

Book Review: Who's Afraid of Academic Freedom? Edited by Akeel Bilgrami and Jonathan R. Cole

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Seventeen essays from distinguished scholars take on the conceptual issues surrounding the idea of freedom of inquiry and consider a variety of obstacles to such inquiry that they have encountered in their personal and professional experience. Opening a discussion on academic freedom and the place of the academy in society is a timely effort, writes Justine Seran.

Who's Afraid of Academic Freedom? Edited by Akeel Bilgrami and Jonathan R. Cole. Columbia University Press. 2015.

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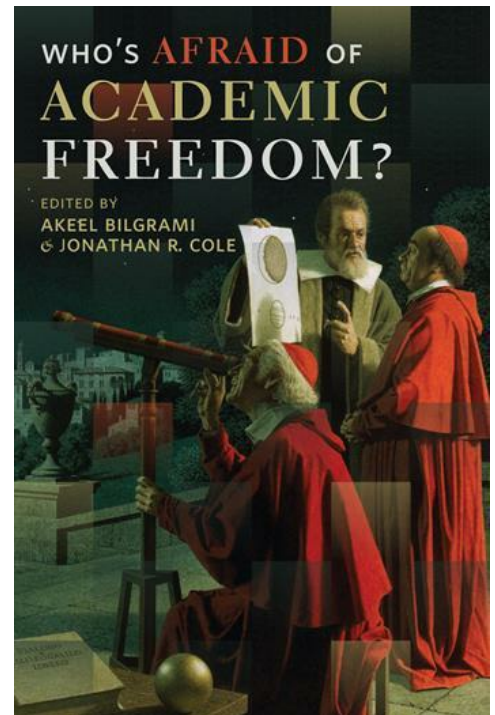
I was recently at a function with fellow academics, and when the discussion veered towards post-PhD employment and I announced my decision to accept to work anywhere in the world, prioritising position over location, a senior member of staff replied that it was all well and good, but that I should always check that my employer guaranteed academic freedom. It led me to wonder: what is this academic freedom that is so central to the Western academy, and how does it depart from controversial notions such as freedom of the press and freedom of speech?

The essays gathered in this collection, which presents itself as a contemporary scholarly look at an often-used but rarely defined term, show that there is no single accepted definition, and that in fact academic freedom is often used as an argument to support conflicting views.

From the onset, the editors state the aim of the book clearly: “to identify and analyze different groups and tendencies in our society that fear academic freedom and attempt to thwart it” (p. ix). Defining freedom as an enabling value that makes truth and excellence possible, they ask whether academic freedom is really specific to the academy, or whether it is akin to general freedom of speech. To that end they refer to Robert Post’s definition of academic freedom as a contract defining the relationship between researchers/lecturers and their employers, as well as the absolute right of the former to evaluate the quality of scholarship. The editors also claim that “the essays presented here are exercises in and for democracy,” which according to them is under attack and must be defended (p. xi).

Geoffrey R. Stone’s opening chapter sketches a brief history of academic freedom, expressing doubt over the presupposed link between a commitment to academic freedom and the putative greatness of U.S. universities. He traces the origins of academic freedom back to Socrates and religious medieval universities. In the U.S. context, Stone notes alternating periods of progress towards secular learning and regression due to fundamentalism through the 18th to 20th centuries (p. 2). Thus, the late 19th-century saw a shift in mentality from cultural preservation to intellectual inquiry, ascribed to Darwinism and the influence of the research-intensive German university system, and brought the scientific community together to weaken clerical control of the academy. In the early 20th century, wealthy industrials funding universities started demanding the dismissal of professors who held dissenting views, and McCarthyism led to increased state control of academics.

According to Stone, future challenges to academic freedom include donors demanding a say in how their funding is



used, the resurgence of religious fundamentalism, lobby groups pressuring universities to take sides as institutions instead of remaining neutral, and students who make faculty uncomfortable by calling them out on perpetuating the structures of oppression and privilege the latter benefit from. Stone's claim that students who are sensitive to social justice issues are trying to curtail academic freedom is particularly outlandish and ignorant of power structures in the higher education sector and prioritises the feelings of those accused of "racism, sexism, anti-Semitism, homophobia, neocolonialism, and terrorism" over the victims of those ideologies (p. 8). He demands the freedom to air oppressive views, but where is the freedom of the students to challenge these views?

Judith Butler's chapter on academic freedom and boycott politics examines the conditions that make academic freedom possible. If academic freedom is the freedom for faculty to express controversial views, then we must remember that underfunding, closure of infrastructure, and imprisonment foreclose the material conditions that make the airing of views possible, and thus that "economic power is a precondition of the exercise of academic freedom" (p. 310). She is especially concerned with "the politics of the academic boycott" of the Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel (PACBI), and concludes that "the academic boycott is [...] a way of objecting to abridgements of academic freedom" by calling for global support for Palestinian scholars (p.296).

It is noteworthy that the new post-2005 Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) campaign is aimed not at individuals but at institutions that do not explicitly oppose occupation, therefore assuming that failure to act is synonymous with complicity. It is not a form of intervention for it does not seek to impact research or teaching, only to call on individuals to pressure their institutions to intervene in state affairs. As a fundamentally anti-normalisation campaign, "BDS is the major nonviolent movement for Palestinian self-determination under conditions of occupation, disenfranchisement, and exile" (p. 308-9). Although this chapter contains many repetitions, they are effective in undermining the arguments used by critics of the boycott.

The overall effect of the book's introduction is marred by a few typographical errors, grammatical and syntactical mistakes, and an inconsistent style in the summary of the essays, but readers should note that I was provided with an uncorrected proof ahead of the official book launch, so I hope these issues are resolved in the final print. I felt very uncomfortable, however, in regards to reiterated elitist concerns about what makes the "great university" great, and repeated mentions of the University of Chicago, which seem to limit the scope of the book to a handful of well-funded private institutions (p.xii, xiv). A subtitle reflecting this narrow scope of enquiry would have been useful to frame the collection, for despite some contributors analysing how the academy responds to international crises, the focus on the U.S. political and economic context limits the interest of this book.

Opening a discussion on academic freedom and the place of the academy in society is a timely effort, however, and as most contributors make it clear, despite the persistence of the "ivory tower" myth, universities are far from impervious to political and economic interests. In order to take a more balanced look at such an important concept, it is to be hoped that similar studies will be conducted in the future to look at academic freedom in centralised or authoritarian regimes, and in countries where higher education is still a public service.

Justine Seran is studying for a PhD with the English Literature department at the University of Edinburgh. Her research falls within the broad remit of Postcolonial Studies with a focus on Aboriginal Australian and Aotearoa/New Zealand Maori literatures. Her doctoral thesis examines the dynamics of intersubjectivity and relationality in a large contemporary corpus of women's writing. Justine's wider interests include education, the social impact of research in the humanities, and literary processes of Indigenous cultural survivance in settler colonial nations. [Read more reviews by Justine.](#)

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