

# ACADEMIC PURPOSES AND ACADEMIC FREEDOMS



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If there is anything to be said about academic freedom, as opposed to freedom without prefix or suffix, or if there is to be any separate and distinctive justification for this special sort of freedom, then the peculiarities will have to be grounded in the distinctiveness of academic duties and academic functions. This at least was recognised by the author commissioned to write a Penguin Education Special on *Academic Freedom* for what proclaimed itself a Council for Academic Freedom and Democracy (CAFD).<sup>1</sup> He went on to assert: "In education the freedom to hold opinions, especially unorthodox opinions, and to advocate them openly and without any fear of reprisal, is supremely important" (pp. 13-14); and again, that "The freedom that matters is the free-

dom to teach and to learn according to one's convictions and interests" (p. 15).

## RATIONAL DISCOURSE

It was, of course, to be clearly understood that this freedom to express unorthodox opinions did not license any expressions which the National Union of Students might decide to ban as "racist or fascist".<sup>2</sup> But what is more immediately remarkable is that there was not so much as a mention of knowledge, truth, or rationality. So let us consider, in salutary contrast, some things said by the Polish philosopher Ajdukiewicz. Along with all his compatriots he had had far more direct experience of constraints on academic and every other kind of freedom than any

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FOR LIFE, LIBERTY AND PROPERTY

homekeeping Englishman. He begins by distinguishing four academic freedoms: freedom of choice of subject of inquiry; freedom of method of inquiry; freedom of thought; and freedom of speech.

He at once links academic rights with academic functions and academic duties. This distinctively “scientific freedom does not mean a freedom of speech so unrestricted that it would permit the dissemination of rubbish or unintelligible gibberish.” So, correspondingly, freedom of thought implies “a right to believe in that and only that which can be rationally justified, and a right to disbelieve everything that is not supported by rational argument and, even more so, everything that rational argument actually speaks against.” So for Ajdukiewicz questions about academic freedom of speech, as opposed to freedom of speech in general, arise only when and in so far as we have meaningful, coherent and rational discourse: an expression of “the competence of the author in the given field.”<sup>3</sup>

Of course this statement by Ajdukiewicz is only a beginning, notwithstanding that it does possess the great merit of being a beginning in the right direction. In particular, it needs to be in some way extended to cover duties to students, and the duties and rights of students. Clearly the “right to believe in that and only that which can be rationally justified” must apply equally to the student, likewise the duty to seek and cherish truth. Clearly too the duties of teachers are duties to their students also. They have no right to present to those students any opinions - whether orthodox or unorthodox - except in a dedicated and disciplined concern for whatever is best evidenced and nearest to the truth.

### **THE SINCERITY OF THE SEARCH FOR TRUTH**

By beginning with the proper emphasis upon knowledge, truth, and rationality we become ready to realise why teachers dealing with areas of controversy who present only their own viewpoint, or who take care that its rivals are represented only by the feeblest advocates, thereby invalidate their own moral claims to academic freedom. No doubt normally they are sincerely persuaded of the truth of the doctrines which they are thus labouring to instil. But this is a negligible concession. For nothing is easier than to persuade ourselves of the truth of any proposition in which we very much want to believe. What is much more difficult, and what alone gives us the moral right to claim academic freedoms, is to discipline ourselves to persist in seeking and saying the truth regardless of whether it turns out to be as we might wish it to have been. It is the sincerity of your search for truth, not the sincerity of your belief that you have found it, which is crucial.

Descartes once remarked that, in determining what people sincerely believe, he preferred to look to what they did rather than to what they said. His advice is equally sound with regard to sincerity in general. Hence, in order to prove that they are indeed sincerely pursuing some purpose, the one thing above all which is needed is to be constantly concerned to monitor success or failure in fulfilling that purpose. If ever and whenever this monitoring reveals that they are not succeeding, all truly sincere purposers will there and then make their sincerity plain by their readiness to adopt fresh tactics, tactics offering better promise of success.

Suppose, for example, that someone professes to be in business in order, no doubt among other things, to turn a profit; or suppose, again, that the captain of a cricket team says that he is playing, no doubt again among other things, in order to win. Then what credence could we give to these professions if there is no care to keep, in the one case, accounts and, in the other, the score?

### **A COMPREHENSIVELY CRITICAL APPROACH**

The moral for us is that the sincere seeker after truth has to be comprehensively critical. Here this means ready to ask questions about, and to test the validity of, all truth claims. To be critical, in this sort of constructive and comprehensive understanding, is by no means necessarily to condemn or to reject. (In a similar understanding, to establish yourself as a critic of the works of Shakespeare it is neither necessary nor sufficient to insist that he was a no-good playwright, fit only for total deconstruction.)

What, however, is necessary first is to insist that every claim the truth of which is in dispute should be formulated with a clarity and precision sufficient to enable critics to know what is or would be relevant to its settling. Thereafter, it is necessary that all well-girded and truth-concerned objections should have a fair hearing. The two qualifying adjectives are needed. For there is no call to attend to objections which either do not refer to the truth or falsity of the disputed propositions or which come only from those lacking a basic “competence ... in the given field.”

