



Scholar activism

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In 1915, John Dewey of Columbia University and Arthur Lovejoy of Johns Hopkins University came together with other educators to establish the American Association of University Professors (AAUP), an organization designed to preserve the integrity of the academy from a politicized donor-driven agenda.

The 1915 Declaration of Principles stated the principles for what academic freedom should be: "the freedom of the academic teacher entail certain correlative obligations... The university teacher... should, if he is fit for his position, be a person of a fair and judicial mind; he should, in dealing with such subjects, set forth justly, without suppression or innuendo, the divergent opinions of other investigators... and he should, above

all, remember that his business is not to provide his students with ready-made conclusions, but to train them to think for themselves."

However, despite the above, free speech is not used almost interchangeably with academic freedom. Academic freedom is being used a "get-out-of-jail-free card" when a speaker, usually a self-described "scholar-activist," intends to thwart oversight and accountability.

In the United States, whatever goes on in a classroom is deemed protected by "academic freedom," whether it is academic or not. Only sexual harassment appears exempt from this blanket protection. Gradually, the entire campus has become an "academic freedom"

zone, where protests and other activities now qualify as academic "speech." The freedom to critique is, predictably, directed mostly at the twin Satans, Israel and America, although efforts to curtail speech that academics find unpleasant and unacceptable have been long standing in the form of "speech codes" and restrictions on "hate speech." Clearly academic freedom is a one-way street; only those having the correct opinions may claim it.

A recent example of how "academic freedom" applies to those who are more equal than others was at Brown University when an invitation to the Egyptian-born speaker Nonie Darwish by a Jewish group was revoked when Muslim and leftist students opposed her views as too "controversial." Such reactive and pre-emptive efforts to control campus speech are increasingly common.

Pre-emptive assaults against Israelis and Jews are becoming commonplace. In the United Kingdom, former Israeli generals are regularly charged with "war crimes" to the point where they refuse to fly to London and are sometimes forced to return, such was the case with Brig. Gen. Aviv Kochavi. Universities have similarly expanded the bubble of "academic freedom" to include pre-emptive restrictions on the participation of Israelis in journals, conferences, and graduate education. The Orwellian inversion of "academic freedom" to mean freedom from Israelis is one more perverse outcome of what

began as efforts to protect professors from being fired for their politics.

Fortunately, in the United States there are hopeful signs that some balance is returning to campus, or at least that academics are now aware that they are under a spotlight. Recently, for example, a new guide for professors of Middle East anthropology was released in an attempt to restore the credibility of a field of study whose reputation has been shattered by years of politicized scholarship. The guide -- titled, "Academic Freedom and Professional Responsibility after 9/11: A Handbook for Scholars and Teachers" and produced by the Taskforce on Middle East Anthropology -- illustrates the effectiveness of critiques of Middle Eastern studies and higher education that have finally put the professoriate on the defensive.

The guide usefully suggests that most classroom conflict can be used for educational purposes. If a student challenges the use of "occupation" by a professor, the professor might discuss with the class why that term may or may not be appropriate, as well as "political claims" associated with alternative terms, such as "disputed territories." The guide advocates turning controversy into teaching, and while it has the air of defensiveness, it is by and large a presentation of fair principles.

Post-September 11, the most intense debates about "academic freedom" have involved Middle Eastern studies, especially the Israeli-

Palestinian conflict. The "right" to teach Israel as original sin and the Israel lobby as a Jewish conspiracy controlling America has been challenged, and, unfortunately, has produced even more virulent rhetoric and overt attacks on Jews. Academia has unconsciously exposed Jews and Israelis as the canaries in the coal mine. If universities are indicators of social trends, then anti-Semitism is becoming more acceptable in the guise of anti-Zionism. Only Jews are unworthy of having a sovereign state, thanks to various sins past and present.

Such attitudes are shockingly common on university campuses, and are protected by "academic freedom." Does calling for the destruction of a state and the dispersal of a people qualify the protections designed by Dewey and Lovejoy? Fortunately, most Americans agree neither with the idea that Israel should be abolished

nor with the blanket protections that currently constitute "academic freedom." The gap between academia and the public is increasing, in part because on moral issues, like defending democracy against jihadi terror and rigorous free speech, the public realizes that universities are on the wrong side.

But until donors and parents start asking questions about how their money is being spent and how their children are being taught, the fight will be restricted to critics seeking to make academia a place where the classroom is once again the center for teaching and learning rather than political theater.

Until a mindset develops where donors ask questions about what is being done with their money, and until it is better appreciated how a few tenured professors have gone beyond the bounds of their academic appointments, little will change.

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