

## Outside Pressures

*Bruce Robbins*

In 2004, when my Columbia colleagues in Middle East studies were being subjected to one particularly noxious wave of lies and pressure tactics from the Zionist lobby, some students organized an event on their behalf, and I was one of the faculty members asked to speak. What follows is, first, an account of what I said and, second, some remarks on what now, with the benefit of hindsight, has come to seem a less than satisfactory response.

What I felt most pressing to say on that occasion was that people outside the university had no comprehension of the academic business they were so rudely interfering with and also had no right to interfere with it. Perhaps they thought they had a right to be heard because they confused academic freedom with freedom of speech. They should realize the distinction, I said. They should realize that they themselves do not enjoy academic freedom, and should therefore respect it by leaving us all alone.

On the one hand, freedom of speech is guaranteed by the First Amendment as an individual right that belongs to all citizens. As constitutional scholar Robert Post points out, academic freedom, on the other hand, is a collective right that belongs only to university faculty.<sup>1</sup> It's not an individual right, but a right collectively enjoyed by the community of scholars. In other words, it's a professional right. It is not guaranteed by the Constitution. It was won, historically, in struggles over university governance and employment practices—specifically, struggles against political firings. It is part of a better deal won for itself by an increasingly powerful profession, which was able to protect its members in ways that are not available to employees generally.

The distinction is important because, as my last sentence suggests, professionalism is very easy to present—indeed, it is hard *not* to present—as an offense against democracy. To repose interpretive authority in a community of professionals is to put it where it is not accessible to everyone. The move will not be universally popular. It's a reminder that the university is a very peculiar institution, one that doesn't follow the same rules as society at large (even if some of us wish society at large would take more guidance from it). When people treat academic freedom as if it were a subset of freedom of speech, they make it seem as if the university as an institution is committed to allowing anything and everything to be said. Not just

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by faculty, but by students, by alumni, by trustees, by concerned outsiders. And if they make that assumption, then they can feel they have the right to call for “balance” in the university’s conversations.

The demand for “balance” is a crucial component of recent assaults on the academy from the right. Left-wing professors are accused of being partisan in their teaching, departments are accused of not hiring enough right-wing professors, and so on. This has been and remains an influential argument. Intelligent and progressive scholars have sometimes conceded that there lies some truth in the accusation, which is to say there is some legitimacy in the criteria behind it. If these criteria seem plausible, however, it is only because even academics themselves do not understand very well what disciplines and professions are.

Disciplines, like the professions that inform and shape them, always constrain the sorts of statements that can be made within them. They are always judging certain kinds of statements to be professionally pertinent and valuable and others not pertinent and not valuable. Yes, this mode of operation has the effect of excluding certain kinds of discourse, but it’s also necessary to what I want to call, in spite of the unfashionable ring, the advancement of knowledge. There can never be equal time for all opinions. Time is limited: in fact, extremely limited. Thus the expression of opinion will have to be limited as well. Some opinions will be judged in advance to be unworthy of taking up the very scarce time allotted for classroom or conference discussion. Scholars trying to advance their own understanding have no choice but to make such judgments. They will find certain positions a waste of time, incapable of advancing anyone’s understanding on the grounds that they rely on discredited assumptions, assumptions that the community of scholars agrees are without value, even when the public sphere might not agree at all. Hence we don’t offer equal time to creationism, though a poll of Americans might well reveal a majority preference for the biblical account of the creation over the Darwinian. Ditto for the proposition that, say, women are inherently inferior to men. There can be no legitimate call for balance on such propositions because, in the judgment of academic professionals, they are not worthy of serving as centers of productive controversy.

To bring the examples a bit closer to home, the scholarly community has judged it unacceptable to ignore the overwhelming evidence of how Palestinians were driven from their homes in 1948. Ignoring this evidence will keep you out of the game of historical and political interpretation on this topic altogether. Scholars, of course, remain politically divided on it. They do not agree that this event must necessarily be called what the Palestinians call it, *al-Nakba*, or “the catastrophe.” They do not even agree that it must be described by the phrase “ethnic cleansing,” though I personally have no trouble with either expression. What they agree on as a community is that if a scholar today wants to enter into professional-level conversations about the origins of the state of Israel, something that can be done in any number of ways without denying Israel’s right to exist, then acknowledging the expulsion of the Palestinians is simply the ante that one has to put up for the right to play, the right to be considered to be making professional-level statements. If you aren’t willing to pay that price, you are the scholarly equivalent of a flat-earther.