All these points about what is meant by a comprehensively critical approach have to be emphasised. For Schumpeter’s oft-quoted observation about liberalism applies here too: “As a supreme if unintended compliment, the enemies of the system ... have thought it wise to appropriate its label.” Thus ‘critical’ in such expressions as ‘Critical Sociology’ and ‘Critical Legal Studies’ is currently employed as a commendatory code word for ‘Marxist’.

## INDOCTRINATION

This is neither the time nor the place to ask exactly, or even very roughly, how much indoctrinatory teaching is now going on within the British educational system. Certainly it is widespread. Equally certainly it has increased enormously in the last twenty or thirty years - and in the schools most of all during the last ten. When I was myself a secondary school and university student - before, during and immediately after World War II - if we knew what any of the political and social convictions of our teachers were, it was scarcely ever on the evidence of their classroom behaviour.

But now, save for a very few lonely dissenting voices, some entire established disciplines would appear to be heavily blinkered and biased.<sup>4</sup> Then again, there are several new pseudo-disciplines of 'Something Studies' or 'Something Education' - 'Peace Studies' and 'World Studies',<sup>5</sup> 'Anti-racist Education' and 'Multicultural Education'<sup>6</sup> - pseudo-disciplines which presuppose and proceed persistently to inculcate various favoured and often demonstrably false conclusions. The uninhibited indoctrinatory intent was most blatant in the case of what was at one time but has perhaps now ceased to be most widespread, 'Peace Studies'. For when in the eighties a newly elected Labour majority took over a Local Education Authority it typically hastened to intrude such a programme into all the secondary schools now under its control; and there was, and indeed could be, little pretence that the purpose was anything but to win support for what that party so misleadingly described as its defence policies.<sup>7</sup>

## THE BUREAUCRATIC-EDUCATIONAL COMPLEX

So much for the theoretical questions about the nature of academic freedom, and about what is required for a moral justification thereof. What are the present practical issues? The first, surely, is tenure? For if we are, as we should be, asking our academics to pursue and to utter the truth, letting the chips fall where they may, then we must ensure that they are not asked to do this at an intolerable cost both to themselves and to their families. Again, many academic jobs are highly specialised. It is not reasonable to expect people to develop and improve such skills - skills for which there may be only the narrowest or no alternative market - without offering them the security of something like a lifetime contract of employment.

Before the era of Education Secretary Kenneth Baker, British Universities certainly awarded tenure much too early, too easily, and too extensively. But that was a situation calling for piecemeal reform rather than wholesale revolution. Like so many other misguided measures emanating from the DES in recent years, the onslaught on tenure would appear to be the

result of appointing Conservative Ministers with no prior knowledge, and hence no deep and all too well-grounded suspicions, of the bureaucratic-educational complex.

Often unwilling even to listen to advice from Conservatives who have spent their entire working lives in what Tom Lehrer taught us to call Edbiz, these wilfully innocent Ministers seem to have been most efficiently used by their civil servants to promote the centralising, imperialist, socialist ambitions of the DES. Even where such selfish departmental interests were not involved, the advice of these officials has often been egregiously misleading: the preposterous student loans scheme, for instance, might have been - and perhaps in this particular case actually was - designed to discredit the whole idea. The full costs of the irresponsible follies of these Conservative Ministers will be revealed only when their first Labour successor enters Queen Elizabeth House. For he or she will be extremely eager to exploit - for the enforcement of illiberally Procrustean, socialist ideals - all the innumerable fresh powers provided to the Minister by the 1988 Educational Reform Act.

## "BY WHATEVER MEANS ARE NECESSARY"

What that is likely to mean for academic freedom is suggested by the repressive behaviour of some socialist students, and by the lack of any properly strong reproachful reaction from either their socialist contemporaries or their socialist seniors. It was in a 1974 conference that the NUS carried by a massive majority a resolution to prevent "by whatever means are necessary" in any institutions of tertiary education any meetings to be addressed by any speakers whom the local NUS affiliate should deem to be "racist or fascist". The main argument in the main - deliriously applauded - supporting speech was that there is no democratic obligation, nor is it at this time prudent, to permit the freedoms of free society to be exploited by those labouring to overthrow such a society and to abolish all such freedoms for their opponents.

Whatever should be said about any corresponding legal rights we can concede - indeed I myself believe that we ought to insist - that we have no moral right to any freedoms which we are not prepared to allow to others. But the argument actually presented to and enthusiastically accepted by that conference was wholly hypocritical. For the Secretary who proposed the resolution was, and was by everyone present known to be, a Leninist and a member of the Communist Party. And, of course, the ban was neither intended to affect, nor has it ever in fact been imposed upon, any Leninist speaker. On the contrary: spokespersons both for established Leninist regimes and for associations of revolutionary militants fighting to impose such regimes are always allowed and often very strongly encouraged to have their say.<sup>8</sup>

## HERETICAL OPINIONS ABOUT MATTERS OF FACT

When the NUS first resolved “by whatever means are necessary” to prevent racists and fascists from getting a hearing, no definition was provided for either of the to key terms; an omission which has to my knowledge never been remedied. Presumably the intention was, as in the event the effect has been, to extend the net as widely as possible.

