

GAME CHANGER

113 - Academic, Civic And Activist Freedom: Practices, Provocations, Problematisations

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Academic freedom has long been seen as an ethical principle and aspirational value. In Europe, academic freedom as concept and practice which entails institutional and individual dimensions goes back to 1088 and the establishment of the University of Bologna, Italy. In the 19th century articulations of academic freedom of teaching and learning were exemplified by Humboldt University in Germany. In the 20th century academic freedom is considered to be the intellectual freedom to debate, teach and research without fear of censorship or retaliation. Academic freedom is seen as a disinterested pursuit of intellectual inquiry, wherever it may lead, for its own ends. It is allied with critical inquiry, free from political restraint, and seen as essential to democracy. Most universities have founding charters which encode an institutional commitment to academic freedom. However, current political contexts in the USA, Europe and Afghanistan demonstrate quite viscerally that academic freedom is enmeshed within political regimes that circumscribe its operations. At the same time, there are different articulations of academic freedom. There is the 'ideal type' which sees academic freedom as freedom from restraint by state or convention and as a mode of telling truth to power. There is a feminist perspective on academic freedom, which critiques the dominant notions of academic freedom as being geared to White, masculinist modes of what/who an 'academic' is, underpinned by assumptions of rationality and autonomy. There are post-colonialist and anti-racist framings of academic freedom. And there is a populist 'woke' version of academic freedom which gathers an activism around certain issues and seeks to circumscribe what other groups can and cannot protest.

This game changer intends to explore these contested political relations that interrupt and energise our in and outside the academy. It offers an opportunity to engage with questions such as:

- What does academic freedom mean to you personally?
- How does your institution support or affect the critical work of academic freedom that you want to do?
- Does education leave enough room for diversity of views, approaches and (respectful) discussion?
- How can we build alliances across difference to support academic freedom, particularly when statutory freedoms are incommensurable?
- In what ways can we push back against the 'knowledge workers for sale' ideology of global knowledge production.
- How has the interpretation of academic freedom evolved in our recent history? Are universities in need of a (re)positioning?
- Are there legitimate limits to academic freedom and, if so, which ones?
- Does the vehemence of public reactions to theses by scientists (e.g. on social media) pose a risk to academic freedom?
- Is there a growing risk of a 'cancel culture' and what does that mean for academic freedom? How do we deal with militant students who stand up for their 'own right', or with academics and administrators who may be afraid of reactions from the outside world?

Keywords: Academic freedom, universities, civil society, debate, difference