

Reflections on Academic Freedom from Wendy Brown, Political Science, UC Berkeley

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It is a pleasure to offer brief reflections on Joan Scott's *Knowledge, Power and Academic Freedom*. In this work, Joan on the one hand distinguishes academic freedom from free speech, marketplaces of ideas, and anything-goes scholarly irresponsibility, and on the other hand articulates the vital connections between academic freedom and shared governance, and between rightwing anti-intellectualism and attacks on academic freedom. She is also willing to consider the Left's foibles alongside the Right's aggressions in eroding the integrity of academic freedom and undermining the critical intellectual spirit that she insists must animate university life.

Most importantly, in what is really her signature move across much of her scholarship and thinking, Joan reveals the relationship between our lost histories and our contemporary political disorientations. For example, she reveals how the common contemporary conflation of academic freedom with free speech itself rests in the eroded public mission for higher education and research. Since academic freedom was born to protect this mission, to liberate universities from church and state so that it might serve the public good, academic freedom was not coined as an "individual right" and should not be treated this way today.

Here, Joan notes that the university is not and cannot be a democratic institution (where all share power equally) and that the academic freedom born to protect unfettered intellectual inquiry in research and the classroom is neither a democratic nor a liberal principle (as free speech is). Rather, we might cast it as a kind of republican principle of self-governance: it secures the right of a professoriat, anointed by its peers through disciplinary societies, to think, publish and teach without constraint or incursion by either the university administration or state and to do so in service to knowledge uncorrupted by concentrated economic, religious or political powers. Academic freedom exists to protect and itself expresses the little *res-publica* (public thing) that is the university, and, Joan says, is a kind of "covenant with the public."

Appreciating this origin and purpose of academic freedom renders contemporary invocations of academic freedom as an individual right a kind of symptom or index of privatization, a measure of the erosion of the university's public mission and ethos. For Scott, this also means that, recovered as an "ethic," academic freedom deployed in its original meaning could help counter at least the spirit if not the fact of privatization, to reassert intellectual autonomy and knowledge serving public rather than private interests. As Joan puts it, "the future of the common good and of academic freedom are bound up together."

But here's my question: If the public mission of higher education is itself the bedrock and *raison d'être* of academic freedom, if academic freedom both depends upon and secures an academy autonomous from outside influence and governed by its own faculty, if it promotes the public good through uncorrupted inquiry and investigation, how could it be practiced when these conditions are in tatters? When the "outside" (politics, donors, neoliberal governance) does not merely exert pressure on the university but has come inside--remaking missions, programs, research and the very subjectivity of faculty and students? When this occurs through donor-funded-and-serving institutes, research projects and faculty lines; through the discursive

transformation of universities from public goods to venues for capital enhancement of individual faculty and students; and through a form of political reason that reduces all freedom to private rights on the one hand, and politicizes and instrumentalizes all knowledge on the other? In this context, how exactly can Joan's version of academic freedom be asserted or protected?

Joan's own answer is that we ought to understand and practice academic freedom as an ethic and an ideal rather than a right. But ethics, too, require conditions to thrive and reproduce—they require cultivation and support, and are available to being twisted or inverted in purpose. Ideals only have meaning in context, and inevitably change their meaning over time. Ethics and ideals do not endure apart from or against the conditions animating them and giving them meaning.

So how exactly does an ethic of academic freedom work absent the publically supported secular monastery in which it can thrive and bear fruit?

There is one other point that I want to develop from Joan's book, which is the passing reference she makes to the relationship between academic freedom and academic responsibility. It is a tired cliché that with freedom comes responsibility, one uttered by every parent as they release young teenagers into the world. This cliché is, however, an essential dimension of the republican inflection Joan has given to academic freedom, where we are not licensed to do as we want, but freed to govern ourselves, the curriculum, the classroom.

My fear is that today—as academic freedom is reduced to an individualized right, symptomatically conflated with free speech, and interpreted through the libertarian version of freedom that neoliberalism has made ubiquitous—this equation has been broken, especially in the classroom. It is telling that reactionaries and conservatives today demand not neutrality in the classroom but political “balance” on the faculty and in the curriculum. They clamor for redressing the “liberal bias” of higher education by forcing the appointment of more rightwing faculty and indulging more rightwing voices. This is not a call for responsible teaching and scholarship but for an equal number of classrooms hammered by one political persuasion or another. And it is a nightmare for the version of critical thinking with which Joan associates the purpose of the university—the deep, reflective and reflexive milieu she insists is the proper one for university spaces.

If we are to be entrusted with academic freedom, what exactly is our obligation, our responsibility as teachers? Not our responsibility to inclusion, diversity, triggers, learning differences and all the other things with which the university is preoccupied today but to something we still might call epistemological and political “neutrality” even if we put scare quotes around the term? What is our responsibility to teaching without imposing our own politics, especially in the human sciences? To opening up ideas, methods, literary works, sociology, politics and history while leaving students to draw their own conclusions? And how much has the inclusion, diversity, and learning differences preoccupation combined with intense rightwing attacks on our work and the very purposes of the university kept us from the hard thinking we need to do here?

Max Weber famously insisted that faculty must strive to withhold all personal views from the classroom, and that even in studying values, our task is to draw out and help students reflect on their implications, never to promulgate them. Weber is often taken as basing this argument entirely on his infamous fact/value distinction. But I think something else was more important for him, namely that only through aiming to withhold our own views could we be responsible with our power at the podium *and* incite critical thinking. Of course, Nietzsche and many others have challenged Weber's formulation of facticity and social science with appreciation of the inherently perspectival, interpretative and discursive dimensions of knowledge. We've challenged the conceit that knowledge can ever be free of imbrication with power or the will to power, or that we can ever remove ourselves from its production, interpretation and dissemination. Still, this doesn't mean jettisoning Weber's ethic altogether. If we cannot teach objectively, if all facts are interpreted, if knowledge is never distinct from power, how might we nevertheless treat our responsibility to students as resting in the ceaseless opening of thought? How might we redouble our efforts to withhold our own conclusions, avoid grinding our own axes, or rehearsing our own agonies and antipathies in the classroom? Working hard at this, and insisting on it as a principle, might help us rebuild, against the historical tide, the spirit of the public mission of the university, one worthy of the academic freedom we cherish.