

Academic Freedom: International Warning Signs

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Academic freedom is a core value of higher education everywhere. Without it, quality teaching and research are constrained. Societies depend on free expression in academe to provide a valuable independent voice for social analysis and criticism and to strengthen civil society. Academic freedom is so much a part of the lifeblood of the university that it is today taken for granted. It is time to reinvigorate a debate about academic freedom because it is now under attack. Not since before the end of the Cold War, when freedoms were restored to the universities of the former Soviet bloc, have there been so many threats to academic freedom. We are faced with a mounting crisis that few have noticed and fewer protested.

Just in the past few weeks, Russia has reimposed many of the controls of the Soviet era, ordering academics to report contacts with foreigners and restricting international travel. China has stepped up harassment of non-Chinese researchers, especially those of Chinese ethnicity, as well as imposing further limits on local scholars and researchers. In Egypt, a well-known scholar and social critic is on trial for subversion. Researchers in such Southeast Asian countries as Malaysia and Singapore face routine restrictions on what they can research, publish, and teach. In the United States and other industrialized countries, the problems are more subtle but nonetheless troubling. The increasing corporatization of research funding in universities has placed restrictions on the reporting of results and the use of knowledge. The ownership of courses and other expression on the Internet is also an area of contestation. In short, academic freedom is being tested as the 21st century begins.

Actually, academic freedom is especially important in the knowledge-based society of the 21st century. This is because the universities are a key engine of the knowledge society and are most effective when there is academic freedom. Researchers do their best work in an atmosphere free from constraints. Teaching benefits from a frank exchange of ideas. University-based intellectuals are often influential social analysts, commentators, and at times critics. In modern societies, where so many knowledge workers are centered in universities, academic freedom becomes critically important to the creation of a healthy civil society and the development of intellectual life.

A few definitions and a little bit of history are in order. There are two basic elements of academic freedom.

The most basic was codified in the 19th century by Wilhelm von Humboldt during the reform of the German university. Academic freedom meant the freedom of the professor to teach, do research, and publish without fetters in his field of expertise. This definition of academic freedom was limited to the classroom and the laboratory. It did not extend to the public sphere nor did it give professors the right to speak out on topics outside of their scholarly specialization. Socialists, for example, were prevented from teaching in the German universities of the Wilhelminian era, and this was not considered a violation of academic freedom. The Americans, in the early 20th century, expanded the concept of academic freedom to the public sphere. Professors were protected not only with regard to teaching and research in the classroom and laboratory but also enjoyed the right to speak out on any topic in any forum and to publish their views without any restriction. Gradually, academic freedom came to include both of these concepts.

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However, academic freedom has always been contested terrain. Professors sought, with limited success, to carve out a sphere of academic freedom in the medieval universities, struggling against both church and state from time to time. Galileo's problems notwithstanding, the academic community slowly gained for itself a considerable degree of freedom of teaching within the walls of the universities. When universities became national institutions after the Protestant Reformation, additional struggles for academic freedom ensued. In the modern period, academic freedom has not had an easy time. In Germany, Hitler destroyed academic freedom—and ultimately the universities—during the Nazi period, and did it with the agreement of a large majority of the academic community. Lenin and Stalin similarly eliminated academic freedom from the universities of the Soviet Union. In the United States, academic freedom came under threat during the First World War and again during the anticommunist hysteria of the McCarthy period in the 1950s.

In the aftermath of the Cold War, considerable progress was made and complacency set in. As mentioned earlier, academic freedom was restored in the former Soviet bloc and a half-century of restriction was largely removed. While the universities in Russia and the other countries of the former Soviet Union have faced many problems, academic freedom was to a considerable degree observed. The situation in Central and Eastern Europe was, and remains,

even more favorable. Even China, where restrictions remained and were tightened after the Tiananmen Square demonstrations in 1989, loosened up by the end of the century.

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Thus it may come as a surprise to learn that academic freedom is under attack in many parts of the world. The doors that were opening in the communist and formerly communist world show signs of closing. Most disturbing are the recently announced restrictions in Russia, reflecting the harsher atmosphere of the Putin administration. The restrictions on academic contacts with foreigners and foreign travel are a reimposition of rules from the Soviet era. Whether these actions presage further restrictions is not clear, although if the academic community in Russia and elsewhere accepts them, it is more likely than not that additional curbs will be put into effect. Academic freedom is also weakening and deteriorating in other countries of the former Soviet Union, most notably Ukraine, Belarus, and Kazakhstan. Slow and tentative liberalization of academic life in Cuba may be coming to an end given the recently implemented restrictions on independent libraries. Academic freedom in China is under increased threat as a number of foreign researchers, mostly ethnic Chinese from other countries have been arrested and charged with various crimes, including espionage. It is likely that these arrests are intended to warn Chinese academics and students to limit their foreign contacts, and they serve as an indication of increased government scrutiny of academe.

Africa exhibits several contradictory trends. On the positive side, the end of apartheid in South Africa resulted in the reestablishment of academic freedom in Africa's best developed academic system. Likewise, the end of the repressive Abacha military regime in Nigeria opened the way for a strengthening of academic freedom. On the negative side, government repression of student demonstrations in Ethiopia in the spring of 2001 resulted in many deaths, the jailing of students and professors, and severe restrictions of academic freedom. Even before the recent unrest, a number of professors had been summarily fired by the government. Zimbabwe's impressive tradition of academic freedom has been undermined as the Mugabe regime seeks to retain power and places ever greater restrictions on the universities. In Africa, with a few exceptions, academic freedom seems only as strong as the stability of the particular regime in power.

Limited academic freedom exists in Malaysia and Singapore. These countries exemplify a pattern of restriction that is not unique but not much discussed. The universities are in general of excellent quality and well

supported by government. In many fields, teaching and research face few if any restrictions. However, in areas considered sensitive by government authorities, academic freedom is severely curtailed, especially in the social sciences. Subjects such as ethnic relations, poverty, social inequality, and religion are considered to be controversial and both research and teaching in these areas must conform to the government's views. Academics who work on these subjects must in some cases obtain approval to publish their work and may be sanctioned if they speak or write from a critical perspective. Academics know that they are accountable for what they write, but are never completely aware of what is permitted or not permitted. Self-censorship is very much on the minds of social scientists and some others.

In the United States and other major industrialized nations, threats to academic freedom are much more subtle. There are few overt restrictions on teaching, research, or public expression. However, new patterns of communication, mainly through the Internet, and current research funding arrangements raise questions relevant to academic freedom. Who owns knowledge, including lectures and course materials, when the Internet is the means of communication? Does the professor control what is said in the classroom when the classroom may be the World Wide Web? Should the university "own" the intellectual content of a course and control its delivery? Such issues, largely moot in the traditional classroom, are looming large in distance education.

Research has become problematic as well. The established norm that research results stemming from university-based work should be available to the scientific community and subject to peer review is increasingly violated when university research is sponsored by corporations that insist on controlling results that may yield profits. The implications for academic freedom of these new patterns of university work are both unclear and controversial. In general, academic freedom is being whittled away by the pressures of the marketplace and technology in a rapidly changing environment.

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The time has come to pay careful attention to academic freedom in order to ensure that one of the most central values of the university is not diminished. The external pressures are great—from governments seeking to stifle dissent and suppress potentially embarrassing research and from the increasingly powerful forces of the market. The academic community has been slow to realize the nature of the crisis and to respond to it. ■