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Germany

“Germany Canceled Me for Supporting Palestine”

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Cologne University has canceled philosopher Nancy Fraser’s planned visiting professorship after learning she signed a pro-Palestine letter. In her first interview after the cancellation [with Hanno Hauenstein of [Jacobin](#), Fraser says she won't let Germany stop her from standing up for Palestine.

Renowned philosopher Nancy Fraser was set to grace the Albertus Magnus professorship at the University of Cologne this May. But at the end of last week, she was abruptly disinvited by the university’s rector, Joybrato Mukherjee, for signing a pro-Palestinian solidarity letter last fall.

Hanno Hauenstein: The University of Cologne disinvited you from the Albertus Magnus professorship. What was it supposed to involve?

Nancy Fraser: The professorship involved a visit of several days and public lectures under the auspices of a program supposed to be devoted to open exchange. I decided to give lectures from my current book project on the three faces of labor in capitalist society, a topic that had nothing directly to do with Israel or Palestine. I had gone ahead and worked hard to write these lectures. I also bought an expensive plane ticket, by the way.

Hanno Hauenstein: Can you walk me through how the cancellation unfolded?

Nancy Fraser: A few days ago, I received an email from a professor in Cologne, Andreas Speer, who organizes these events. He told me how he’d just heard from the university rector, who was concerned about the fact that I’d signed the “Philosophy for Palestine” statement back in November and wanted me to clarify my position. I thought, what a nerve! I mean, what’s it his business what my views are about the Middle East? I’m a free agent, I’m able to sign whatever I want.

On the other hand, I didn’t want to be overly confrontational. So, I wrote back and said, well, of course, there are many different views about Palestine and Israel, and there’s a lot of pain on all sides, including pain I experienced myself as a Jew. But there’s one thing on which there can be no disagreement. I quoted a line from a statement the university rector had posted on the university’s website, on the importance of open and respectful discussion. So, I told Mr. Speer, please assure the rector that he can absolutely count on me when it comes to an open and respectful discussion.

I thought that might put an end to the matter. But in fact, just one or two days later, I received a direct email from the rector saying that he had no choice but to withdraw the invitation. It’s written explicitly, in black and white, that because I signed this letter, and didn’t disavow it in our subsequent communication, I am canceled.

Hanno Hauenstein: What was the main point of contention? The use of the wording apartheid and genocide? Or the boycott of Israeli institutions, which the letter invites readers to take part in?

Nancy Fraser: I really don’t know because I have not received any further explanation. The rector did offer me a telephone or video chat at which he would further explain his views. I haven’t replied to that. This is a public affair. I think we all need to go on the record. So, it’ll be up to him to clarify that. There’s also a statement on the university’s website now. To me, most of this seems like smokescreen. It is a clear violation of the university’s own stated policy as well as of the very values they invoke with the name Albertus Magnus.

Those values are precisely values of academic freedom, freedom of opinion, freedom of speech, and open discussion. Whatever complicated rationalizations are being given as to why this proceeding allegedly doesn't violate those values ring hollow to me. This also sends a very strong signal to all people in the university and scholars around the world: if you dare, say, express certain views on certain political subjects, you will not be welcome here [in Germany]. It has a chilling effect on people's freedom of political speech.

Hanno Hauenstein: When you're saying this is a violation of the university's policies, do you anticipate taking legal action?

Nancy Fraser: I thought about it. It's not my priority. I'm also not ruling it out. But first and foremost, I want to convince people that this is a truly outrageous instance of something many people would argue is a much broader trend in Germany today. People in positions of power at German universities and art institutions and those in the German federal government who may be urging them on in this respect should think twice. They are in clear violation of widely held academic — and, frankly, constitutional — norms about political freedom and freedom of speech. This will do considerable harm to the German academy.

Hanno Hauenstein: Given only the most recent history of public outrage and cancellations in Germany, you seem to be in somewhat good company. There were the cases of Masha Gessen, Ghassan Hage, Judith Butler, and several others. Many of them are, like you yourself, Jewish. Are you worried about this?

Nancy Fraser: Not for myself. I'm sitting in New York and have a huge amount of support, including an extremely strong letter by the president of my own university at the New School, Donna Shalala, which opens with the great line, “Albertus Magnus would have been appalled!”