Desirable as balance may be, in other words, everything depends on the choice of proposition around which balance can legitimately be demanded. Balanced on either side of what point? That central point shifts with time, with the progress of scholarly research and argument, and only scholars who have paid their dues in mastering the argument and the research have the authority to help decide where it is located. The question will be decided, and can only be decided, on the basis of professional knowledge. What's actually being complained about now (as I said in 2004), in many demands for balance, is the fact that the center of controversy has indeed shifted and in so doing has diverged from a great deal of popular opinion. We are not, or are no longer, ready to afford equal time to the sorts of propositions that I still sometimes get in my in-tray: that the Palestinians don't exist as a people, or that Islam is an inherently terrorist religion, or that God has promised Judea and Samaria to the Jewish people. Scholars are not unwilling to fight with each other about all sorts of issues, as the historical record will show; but the issues have to rise above a certain level. These propositions have not made the cut, professionally speaking. They are among the many, many propositions that laymen are free to formulate and indeed that fill many angry pockets of the Internet, but that have not won the specific and restricted privilege of being debated by professional scholars.

This is more or less what I said in 2004, minus a bit of exhortation suitable to the occasion. If necessary—and the persistence of the Zionist lobby in smearing Columbia faculty suggests that it may well be—I would probably say it again. But here in 2008, I profit from a moment of respite to reflect a bit on the problems and limits of this case.

For me, the quickest route to those problems and limits is through 1968. This year's commemorations of 1968 have been uncomfortable for those of us who were students then and ended up making a life in and around the university. This is not just because we have been obliged to recognize the effects of forty years on bodies and minds that were once friskier, but because, in the midst of much that is familiar—another foreign war to protest, along with U.S. policy in the Middle East and assaults on civil liberties at home—there has been one large reversal of position. Back then, it was my generation that, speaking in the name of social relevance, was trying to pressure reluctant universities to establish programs in unprecedented areas like African American studies. And back then, academic freedom was the slogan of faculty members who announced that they were not going to be told what subjects the university should teach or how they should be taught. The case they made then is not substantially different from the case I make above. Here is Sidney Hook defining academic freedom in 1968. Academic freedom, Hook writes, “is the freedom of professionally qualified persons to inquire, discover, publish, and teach the truth as they see it in the field of their competence. It is subject to no control or authority except the control or authority of the rational methods by which truths or conclusions are sought and established in these disciplines” (34). It's a somewhat limited definition—unlike Robert Post, Hook says nothing for instance about the protection of professors' extramural speech, and the protection of professors' extramural speech is crucial to anyone trying

to speak, like Noam Chomsky, as an intellectual rather than exclusively as an academic. But otherwise, Hook's account is quite close to Post's, to which mine is clearly indebted. Both try to defend "professionally qualified persons" against any pressure from outside their ranks.

The contradiction appears flagrant. How can I offer my account of academic freedom as a prerogative of professionalism without taking the side of those who in 1968 were using this same reasoning to declare that they didn't need to listen to the student radicals, including myself? Defending academic freedom as a professional privilege, as I do above, would seem to entail a certain self-betrayal. And truth to my younger self would seem to force me into a very uneasy identification with my present antagonists. Politically speaking, the student movement then, concerned with Vietnam, racial and gender equality, and so on, was worlds apart from the well-financed, professionally organized, and utterly unscrupulous Zionist lobby that has targeted Columbia professors in the past few years. But in terms of the structure of the argument, they occupy the same slot. Both groups represent nonfaculty voices asking faculty to reevaluate their disciplinary norms from an ostensibly wider, extra-academic perspective. For both, pressure from outside the profession is necessary and salutary.

