

# Socialism: The Road to Academic Censorship

*by Gabriel F. Benzecry, Nicholas A. Reinarts, Daniel J. Smith*

**W**hat lessons does history offer about the relationship between socialism and academic freedom? Academic freedom is the right of academic scholars to “engage in the professionally competent forms of inquiry and teaching.”<sup>1</sup> It is broadly considered necessary for promoting the advancement of scientific ideas, playing a role in the preservation of democracy and economic growth.<sup>2</sup> There are several threats to academic freedom posed by a socialist economic system, as defined by state ownership of the means of production.

There are three potential channels through which state ownership or control of the economy influences academic freedom. First is through the restriction or elimination of public or private employment options for academic scholars. Second is through the restriction or elimination of the private wealth necessary for developing a wide range of diverse funding sources. Third is the restricted ownership or control of the resources necessary for engaging in public intellectualism.

The availability of employment opportunities from competing public and private universities, think tanks, the non-profit sector, and the broader private sector heightens the competition for academic scholars. Universities compete for students, governmental and private money, rankings, Carnegie classifications, grants, partnerships, and prizes. This competition leads academic institutions to compete for the academic scholars who best help institutions compete across these margins. Academic freedom is one of the non-pecuniary benefits that universities use to recruit scholars.

A dearth of employment options for academics inside and outside the academy under state socialism, however, would make scholars more dependent on the state as a primary, or even single, employer. It may also hinder the ability of scholars to protect academic freedom since bargaining power depends on the right of exit.<sup>3</sup>

The existence of independent private universities, in competition with public universities, may also boost academic competition. Private universities with large endowments and rainy-day funds can better protect faculty stability and academic freedom regardless of political or economic trends. The lack of private higher education institutions or the inability of individuals to acquire wealth for establishing endowments under state socialism may pose a threat to academic freedom. State ownership gives the state authority over the public institution, allowing state actors to exert influence over it.<sup>4</sup> Private universities may thus have more independence to protect intellectual freedom.

Academic freedom may also be protected by think tanks or watchdog groups. Think tanks not only disseminate academic ideas to the public and generate competition in ideas, but they also provide academics with another employment avenue to engage in public intellectualism. Private watchdog groups like the Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression, Heterodox Academy, National Association of Scholars, and Scholars at Risk may also serve more broadly to protect academic freedom. Like private universities, think tanks and watchdog groups can establish endowments or cultivate private donors to protect intellectual freedom from political and economic pressures.

Due to the lack of alternative employment opportunities, the sole reliance of academic institutions and scholars on the state for support could potentially lead to direct manipulation of the hiring and promotion practices of academic scholars. For instance, the Federal Reserve, through its employment of monetary economists, conferences, and academic journals, may influence academic research.<sup>5</sup> For Bromwich, “If academic freedom has ever meant anything, it has meant to guard against political persecution for the dissemination of such knowledge” that those in political power find inconvenient.<sup>6</sup>

State socialism would also restrict private wealth, independent of the state, which would be necessary to foster a diverse range of external funding sources available to academic scholars. The availability to raise research funds from a broad array of public and private sources to support academic research and programming might play a vital role in protecting the academic freedom of faculty members who fall outside mainstream fields or hold heterodox ideologies or methodologies. This can be especially true in the presence of systematic faculty bias.<sup>7</sup>

State ownership or control of the economy could also restrict the ownership of a variety of media venues necessary for academic scholars to engage in public intellectualism. While private ownership of media does not guarantee media freedom, it does appear to be an important factor for preserving media freedom, and, more broadly, political freedom.<sup>8</sup> Academics under state socialism would lack access to the privately owned resources necessary to serve as independent public intellectuals.

There is also an observed tendency for governments to use public education to advance the state interest.<sup>9</sup> This would likely be amplified under state socialism. A centralized education system is also more susceptible to public interest group capture. Whoever captures the ownership of the means of production of education can limit ideological diversity, the very “engine that generates knowledge.”<sup>10</sup> In the extreme, authoritarian governments can engage in major violations of academic freedom.<sup>11</sup>