She notes that it's especially concerning for a German institution to cancel a faculty member of the New School, which not only rescued German scholars fleeing fascism as individuals, but also created a space for continuing the body of critical theory that had been wiped out in Germany. The New School has contributed to that body of thought as well as I did personally. So, this is an insult to the New School, as well as to me. But more importantly, it's a violation of the norms of academic freedom.

Hanno Hauenstein: Do you believe this is a trend?

Nancy Fraser: Yes, and I am very concerned. I think of this as a fever that's gripping Germany and to a lesser extent, Austria. It is a very harmful thing. I also think that it's so important that Germans understand something of the complexity and breadth of Judaism, its history, its perspective. They are sort of signing on with this idea of an unconditional pledge of allegiance to Israel, that that's the German responsibility — unqualified support for the state of Israel.

Given what Israel is currently up to, this is a betrayal of what I would call the most important and weighty aspects of Judaism as a history, a perspective, and a body of thought. I'm talking about the Judaism of Maimonides and of [Baruch] Spinoza, of Sigmund Freud, Heinrich Heine, and Ernst Bloch.

Hanno Hauenstein: Can you specify what you mean by that?

Nancy Fraser: This [other] tradition of Judaism is reducing Judaism to not just nationalism, but an ultranationalism of the sort that's trampling and basically destroying the Gaza Strip. By the way, I just signed another letter! I'm not repentant. A letter against Israeli “scholasticide,” meaning the destruction of schools and universities in Gaza.

Over a hundred professors have been killed there. Nine university presidents have been killed. The names of the people that I mentioned to you earlier are just rattled off the top, there are so many more. Just think of Albert Einstein, who was offered the presidency of the state of Israel and refused. These are people whose very Jewishness took them to defend universal rights, not a narrow tribal identity.

Hanno Hauenstein: Some of your critics argued that you haven't actually been canceled, but simply have been refused a tribute of sorts.

Nancy Fraser: There are Germans who are tempted to hem and haw over this and say it was just an honorary prize. Many Germans, even journalists, have been intimidated into accepting a very distortedly narrow view of what academic freedom actually means. The argument that you could simply take away something because it's just a prize and not genuinely academic is baloney.

The thing is, it's a visiting professorship, an academic appointment. Along with all other past holders of this chair, I was selected for my academic work. The idea that what I do otherwise is cause for a disinvitation already says that academic autonomy is being violated. There's no question about that. I do want to say to these people that you do, indeed, have a responsibility to think deeply about Jews. It's just that you're thinking in the wrong way. There's another way to think about this.

Hanno Hauenstein: Critics like Masha Gessen have argued that Germany's specific interpretation of “Staatsräson” (raison d'état) toward Israel in recent years has helped right-wing extremists such as the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD). Would you agree?

Nancy Fraser: I can't comment specifically on the AfD. But I can tell you that in the United States, the Christian evangelical right has its own version of “philosemitic McCarthyism,” to use Susan Neiman's phrase. And they have a theological rationale that is in and of itself deeply antisemitic. But the most worrisome thing about Germany to me is not the AfD.

Hanno Hauenstein: What is?

Nancy Fraser: The sort of right-thinking centrism, where the real weight of public opinion lies. It's so easily swayed by what to me are transparently bogus arguments. Like the one argument that in disinviting me allegedly nobody is violating academic freedom, but simply choose not to honor a person who holds the views they think I hold.

Hanno Hauenstein: You said that there is no deeper connection between the “Philosophy for Palestine” and the lecture series you were supposed to give in Cologne. But would you say there isn't a connection between the stance you took in the letter and your academic writing?

Nancy Fraser: I wear more than one hat. I do theoretical work. Occasionally I sign letters as a citizen. I don't feel these must be directly connected. I do, though, occasionally write in a more agitational or propagandistic mode. The best example would be the Feminism for the 99% which I coauthored with Cinzia Arruzza and Tithi Bhattacharya. We took ideas each of us had been developing in her own work and sort of melded them. It's a manifesto for how to chart a different path for feminist activism that was understood of interest of the 99 percent, of women, and of men and children — as opposed to a certain kind of corporate neoliberal feminism. So, I have tried to popularize my academic ideas, but I've never written on the Middle East. I don't have great expertise, but I am a thinking, reading citizen. And as a Jew, I do feel my special responsibility for the “not in our name” kind of sentiment.