Desperately seeking differences, I ask: Does it make a difference that the faculty now, partly thanks to our efforts, is far more representative, in terms of race, gender, and ethnicity, than it was then and thus can be trusted to be more genuinely responsible in its judgments? Does more democratic representativeness win it the right to greater self-regulation? Or does such thinking merely open the door to demands for equal numbers of Republicans and believers to offset the liberals and secularists? The argument is perhaps worth pursuing. Does it matter that this time these outside groups are trying to get the government to intervene on their side, as they have for example with the Academic Bill of Rights and House Bill 3077? Does the notion of academic freedom depend on an implicit sense that what the university really has to be protected from is *official* power, to which the Zionists are much closer (look at the history of U.S. policy in the Middle East) than the student radicals ever were? Again, perhaps. I would be grateful for further suggestions.

In the meantime, the more promising line of argument, it seems to me, would require some backing off from the narrowly "professionalist" case for academic freedom. This will be risky. For the moment, it will mean leaving the university more exposed. But it offers the hope that academic freedom will be strengthened in the long term.

By the neologism "professionalist" I mean an understanding of the professions as socially autonomous. The historical fact is that they are not, as Post indeed acknowledges. In my book, *Secular Vocations: Intellectuals, Professionalism, and Culture*, I argue that though professionalism often looks like a conspiracy against the laity, as Shaw called it, it is in fact constitutively open to and dependent on public opinion. (I am grateful to Gerald Graif for reminding me, in a personal communication, of how pertinent this old argument is to discussions of academic freedom now.) They establish their relative autonomy only by legitimating their goals and methods, and the autonomy thus won—there are many cases of would-be professions failing to

win it—can always be pared down and even revoked. We have recently seen a loss of autonomy even in paradigmatic professions like medicine and law. Even in such professions, that is, the constituting of professional norms does not happen in isolation from the extra-professional tides of cultural and political change. In this case, the deconstructive refrain is an observable social reality: The outside cannot be separated from the inside. Thus it's simply not historically accurate to pretend that professional judgments of, say, where legitimate controversy can and cannot be centered come into being for reasons that are themselves solely and purely professional. It seems likely, to take up again my earlier example, that recognition of the expulsion of the Palestinians in 1948 worked its way into the common sense of scholars otherwise divided in their political and methodological allegiances not only because more scholars of Middle Eastern background have made their way into the American academy, but also because global capitalism itself has demanded a less parochial, less ethnocentric view of the world than characterized the United States in the 1950s and 1960s. Like them or not, these are not exclusively professional reasons.

Here my argument overlaps somewhat with that of Judith Butler in her response to Robert Post in *Academic Freedom after September 11*. Butler objects to Post's assumption (which is also mine above) that professional norms represent an accepted common sense that has passed beyond professional controversy or conflict. She warns that in our haste to defend academic freedom, we may understand professional norms in a way that entails a "profoundly conservative resistance to interdisciplinarity and disciplinary innovation" (127). It's a real danger. She is right, I think, that many of the most vociferous, but also the most important arguments, in disciplines as in couples, are over the norms of argument and even over whether an argument is taking or has taken place.<sup>2</sup> Dissensus about professional norms is, so to speak, normal. And one major reason for this is that professional norms emerge and change in direct contact with the society around them. As Butler notes, foundations and state agencies are now working hard to change such norms by setting political criteria for the funding of research projects. One example is the infamous Ford Foundation proviso that grantees cannot promote "violence, terrorism, bigotry, or the destruction of any state" (132), a proviso that as Butler says could have been invoked against critics of South African apartheid and might indeed have made trouble for the funding of John Locke's thesis against the divine right of kings. In principle, why would Michael Ignatieff not risk getting his hypothetical grant revoked for advocating the use of violence in Iraq? These particular pressures are of course to be resisted. But the rush to resist them cannot be allowed to obscure Butler's more general point, which almost seems to cut the other way. Pressure on professional norms from the "outside" *cannot be resisted as such*. There is no alternative to it. There is no line of defense separating the inside from the outside.