## Academic Freedom and Socialism in Numbers

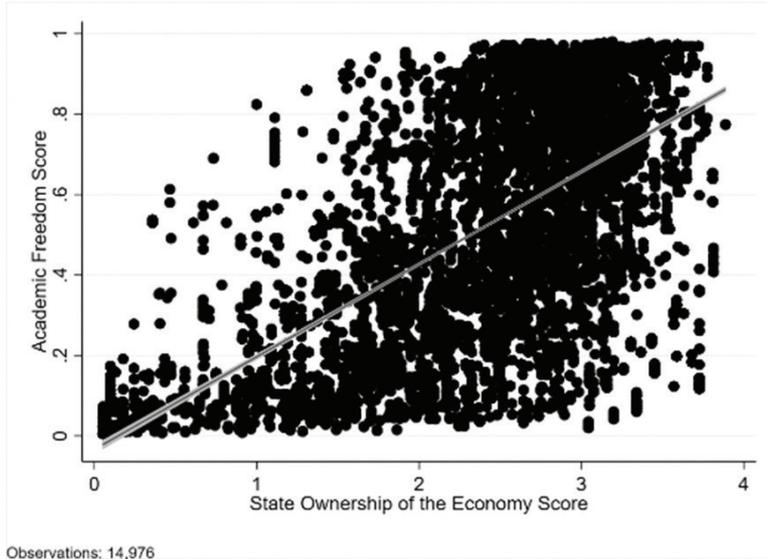
We use V-Dem’s Academic Freedom Index (*v2xca\_academ*) as our primary measure of academic freedom. According to V-Dem, “The Academic Freedom Index is designed to provide an aggregated measure that captures the de facto realization of academic freedom, including the degree to which higher-education institutions are autonomous.” The components of the index include the Freedom to Research and Teach (*v2cafres*), the Freedom of Academic Exchange and Dissemination (*v2cafexch*), Institutional Autonomy (*v2cainsaut*), Campus Integrity (*v2casurv*), and Freedom and Academic and Cultural Expression (*v2clacfree*). The Academic Freedom Index goes from 0 to 1, with a score of 1 representing the highest degree of academic freedom. The individual components of the index all range from 0 to 4, with 4 indicating the highest level of academic freedom.

We use V-Dem’s State Ownership of Economy (*v2clstown*) as our measure of state socialism. This measures the extent to which the state owns or controls the economy. This corresponds with the traditionally understood definition of socialism.<sup>12</sup> The index ranges from 0 to 4, with 4 indicating that “very little valuable capital belongs to the state or is directly controlled by the state.”

Overall, our data includes 180 countries, with data for many countries going back to 1900. Appendix 2 provides a list of the included countries. The Academic Freedom Index recommends the use of its reported uncertainty measures in drawing comparisons across time and countries.<sup>13</sup> We calculate our lines of best fit in our results to include a 95 percent confidence interval that reflects these reported uncertainty measures.

We first examine V-Dem’s index of academic freedom and state ownership of the economy in Figure 1.

**Figure 1: Academic Freedom Index and State Ownership of the Economy, 1900-2022**



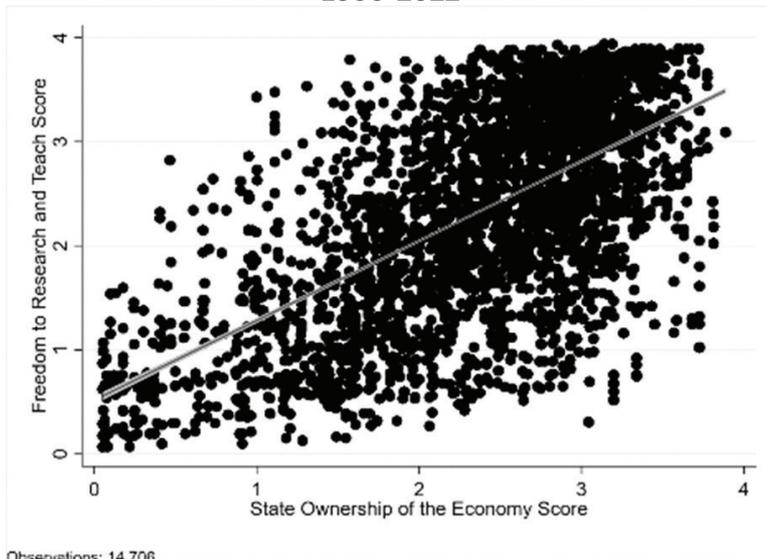
Observations: 14,976

The Academic Freedom Index scale goes from 0 to 1, with a score of 1 representing the highest degree of academic freedom.

No country under state socialism has historically been able to achieve an Academic Freedom Index score of over .7 for even a single year.

We next examine the relationship between Freedom to Research and Teach and state ownership of the economy in Figure 2.

