
Akeel BILGRAMI and Jonathan COLE, eds., *Who's Afraid of Academic Freedom?* (New York, Columbia University Press, 2015)

Reading this recent volume edited by two distinguished scholars from Columbia University, one cannot help but think of Max Weber's words pronounced almost one century ago: "The first task of a competent teacher is to teach his students to acknowledge *inconvenient* facts."¹

Are *inconvenient* facts, meaning facts that are disagreeable with regard to the teacher's or the student's own political views, still at home in our contemporary research universities? Despite growing efforts to control the orientation of research (primarily through the funding agencies) or to impose "speech codes" or "balanced views," is it still relevant today for faculty members to consider themselves as bearers of the classical ideal of Academic Freedom [AF]? And, if that is the case, how should we define it from now on?

Sociologists of science have extensively described the consensus among academics on the core values of scientific research, and AF is obviously one of them. They have also showed that if the same academics are asked to define these values, they generally provide highly varied answers. In this respect, this book is no exception to the rule. Written by sociologists, historians, philosophers, legal and juridical scholars or senior university administrators, the 17 essays² gathered by Akeel Bilgrami and Jonathan R. Cole share approximately the same historical genealogy of AF in the United States. A great deal of attention is devoted to the 1915 declaration of principles, written by Arthur Lovejoy and Edwin Seligman, which defined the university as "a place dedicated to the openness of mind" and became the charter of the American Association of University Professors. They also share the same normative will to defend AF against threats from various horizons (ideological, financial, religious, etc.): "the essays presented here are exercises in and for democracy" [xi]. But once the history is

¹ "Science as Vocation" (1918), in Weber M., *The Vocation Lectures*, Hackett Publishing Company, Indianapolis/Cambridge, 2004: 22.

² As mentioned by the editors, some of these essays were presented as lectures (Bilgrami, Chomsky). Others have already been published in a different format (Cole, Bromwich, Scott).

reconstructed and the defense delivered, when it comes to precisely characterizing AF, the situation becomes more complicated.

There is an illusory feeling of self-evidence about AF. A feeling that paradoxically even prevents scholars from spending some of their time defending what they nonetheless view as a core value. But the idea is far more complicated than it seems, with divergent interpretations regarding its nature and its basic conditions of existence and application. Some brief extracts, organized around three basic dichotomies, may help in describing these divergences.

– Abstract/Concrete: AF is “an abstract value—the value of the unfettered search for truth—and it is defined independently of the political circumstances that might attend or frustrate its implementation” (S. Fish, p.283); “academic freedom is not an abstract right, but [...] a conditional right [...] [based on] a constant struggle to establish academic independence in the midst of both economic and political dependency” [J. Butler: 310].

– Personal/Professional: “AF belongs to the larger class of rights enjoyed by citizens of a free society” (D. Bromwich, p.27); AF is the “basic norm of academic practice according to which persons, groups, and institutions constituting the ‘Academy’ may justly expect society to protect them in the exercise of a robust right of self-regulation” [Moody-Adams, p.101].

– Inside/Outside: “Some would argue further that AF should also protect speech unrelated [...] to scholarship, teaching, or academic governance. However, it is far from clear why such speech has value to the academic enterprise and should be protected by principles of academic freedom” [M. Goldstein, F. Schaffer: 255]; “what is missing in those sharp distinctions between outside/inside, power/knowledge, action/thought, politics/truth is, ironically, the idea that one’s sense of responsibility as a citizen could legitimately affect one’s scholarship” [Scott: 77].

Beyond the difficulty of elaborating a unified version of AF, it is also the case that “those who love AF in principle do not always love it in practice” [Shweder: 204]. Making one’s way through the 17 essays, the reader is rapidly convinced that the editors have reached their primary objective: to “exemplify the spirit of controversy that many of the contributors believe universities should protect, indeed encourage” [p.xvii].

It is worth noting that if the contributors do not agree on what AF *is*, there is less dispute about what AF *is not*. They all, for example, clearly oppose AF to “neutrality” or what is also called the

“Marketplace of Ideas” fallacy. The general argument is clearly summed up by A. Bilgrami. For its proponents “the pursuit of truth is best carried out [...] under conditions wherein a variety of opinions are allowed to be expressed on any subject, even if one finds some of them quite false, since it is possible that they might be true and one’s own view might turn out to be false [...] [hence] the advice [they give] [...] about how [scholars] should be balanced in what [they] say in [their] classrooms, showing consideration to all points of view, even those that from [their] point of view [they] confidently know to be wrong” (pp.11-16). To understand the strong political dimension of the argument in America, one has to remember the Bush administration’s education policy and, more specifically, the US President’s contribution to the “intelligent design” controversy. In 2005 George W. Bush told reporters in a group interview at the White House that he thought that intelligent design should be taught alongside evolution as competing theories: “Both sides ought to be properly taught [...] so people can understand what the debate is about [...] Part of education is to expose people to different schools of thought. [...] You’re asking me whether or not people ought to be exposed to different ideas, and the answer is yes.”³

