

Academic Freedom and Society:
Intellectual Critique or Violent Revolution?
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Abstract

Authoritarians restrict academic freedom as if the choice were between dissent and obedience. Such attempts can be momentarily effective in curtailing opposition, but as the deputy chairman of the national Black Panther Party, Fred Hampton, explained prior to his assassination, "You can kill a revolutionary, but you can never kill the revolution." Limiting academic freedom is folly if the choice is not between dissent and obedience but between intellectual critique of illiberal regimes of power and violent revolution. The role of academic freedom in society extends beyond the confines of higher education to the core of democracy and social justice. Reactionary responses against academic freedom are on the rise. Academics need to speak out now, peacefully and with informed reason, while they can, as failure to safeguard academic freedom will likely bring the silence of subjugation, informed resistance, and violent revolution.

Society is plagued by logical fallacies. These glitches in human cognition produce quirks that pass without much notice. Occasionally, logical fallacies contribute to situations of social peril. False dichotomy, which limits a decision to two options (Hurley 2011), can fall into the latter category of fallacies. Authoritarian responses to academic freedom frequently present a choice between patriotism and subversion (Scott 2022). This is not a new tactic. As Adlai Stevenson (1952, 4) explained, "To strike freedom of the mind with the fist of patriotism is an old and ugly subtlety." Beneath the veneer of patriotism and subversion resides the operative dichotomy between dissent and obedience. Regarding academic freedom, the choice is between neither patriotism and subversion nor dissent and obedience. If one were forced to reduce academic freedom to a choice between two alternatives, it would be more advantageous to consider it a choice between intellectual critique and violent revolution. As President John F. Kennedy (1962, para. 28) said in a speech prior to his assassination, "Those who make peaceful revolution impossible will make violent revolution inevitable."

Whereas no single definition exists, academic freedom can be understood as "the principle that scholars, researchers, and educators can engage in teaching and scholarship without the fear of censorship or retribution" (De Witte 2023, para. 1). It is useful to distinguish between academic freedom and free speech. Academic freedom is about pursuing *truth*, "even if the truth is

unpopular” (Reed 2023, para. 3). Free speech is the right to articulate an opinion; academic freedom includes the obligation to present an informed perspective (Bérubé and Ruth 2022). The relevance of academic freedom goes beyond the confines of higher education to the broader concerns of a democratic society (Cole 2017) and social justice (Metz 2010). Consequently, employment in the academy entails an obligation to pursue the types of engagements associated with academic freedom.

Academic freedom is not a luxury reserved for elites but an obligation for informed action. The situating of academic freedom is contingent and consequential. “To situate academic freedom in the institutional milieu of a free society is not arbitrary. It is instead a recognition of the contingency of academic freedom, much as any variant of national democracy is also historically contingent” (Dreiling and García-Caro 2022, 7). Academics hold a unique position in society. “Intellectuals are in a position to expose the lies of governments, to analyze actions according to their causes and motives and often hidden intentions. . . . they have the power that comes from political liberty, from access to information and freedom of expression,” and “it is the responsibility of intellectuals to speak the truth and expose lies” (Chomsky 2017, 16–17). Academics have access to information, research skills, a capacity for critical reasoning, and a perspective from which to assess society. Academic freedom is the right to combine these attributes and manifest their potential through active, critical engagement. Because the action afforded under academic freedom is so often critical, it tends to be unwelcome to those in power (Giroux 2006; Tierney and Lechuga 2005).

Threats and attacks on forms of informed speech, including academic freedom and the press, have increased in the United States (Barberá 2020; Waisbord 2020). According to the Academic Freedom Index (AFI), “Threats to academic freedom also arise in liberal democracies, however, as the data for two academic powerhouses illustrated: The United States of America and the United Kingdom are among countries for which the AFI reports significant declines” (Kinzelbach et al. 2023, 4). This is political, as the views expressed toward higher education in Republican Party platforms since 1948 have become increasingly negative and focused on concerns of ideology (Jackson and Heath 2023). Further manifestations of political engagement in education curriculum and concerns with academic freedom have shown up regarding race (Martin 2022; Wood 2022) and policy (Johnson 2023). Collectively, this illustrates that a concern for academic freedom is a political concern.

Propaganda is linked with governments (Hopkins 2015; Sussman 2021), political parties (Bradshaw and Howard 2018; Miller and Robinson 2019), and corporations (Mullen and Klaehn 2010; Smith, Lasswell, and Casey 1946). An established definition of propaganda is that it is the “consistent, enduring effort to create or shape events to influence the relations of the public to an enterprise, idea or group” (Bernays 2005, 52). Regarding the government’s use of propaganda, “a government cannot have power if it does not have the support of the public. To gain the support of the public, propaganda is used to promote the government and the ideas behind it” (Vidal n.d.,

para. 19). Within this context, the hazard of academic freedom to authoritarians is most obvious. Any attempt to galvanize support around generalities like *capitalism*, *duty*, *individualism*, *patriotism*, or *tradition* cannot hold up against critique. Each, in turn, is revealed as an act of propaganda. Academic freedom is an existential threat to those whose only claim to power is authority. The use of propaganda can be understood as an act of repression. As such, it is beneficial to explore psychological responses to this constraint.