**Figure 2: Freedom to Research and Teach and State Ownership of the Economy, 1900-2022**



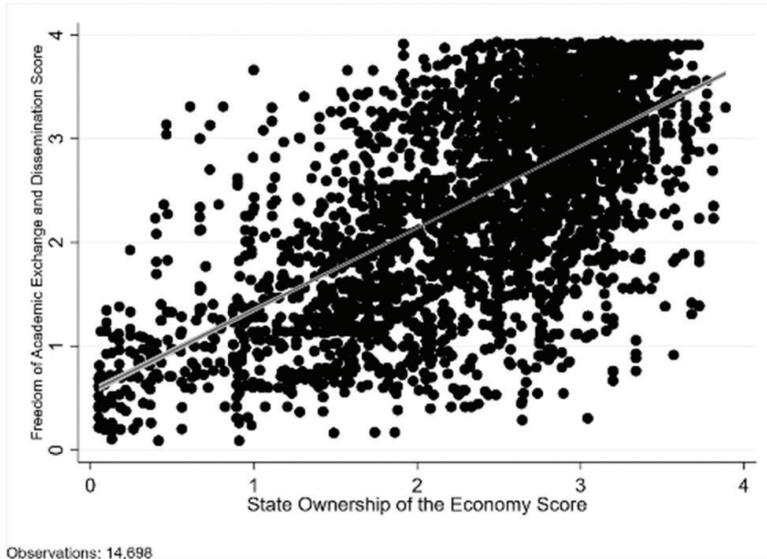
Observations: 14,706

The Freedom to Research and Teach scale goes from completely restricted (0) to fully free (4).

No country under state socialism could maintain a level of Freedom to Research and Teach above 3 for even a single year.

We next examine the Freedom of Academic Exchange and Dissemination and state ownership of the economy in Figure 3.

**Figure 3: Freedom of Academic Exchange and Dissemination and State Ownership of the Economy, 1900-2022**



Observations: 14,698  
 The Freedom of Academic Exchange and Dissemination scale goes from completely restricted (0) to fully free (4).

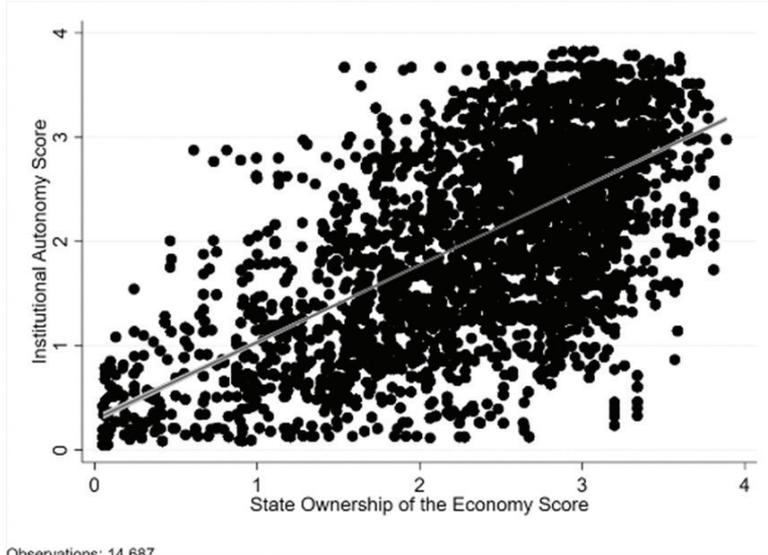
Compared to the other components of academic freedom, some countries under state socialism have been able to obtain Freedom of Academic Exchange and Dissemination. Table 1 provides a list of the countries under state socialism that were able to achieve a level of freedom to exchange and dissemination above 3.

**Table 1: Countries Achieving the Highest Levels of the Freedom to Exchange and Disseminate Under State Socialism**

Country	Year
Bosnia and Herzegovina	1992-95
Botswana	1964-65
Guinea-Bissau	1984-85
Russia	1990-91
Zambia	1980-90

Next, we examine the relationship between Institutional Autonomy and state ownership of the economy in Figure 4.