What is to be done, then, to defend academic freedom? If dissensus over norms is both inevitable and (as a good in itself) desirable, the protective capacity of academic freedom would seem to be weaker

than we might wish it. It's not quite clear, however, that Butler in fact draws this conclusion. "In a world in which common standards cannot be assumed, in which what has become most common is the predicament of finding that norms are open to interpretation," she writes, "the ethical problem is not how best to apply a pre-given norm (fabricating its stability in the moment of its use) but how to be open to a clash of norms while making the best possible judgment in the fray (that is, without overruling the contestatory character of the field of norms at the time)" (122). This is a very attractive statement, but it is first and foremost, as it says, the description of an *ethical* position. Its strongest imperative is not to forget that norms are indeed endlessly open to contestation. The public vulnerability that accompanies this openness does not register. On the other hand, this may be because Butler assumes that openness is not so much a weakness as a rhetorical strength, an answer to the "what is to be done?" question. According to this logic, Butler's implicit strategy for public legitimation, if such a strategy can be imputed to her, would be the ideal of pure controversy itself. The public would be asked to sponsor and protect the university on the grounds that the university is a place where, unlike other social institutions, controversy is an end in itself. In the university, the controversy never ends, we would be saying, and that's what's so publicly valuable about it.

This comes very close to the "free speech" understanding of academic freedom as described above. Its advantage is its obvious democratic appeal. As opposed to professionalism, which excludes, it seems to exclude no one—except perhaps the Monty Python character who would disagree about the value of disagreement. But it also has the disadvantage that Post points out: If the ideal is freedom for anything and everything to be said, then there can be no case that knowledge is advancing. Agreement is the only currency in which the advancement of knowledge can be measured. Without it, that particular case for the public benefit of scholarship would almost certainly have to drop out.

Dependence on the "advancement of knowledge" idea was another problem with the argument I made in 2004. I called it "unfashionable," and it is, at least in the humanities, but I certainly didn't make the case for its relevance. Though no one in the audience called me on it, my "flat-earther" remark takes for granted a notion of epistemological progress that is not easy to square with the traditional notion of the humanities as engaged in the preservation and transmission of wisdom from the past, and that almost no one today seems to accept, at least explicitly. Is it possible that the emergence of a less traditional notion of the humanities has brought with it a more positive take on the advancement of knowledge, though one that is not yet articulated as such? The question seems worth asking. And if the advancement of knowledge no longer names professionalism's implicit pay off to the public, e.g., what the public gets back in exchange for continuing to grant us professionals the authority to decide around what point controversy will be organized, and if (as I suspect) the ideal of controversy as such cannot do that job either, then what exactly do we have to offer the public? Why should the public agree even provisionally to grant us the self-policing authority it does?

This may seem like a problem that is peculiar to the humanities, but of course much of the trouble with academic freedom is also peculiar to the humanities. In March 2005, the former Columbia provost, Jonathan Cole, gave a stirring public lecture called "Academic Freedom Under Fire" (it has since been published in *Daedalus*) that tried to remind the American public of how much it owes to the free circulation of ideas in universities. When Cole listed the accomplishments of the university, accomplishments of which America should be proud, all the accomplishments were from the natural sciences, none from the social sciences or the humanities. In the natural sciences, of course, the advancement of knowledge paradigm remains in place. But the attacks at Columbia were largely directed at work in the social sciences and the humanities. There was and is a certain awkwardness about defending the public value of that work directly. A working vocabulary of pride seems to be missing. If academic freedom is to be better defended, that vocabulary may have to be supplied.

In practical terms, the conclusion of this line of reasoning is that we professionals cannot simply tell would-be intruders to "butt out." In order to defend the (always fragile) social contract that is the real substance of academic freedom, professionals have to talk to outsiders. We have a lot of talking to do, and talking of a strenuous and unaccustomed sort. Much of that talking (and listening) has to be about the value we see in the scholarship they don't like. This is a long-term political process. It involves changing public opinion itself, not just on the subject of scholarship, but also on topics like secularism and internationalism where the gap between public and scholarly opinion remains widest. Alas, academic freedom cannot save us from politics.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Here I was borrowing from Robert Post, whose essay I was lent (thanks to Paul Strohm) while it was in manuscript. See Post.

<sup>2</sup> See my response to Amanda Anderson's *The Way We Argue Now*.

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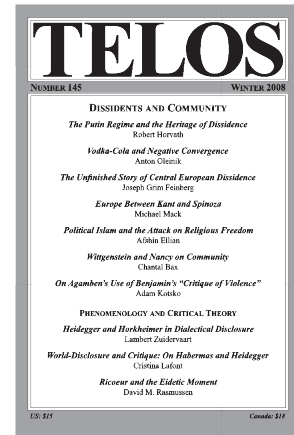
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