I presume all contributors would agree with the fact that through his call for “balance” or “neutrality” between the theory of evolution and the theory of intelligent design, President Bush was acting at that time simply (and deliberately) as a direct opponent to AF⁴. Science and/or science education is not about balance; it is about evaluating the unequal robustness of competing scientific theories. But against D. Bromwich’s view, it seems a bit too simplistic to discard the “Marketplace of Ideas” fallacy as a simple “misjudged adaptation of common sense” [30]. Its persuasive value should not be underestimated. It is drawn from the strength of contemporary fallibilist epistemology but also from the general appeal of democratic values, namely equality. Despite their references to these values (and one should here remember Cole and Bilgrami’s introductory claim: “exercises in and for democracy”), academics are governed by principles that are not rooted in democratic values but in the authority of the disciplines in which they are trained and accredited. It is not

³ Baker P, Slevin P, “Bush Remarks On ‘Intelligent Design’ Theory Fuel Debate,” Washington Post, August 3, 2005.

⁴ Cole recalls that “political pressure to include ‘creationism’ and theories of ‘intelligent

design’ as alternatives to Darwinian evolution in the secondary school science curriculum has already led to a purging of Darwin’s theory from the science curriculum in at least thirteen states” (45).

infrequent to consider institutional neutrality as a precondition for the exercise of AF⁵, but the scholar's responsibility is to fully exercise his or her right of "non-neutrality"—which is composed of the right to advocate on the basis of one's best expertise and a right to risk offending one's audience. In this regard Moddy-Adams' detailed analysis of these different rights directly echoes Max Weber's views about *inconvenient* facts quoted at the beginning of this review: "Academic non-neutrality is [...] a duty as much as a right; moreover, the virtue of sincerity should make an instructor ready to meet the demands of non-neutrality even if a course must then include some ideas and arguments that a student finds offensive. Those who are prepared to exercise academic freedom in this way must be prepared for unsettling results" [113].

Even if it may be irritating (especially for the non American reader) to see the historical or theoretical discussions of AF at times turned into an exercise of self-celebration⁶, considered as a general contribution to the understanding of the complexity of AF, this volume is a great success. But Bilgrami and Cole have another general objective in mind: "to identify and analyze different groups and tendencies in our society that fear academic freedom and attempt to thwart it" [ix]. And in this matter the situation is more nuanced.

It is generally assumed that the opponents of AF may be distinguished according to their origins and/or locations. By following this principle, the contributors oppose "external" threats to "internal" ones. The former are described as being located *outside* the academic system: government policies, national or local politicians, public media, financial supporters, lobbying groups, religions, etc. The reference to the "Galileo-Inquisition" case on the cover of the book is included to remind us that our freedom of thought is the product of centuries of struggle against those external forces. The internal threats are described as being located *within* the academic system and as profoundly rooted in the behavior of academics or

⁵ I.e. the theoretical impossibility for universities "to endorse candidates, condemn policies, embrace causes, or advocate positions, not integrally related to higher education itself" (Stone: 8).

⁶ For example, "The preeminence of American universities is an established fact. [...] Our universities are the envy of the world, in part because the systems of higher education in many other countries [...] do not allow their faculty and students the extensive freedom of inquiry that is the

hallmark of the American system" (Cole: 41); "The commitment to maintain open, rigorous, intense inquiry in an environment of maximal intellectual freedom is not a simple one. [...] The University of Chicago holds these as its highest values, and we seek to reinforce them at every turn" (Zimmer: 245); "At the City University of New York, the nation's largest public urban university, the commitment to academic freedom is well established and firmly held" (Goldstein and Schaffer: 250).

students: “It is impossible to take certain positions without inviting a torrent of abuse, protest, and ostracism. In this respect, students are often the worst violators” [Stone: 8]; “Some of the most subtle threats come from within the academy itself. For example, an unspoken but widespread aversion to airing topics that are politically sensitive in various fields sometimes limits debates that ought to take place” [Cole: 51]. This external/internal analytical distinction is of course basic and some threats to AF like the “Institutional Review Boards” (IRB)—harshly criticized by Hamburger as a new form of the Inquisition—combine different dimensions. IRB are imposed by government policies but they also consist of faculty, administrators, and at least one community member, “all of whom are to be chosen for their ‘sensitivity to [...] community attitudes’” [Hamburger: 159].

The book contains numerous references to examples of internal and external threats to AF: the recent amendment by US Senator Tom Coburn prohibiting the National Science Foundation from funding political science research that does not promote national interests [xi]; the exclusion from universities of those accused of communist sympathies during the McCarthy era [12]; economics as a strong case of academic dogmatism among scientific disciplines [20]; the Israeli lobbying campaign against Professor Joseph Massad of Columbia University between 2002 and 2004 [42]; the fight against “academic mainstream” by scholars working in women’s history, African American history or postcolonial history [66]; the controversial appointment at Princeton University of Peter Singer to a chair in bioethics in 1999 [97]; the dismissal of Denis Rancourt, Professor of Physics and political activist, from the University of Ottawa [278]; DePaul University’s June 2007 decision to deny tenure to Norman Finkelstein, outspoken critic of Israeli policies towards Palestinians [317, 334], etc. From that general perspective of producing an inventory of the traditional or contemporary threats to AF, Elster’s contribution (“Obscurantism and Academic Freedom”) is particularly flavorsome. His essay in the emerging area of *Bullshitology* focuses on soft and hard obscurantisms (as internal threats to AF) and tries to assess their relative academic weight: “The pathologies of soft and hard obscurantism are not marginal phenomena. [...] In France, the current success of Bruno Latour and Alain Badiou testifies to the dominance of soft obscurantism, in addition to the continuing influence of the slightly less absurd (although more easily imitable) writings of Bourdieu and Foucault. In the United States, some