Hanno Hauenstein: Because what is done in Gaza is, to a degree, done in the name of the Jewish people?

Nancy Fraser: Exactly. There's also no question that there is an instrumentalization, or even a weaponization, of the accusation of antisemitism that is being applied so wrongly to people who feel that in condemning the current course of the Israeli government, we are arguing for a course correction to improve the situation of Palestinians, as well as of Jewish people everywhere.

Hanno Hauenstein: That sounds like an honorable thing to say. In Germany, however, the Bundestag (parliament) passed a resolution declaring boycotts of Israeli institutions an instance of antisemitism. Many in Germany associate such boycotts with images of historical boycotts against German Jews back in the 1930s.

Nancy Fraser: That is an interesting association. After all, there was no Jewish state back then that was engaging in illegitimate militaristic carnage. A much better parallel would be South Africa, where there was a strong academic boycott, a sports boycott, and a cultural boycott, which had some impact along with the economic boycott in leading to put an end to apartheid. By the way, the Germans didn't just boycott Jews. They expelled them, rounded them up, sent them to camps and killed them. None of that is going on here.

Hanno Hauenstein: Are you planning to repeat your Cologne lecture series elsewhere?

Nancy Fraser: I will be doing it elsewhere! It is a new expanded and revised version of some lectures I gave in Berlin two years ago. I now have lots of new material, which I was eager to present. My university, the New School, is organizing an event. It's also been suggested that I lecture elsewhere in Germany under the label: "This is what they didn't want you to hear in Cologne."

Hanno Hauenstein: Some German professors have expressed solidarity with you. Do you believe people in Germany might be changing their mind on these issues?

Nancy Fraser: I'm not close enough to the ground to have an informed view on that. But I do have the feeling that the fever will break. Whether my case is the precipitating event, or the next case, or the one after that, I'm not in a position to say. There is some growing unease about this. At least people in New York see it this way.

Hanno Hauenstein: Your colleagues look at Germany and ask themselves: What's going on?

Nancy Fraser: Among academics and people in the arts, for sure. Also in journalism, since the Gessen case was so widely reported. And the belated attempt now to strip Butler of the Adorno Prize — all this is very much discussed. At least in the arts, in academia, and in journalism, people are very disturbed, appalled, also outraged. There have been plenty of Palestinians and ethnic Arabs who have been victimized by this, but also prominent Jews. This incites this feeling of, well, who are you to tell us what it means to support the Jewish people?

Hanno Hauenstein: Do you see yourself as a victim of what you described as philosemitic antisemitism earlier?

Nancy Fraser: I suppose so. I'm canceled in the name of the special German responsibility for the Holocaust. I assume that responsibility should entail responsibility to Jews. But of course, it gets narrowed down to the state policies of whatever government happens to be ruling in Israel. For us in the United States, McCarthyism is a powerful word. It's a way of shutting people down under the pretext that you're allegedly for the Jews.

Hanno Hauenstein: Where do you think this comes from?

Nancy Fraser: It's simply become normalized. People in Germany have come to accept a narrow view of what academic freedom and freedom of speech means and what democratic political freedoms are.

Hanno Hauenstein: The US and Germany have been the two most important suppliers of support and weapons to Israel over the last six months. How does this factor into your view of Germany?

Nancy Fraser: The prime culprit here is the United States. I'm not letting Germany off the hook, but really, if you care about who is funding [Israel's] policies, it's the US. However, for the first time in my life, and I think ever, there is a balanced public discussion on the issue of Palestine. Palestinian voices are in the public sphere. Organizations, including Jewish organizations on the Left that are criticizing Israeli policy are in the public sphere.

[Joe] Biden is under a lot of pressure. He's been talking a tougher talk about conditioning aid and calling for a cease-fire. Whether this will translate into real cutoffs or conditionality of aid, whether Democrats in the Congress will try to force that issue, remains to be seen. But at least our government's open faucet of military aid has become politicized and contested.

I would hope that something like this would develop in Germany as well. That at least it becomes a public issue that you can argue about, without being accused of antisemitism or being canceled.

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