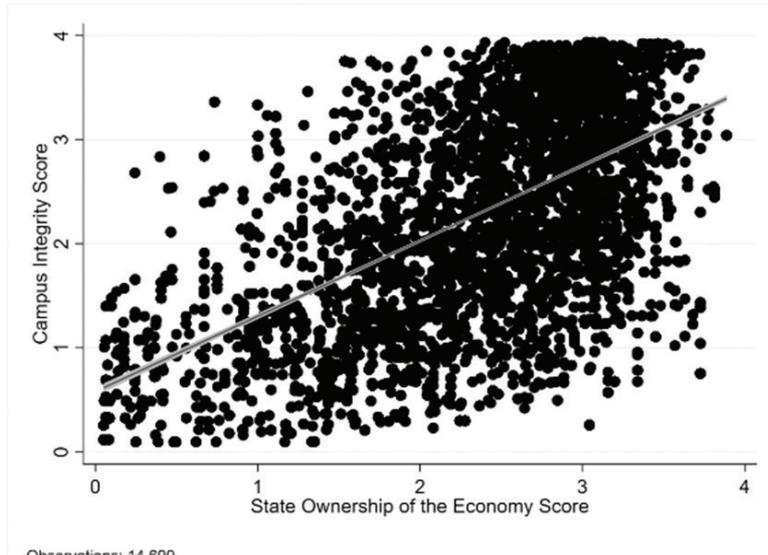
**Figure 4: Institutional Autonomy and State Ownership of the Economy, 1900-2022**



Observations: 14,687

The Institutional Autonomy scale goes from no autonomy at all (0) to complete autonomy (4).

**Figure 5: Campus Integrity and State Ownership of the Economy, 1900-2022**



Observations: 14,690

The Campus Integrity scale goes from completely restricted (0) to fully free (4).

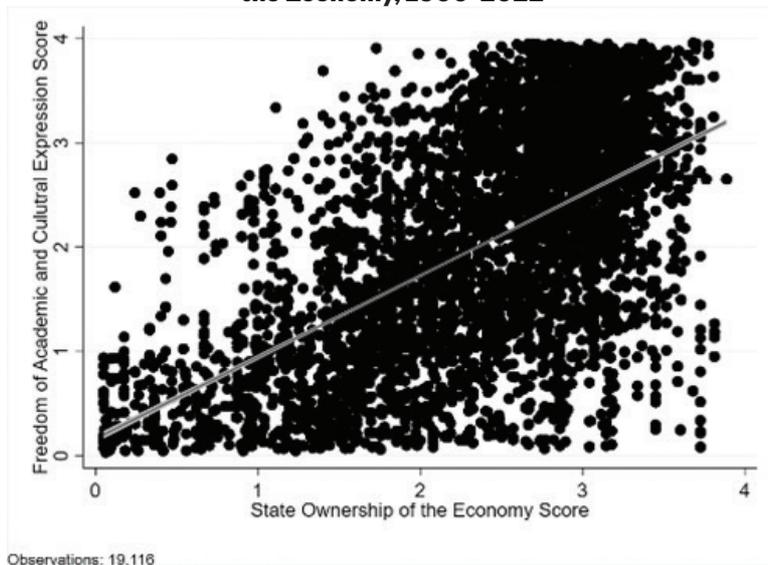
No countries under state socialism were able to achieve an Institutional Autonomy score above 3 for even a single year.

Figure 5 examines the relationship between Campus Integrity and state ownership of the economy.

Botswana is the only country under state socialism to have achieved a Campus Integrity score above 3 between the years 1964-65 and 1993-95.

Figure 6 examines the relationship between Freedom of Academic and Cultural Expression and state ownership of the economy.

**Figure 6: Freedom of Academic and Cultural Expression and State Ownership of the Economy, 1900-2022**



The Freedom of Academic and Cultural Expression scale goes from not respected by public authorities (0) to fully respected by public authorities (4).

No country under state socialism was able to achieve a Freedom of Academic and Culture Expression score above 3.

## Final Thoughts

The historical record and theoretical considerations alike point to a troubling relationship between socialism and academic freedom. We examined this relationship using data on the academic freedom environment and state ownership of the economy from V-Dem, with annualized data for 180 countries as far back as 1900. Our results indicate that state socialism has historically been associated with the suppression of academic freedom.

One limitation of our study may be that the Academic Freedom Index unintentionally prioritizes state suppression of academic freedom and thus may not fully capture corporate or capitalist influence not channeled through the state. If the index prioritizes state suppression, then it implies that the suppression of academic freedom emerging from within the academy itself, including self-censorship, cancel culture, or biased hiring and promotion decisions, stemming from ideological imbalance of the academy, would also be underrepresented in the index.<sup>14</sup> While the prioritization of state suppression of academic freedom has not been identified as a weakness of the index, future research can investigate this possibility.

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