The emphasis, however, has always been on the charge of racism, and this too is the more important for us since it bears not only on “freedom of speech” but also on “freedom of choice of subject for inquiry”. For what is here denounced and where possible repressed as racism is not the advantaging or disadvantaging of individuals for no other and better reason than that they happen to belong to this racial set and not that. Instead it is any expression of, and hence any research which might result in the expression of, heretical opinions about matters of racial fact.

Thus one of the first victims of this campaign was Professor H. J. Eysenck, assaulted in a London School of Economics lecture hall. Today it is above all Ray Honeyford, who can address meetings on campus only under heavy guard.<sup>9</sup> Neither of these notorious dissidents is even accused of immoral racist behaviour. Their fault has been to utter heresies. In the one case these were claims that there in fact are, at least on average, some substantial genetically determined psychological differences between members of certain racially defined sets. In the other it was to challenge various policies and practices based upon the certainly false assumption that in any multi-racial population all racial subsets will - in the absence of racial discrimination - be represented proportionately in every category of achievement or failure to achieve.

## ACADEMIC UPROAR

Such exercises in suppression cannot be comfortably dismissed as merely juvenile delinquencies. For there are many seniors, both inside and outside the academy, who approve the aims if not the methods of these student storm-troopers.<sup>10</sup>

In 1985, for instance, the British Museum (Natural History) suddenly closed down the Biological and Physical sections of the Sub-department of Anthropology because research into racial differences “is no longer appropriate”.<sup>11</sup> Again, it was because its members feared that most differences in achievement are truly to be explained by cultural differences between the achievers and non-achievers, that Swann (The Committee of Inquiry into the Education of Children from Ethnic Minority Groups) refused actually to sponsor the research required by its terms of refer-

ence. As *The Times* (15 March 1986) reported, in its restrained way: “Conflict within the Committee itself prevented it from pursuing its proposed factual survey into the social circumstances of successful and unsuccessful pupils in each major ethnic group.”

Most recently there has been an enormous uproar against Philippe Rushton of the University of Western Ontario for publishing evidence of average differences in abilities, dispositions and behaviour as between three major racial sets, differences which appear to be in large part genetically determined. There were calls for Rushton’s dismissal for these heretical expressions, including one from the Liberal [*sic*] Premier of Ontario, and Rushton was shunned and abused by most of his local colleagues. The proceedings intended to lead to Rushton’s dismissal by his university would surely have achieved this result had not Rushton been able to rally letters of support from an array of international academic luminaries - not, of course, including any of the well-known leftists.

## NOTES

1. Anthony Arblaster, *Academic Freedom*, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, Middlesex, 1974. For a critique of this, see Chapter 8 of my *Sociology, Equality and Education*, Macmillan, London, 1976.
2. Equally clearly student freedoms for Arblaster and his kind must not be mistaken to embrace any freedom *not* to join intensely political student unions.
3. H. Skolimowski, *Polish Analytical Philosophy*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1967, p. 135.
4. Consider for instance, the evidence deployed by David Marsland in his *Seeds of Bankruptcy*, Claridge Press, London, 1989. This is, surely, sufficient to show the strong anti-liberal, anti-business, collectivist bias of almost all British Sociology teaching.
5. Compare, for instance, C. Cox and R. Scruton, *Peace Studies: A Critical Survey*, and R. Scruton, *World Studies: Education or Indoctrination*, Institute for European Defence and Strategic Studies, London, 1984 and 1985, respectively.
6. See, for instance, my *Power to the Parents: Reversing Educational Decline*, Sherwood Press, London, 1987, Chapter 5.
7. Compare “Peace, ‘Peace Studies’ and the ‘Peace Movement’,” Chapter 6 in my *Power to the Parents*.
8. Freedom-fighters, as those who describe such persons thus would wish us not to understand, are - like firefighters - fighters *against* rather than *for*.
9. Although some individual student unions have verbally distanced themselves from such attempts to suppress heresy by force, there seems never to have been a case of any union coming actively to the defence of dissidents from NUS orthodoxy. This should be recognised as yet another reason for removing the state-supported compulsion to join such unions.
10. ‘Storm-troopers’, as few of those so free in their misuse of the term ‘fascist’ will know, was the official description of the uniformed thugs of Adolf Hitler’s National Socialist German Workers’ Party.
11. See, for an account of this episode, Beverly Halstead, “The New Left’s Assault on Science: The Case of Anthropology at the Natural History Museum”, in *The Salisbury Review*, Vol. V, No. 2, January 1987, pp. 37-9.