversial topics discussed, but rather the commitment is to interrogate processes of knowledge production that underpin this work; this overrides my anxieties about the potentially polemical engagements with this work. Please read it in this spirit.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank a number of people and organisations who have supported and encouraged me through this research process. Firstly, I would like to thank the interview participants who so generously gave of their time and trusted me to share the often challenging experiences they have had with their research – this book could not have been written without them. I would also like to thank Professors Dave Gillborn and Kalwant Bhopal, Directors of the Centre for Research on Race in Education, at the University of Birmingham, who kindly gave research support in 2019 and 2022, respectively. I am also indebted to Peter Dorman, the former President of the American University of Beirut (AUB), Lebanon, for the opportunity of spending a formative period of my career at AUB from 2012 to 2017, and his wife, Kathy Dorman, for kindly welcoming me and the family to the AUB community. I also thank the then Provost Ahmad Dallal, former Dean of the Faculty of Arts; Sciences Professor Patrick McGreevy; Head of the Department of Sociology, Anthropology, and Media Studies Professor Sari Hanafi; and Professor Samir Kalaf for leading the dynamic intellectual atmosphere AUB is known for during this period and for their intellectual generosity and friendship.

I am grateful to Rebecca Taylor and Isabel Collins, commissioning editors at Cambridge University Press, who have provided empathetic support and guidance throughout the writing process and have been generous in granting two extensions during the COVID-19 pandemic. Thanks also to Rosie Wood who has worked on the index of the book.

Finally, I would not have been sustained throughout this period without the love of my family and friends. I cannot thank my mother and father enough for a lifetime of love and support, the encouragement of my dear friend Soumaya Al-Hajj, and the love and joy my sons Hibou and Magdi bring me.