A number of factors influence whether one acquiesces or dissents when academic freedom is challenged. One consideration is the role of power and status. Individuals with greater standing are generally more comfortable expressing dissent because they are more secure in their position. The influence of power on the probability of dissent has been demonstrated by differences in sex, race, and tenure. Nicole Rangel (2020, 365) described academic freedom as “a stratified freedom drawn across academic-rank lines, reflecting the racial and gender hierarchies of [the] larger society.” How one experiences academic freedom is influenced by one’s position and tenure status. If, as Rangel (2020, 365) suggested, “the culture of the academy encourages conformity rather than ethical risk-taking,” only faculty with power and status can dissent. Pre-tenure and non-tenure-track faculty tend to have less power, influence, and institutional collateral and, therefore, are less likely to dissent. These individuals have greater risk and may fear retribution. Instead, academic freedom is enjoyed primarily by a “dwindling fraction of its intellectual laborers: tenured professors” (Rangel 2020, 371). Therefore, increasing the number of nontenured faculty at four-year institutions might reduce radical thought and dissent.

Tenure status overlaps with two other markers of social power: race and gender. Non-tenure-track faculty are more likely to be women and people of color, further exacerbating higher education institutions’ social stratification (Olsen, Maple, and Stage 1995). Faculty of color, particularly women of color, tend to report the most obstacles in exercising their intellectual freedom, including pressure to conform (Rangel 2020). These factors lead to greater self-censorship among female and minority faculty members, which may be in part “a manifestation of values that are rooted within social norms and beliefs about the prescriptive and proscriptive behaviors ascribed to different genders” (Adamska et al. 2022, 570) and racial groups throughout history. In line with this, research suggests that regardless of academic rank, white males felt the highest levels of academic freedom (Rangel 2020). This suggests that the more power characteristics one possesses, the more likely one is to resist when academic freedom is denied. This makes it imperative that those who *can* exercise academic freedom *do so*.

In addition to power, individual personality differences also influence the probability that an academic might dissent in the face of authoritarian threats on academic freedom. Specifically, research suggests that individuals high in conscientiousness and openness to experience—two of the Big Five personality traits (the others being extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism)—are most likely to dissent (Packer 2010). Openness is necessary for forming alternate opinions, but

these opinions are unlikely to be expressed without the influence of conscientiousness “to motivate the articulation of deviant perspectives once they have been formed” (Packer 2010, 202).

These traits can be considered in terms of political ideology. It is established that individuals high in openness to experience are more likely to report a liberal ideology, while individuals high in conscientiousness are more likely to report conservative political attitudes (Carney et al. 2008). The conscientiousness captured in these studies emphasized the common conservative motivation to avoid change, making dissent less likely. Dana Carney, in summarizing the work of John Jost et al. (2003), defined political conservatism as “an ideological belief system that consists of two core components, resistance to change and opposition to equality, which serve to reduce uncertainty and threat” (Carney et al. 2008, 817). However, because the relationship between conscientiousness and academic achievement is established (Conrad and Patry 2012; Ibrahim et al. 2014), it is reasonable to assume that faculty who reach the highest levels of academic achievement are highly conscientious regardless of political ideology.

Considering academic freedom, this suggests that faculty with a more liberal ideology might be more likely to dissent, as they are most likely to be high in openness and conscientiousness. Conversely, faculty with a more conservative ideology tend to be motivated to maintain the status quo, providing stability, reassurance, and structure (Jost et al. 2003). Without the security of power, the ingenuity of openness, and the motivational drive of conscientiousness, academy members are unlikely to benefit from academic freedom and therefore unlikely to dissent. Because the number of individuals with institutional and social power is dwindling, the obligation to dissent falls on an increasingly small number of individuals to respond, and potentially to revolt, if academic freedom is restricted.

The perspective developed here is neither a threat nor a call to violence but an exploration of the situation. Violence is not the answer. Just two months before his own assassination, presidential candidate Robert F. Kennedy (1968, para. 3) asked the day after the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., “What has violence ever accomplished? What has it ever created? No martyr’s cause has ever been stilled by his assassin’s bullet.” Society correctly eschews violence. However, restraint in the face of authoritarianism is no justification for passive resignation. The assessment provided here is a warning of a foreseeable, tragic, social consequence of foolish attempts by authoritarians to limit informed critiques of society and academic freedom. This is a call for increased focus, engagement, and resistance. One might silence a speaker; the message will endure. As deputy chairman of the national Black Panther Party, Fred Hampton explained prior to his assassination, “You can kill a revolutionary, but you can never kill the revolution” (Thompson 2022, para. 51). Academic freedom will inform civil discourse when sanctioned and foment resistance when unauthorized.

Academic freedom does not ensure that what is said is *right*; it safeguards the ability of informed individuals to point out what is perceived as wrong. Academic freedom allows one to bring light to concerns and engage in debate with those with whom one disagrees. This is a vital

social function. Academic freedom must agitate against the status quo for it to be relevant. Those in power will use propaganda. Authoritarians silence academic freedom on a path toward further abuses (Giroux 2006; Grove 2023; Nahon-Serfaty 2023). Attacking academic freedom is a *means*, not an *end*. A society without academic freedom is a totalitarian regime based on propaganda. Authoritarians may extend their control in the *short term*. They do so by increasing the long-term probability of a violent revolution.

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