universities seem to specialize in soft obscurantism. Duke University is (or at least was) an example” [90].

But as brilliant and polemical as it may be, Elster’s chapter is not an in-depth case study of academic obscurantism: “The format is that of a polemical essay, rather than of a fully documented scholarly article” [81]. And obviously, beyond Elster’s individual case, what are missing in this volume (in regard of to its second general objective which is “to identify and analyze different groups and tendencies in our society that fear academic freedom and attempt to thwart it”) are not examples (of which there are many to be found in the 368 pages) but “fully documented” case studies aiming to provide original knowledge on the historical processes and social mechanisms related to AF and its limitations. The majority of the essays adopt a much too illustrative approach of the empirical material. It would have been useful to limit the replication of certain essays (some examples are repeatedly discussed by different authors) and save some space (with a dedicated section) for detailed empirical case studies.

The only contribution that takes such an approach is to be found in the last chapter, a pilot study of faculty views by J.R. Cole, S. Cole and C. Weiss. The Cole brothers were students of Robert K. Merton in the sociology of science in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Their pilot survey provides some interesting early results on Columbia University academics’ views of AF. Based on 14 hypothetical vignettes, faculty members were asked to assess the action taken by the various actors portrayed in the vignette (319 responses for 1,510 full-time faculty members initially contacted by email). The example of vignette 5 follows.

A team of anthropologists and geneticists who hold faculty positions at a major research university are conducting a study of a rare but deadly hereditary disease in Venezuela. There is a high level of the disease in the fishing town and a great deal of family formation within the community. It is a deeply Catholic community. The researchers offer birth control information for those who ask for it but otherwise do not. The efforts of the team have led to the discovery of the gene responsible for the hereditary disease. They receive a grant from the NIH to continue their work, but the local IRB says that they cannot carry out the research unless they have mandatory sessions explaining the heritability of the disease and how birth control methods could reduce its incidence in the community. The researchers refuse and claim that the IRB is being insensitive to the religious beliefs of the community and in refusing to allow them to conduct the research is violating their rights of free inquiry [375].

49% of the faculty members surveyed agree with the researchers that the IRB is interfering with the researchers’ rights as faculty members. However, a significant proportion of faculty members

(37%) disagree with the researchers and support the position of the IRB. Despite P. Hamburger's strong condemnation of the IRB as a new form of the Inquisition, it seems that there is no academic consensus on IRB (il)legitimacy. More alarmingly still, the overall data of the study suggest an "erosion" of the centrality of AF among academic values.

How can we understand the variations in faculty responses to the vignette? In terms of basic political self-identification and attitudes, the authors of the study recognize that they did not find much variance among the Columbia faculty. However other variables may have some influence on scholars' attitudes toward AF.

– *Gender*: "Women tend to be more politically liberal, and in response to the academic freedom vignettes, somewhat more supportive of doing nothing against the action represented in the cases" [360].

– *Age*: "where we did find variations in opinion, faculty members who came of age in the 1960s and 1970s tended to have somewhat more liberal academic freedom views than those who were born later" [361].

– *Disciplinary affiliation*: "members of the faculties of business, engineering and the natural and biological science were more likely (20%) than their colleagues in the other professional schools and in the humanities and social sciences departments to agree that scientists should not talk about political issues in a science class" [362].

– *Status*: "faculty members with tenure scored significantly higher on the academic freedom and free inquiry index than assistant professors without tenure" [364].

Although of limited scope, this final pilot study should be considered as a strong invitation to develop more detailed studies on the changing attitudes toward AF. And, as the "Great American Universities" represented in this book through many distinguished scholars tend to export their cultural and organizational model abroad, why not consider the AF issue for international universities such as New York University Abu Dhabi? Not so long ago (March 2015) Andrew Ross, Professor of Social and Cultural Analysis at New York University was blocked from entering the United Arab Emirates (UAE), particularly since his scholarly work has included research on UAE labor practices. Other cases of pressure have been reported since, with less publicity. The transformation of higher education into an "international market" with emerging hubs in Qatar, Malaysia or the UAE (both Abu Dhabi and Dubai more specifically) create new opportunities but also new challenges for AF. The sociological

RISKS AND VIRTUES OF ACADEMIC FREEDOM

understanding of this international trend that intertwines academic, political, cultural and economic factors requires more than self-celebration from AF's proponents; it requires methodical and open-minded empirical investigation.

M I C H E L D U B O I S