

Academic Freedom: Has the ship already sailed?

Hank Reichman's book impressed me. It is on one hand deeply practical: it demystified the various stories and anecdotes that have been swirling in the press and on social media. In the process, it provided me a powerful framework to understand the recent tension-points around academic freedom that have erupted on campuses throughout the United States. On the other hand, it went deeper and demonstrated how some of the largest threats to academic freedom are more subtle and don't show up in the news. Here I am thinking of issues such as the defunding of public higher education, the explosive growth in administrative control, etc. In fact, my biggest complaint concerning this book is that Reichman didn't write it sooner! I wish I had been given this book to read while I was a graduate student, as it would have better prepared me for the academic world I was entering into.

With that said, I would like to begin my comments with a bit of a provocation.

The title of Reichman's well written, important book is *The Future of Academic Freedom*. However, the question that gnawed on me as I read this text was: *has the ship already sailed?*

At the core of Reichman's excellent text is a deep concern for the larger crisis facing institutions of higher education in the United States today. The threats to academic freedom, he argues, "...are central to the present crisis in higher education" (Reichman, 2019, p. xv). Before he gets there, however, he points to the deeply rooted bridge between the institution of tenure and the possibility of academic freedom. In fact, he writes that tenure is a *derivative* of academic freedom. In his words: "...tenure...derives from the need to protect academic freedom..." (Reichman, 2019, p. xiv).

Reichman also identifies, and I think rightly so, that faculty are central to higher education, but that in our current moment, "...the central role of faculty is more precarious than ever" (Reichman, 2019, p. xv). In his formulation, the precarious position of faculty is central to the challenges facing higher education more broadly and to academic freedom specifically. To illustrate this point, one of his arguments hits close to home for us here at UC Berkeley:

"...recent controversies over outside speakers on campus have been exaggerated and pose less of a challenge to academic freedom than do more ominous developments like the decades-long expansion of contingent faculty employment..." (Reichman, 2019, p. xvi).

On one hand, this likely brings many of us comfort: the spectacles on Sproul are not only frustrating but they are, in fact, not that important either. On the other, however, lies a more serious problem – the expansion of contingent faculty employment. With this problem in mind, Reichman has a clear and decisive solution: "...if higher education is to adapt and survive, the

faculty and its allies must retake center stage in defense of academic freedom and shared governance” (Reichman, 2019, p. xv).

This is complicated for me. I am one of the many contingent faculty members on this campus. I have been teaching here for nearly 9 years. However, as a contingent faculty member, I have never been a part of shared governance – not even remotely – nor have I ever enjoyed the protection of my academic freedom which the tenure-system was created to protect.

With this in mind, I want to return to my starting provocation: *has the ship already sailed?*

Given that, for example, nationally, according to the American Association of University Professors, 73% of all faculty positions are off of the tenure track (American Association of University Professors (AAUP), 2018). Moreover, while here at UC Berkeley the tenure-track faculty numbers are stronger, and as of last October there are 912 lecturers and 1515 ladder rank faculty on campus (University of California Office of the President (UCOP), 2019), nearly 50% of Student Credit Hours are taught by Lecturers (Burawoy & Johnson-Hanks, 2018). It seems to me that the institution of academic freedom is far less widespread than we might imagine, and there are actually very few remaining who hold this privilege.

The days of tenure-track protections on academic freedom are long gone for the vast majority of faculty. Shared governance is admittedly more complicated – at Reichman’s most recent institution, Lecturers have a place – though a relatively small one - in the Academic Senate where they help to govern the institution. Faculty at CSU East Bay are also organized as a union to protect their rights as employees. Here at UC Berkeley, we have a firm two-tier system: currently, Lecturers are very clearly not welcome in the Academic Senate (nor, I might add, in the Berkeley Faculty Association). We, too, have chosen to unionize to protect our rights. However even this protection is under threat, as unions across the country are more precarious than ever following last year’s *Janus* Supreme Court decision.

Now, sure, here at Berkeley the tenure-track faculty that make up the Academic Senate are still in charge of the curriculum – but we Lecturers are teaching 50% of those classes that they are in charge of. This means that we Lecturers have little to no say in the management of the curricula that we teach. I would argue, therefore, that at least from a teaching perspective, 50% of the faculty-led pedagogy on this campus is not happening under the auspices of academic freedom. Certainly, the same goes for the vast amount research carried out by Lecturers as well...

With this context in mind - what can we really say about the current state of academic freedom in higher education in the United States, or here at UC Berkeley? Is it even a thing? Moreover, what might be a reasonable path forward be, given this context?

As someone who teaches contemporary political economy, I find it useful to approach this last question through the lens of 20th and 21st century political economic theory.

The days of faculty-led control over institutions of higher education – those were the Keynesian days of higher education. The university was an institution managed by a set of elites – primarily tenured faculty – and this management, as Chris Newfield documents, was based on a common set of social and political principles (Newfield, 2011). In this formulation, there was a tension: on the one hand, the institution was motivated by a set of egalitarian goals that, as Wendy Brown has argued, were focused on democratizing knowledge and developing a citizenry educated for democracy (Brown, 2015, p. 185). Yet on the other hand, these egalitarian goals were to be safeguarded and overseen by a small number of tenured elites.

Today, with professional administrators governing our universities, we live in the era of what Henry Giroux calls the Neoliberal University (Giroux, 2014). One in which, as Brown's work excellently demonstrates, the governing rationality is an economic one, and private market-values dominate (Brown, 2015).

So, when I ask the question – *what might be a reasonable path forward given the context that we live in today* – I wonder: Do we aspire to return to the Keynesian days of old where academic elites led the masses? Is that even possible, let alone desirable? Or was that itself a failed project, one that led us to the neoliberal dystopia where economically-minded administrators are the new elites? Or might there be an altogether more radically democratic and egalitarian vision of the university that we might aspire to?

References

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