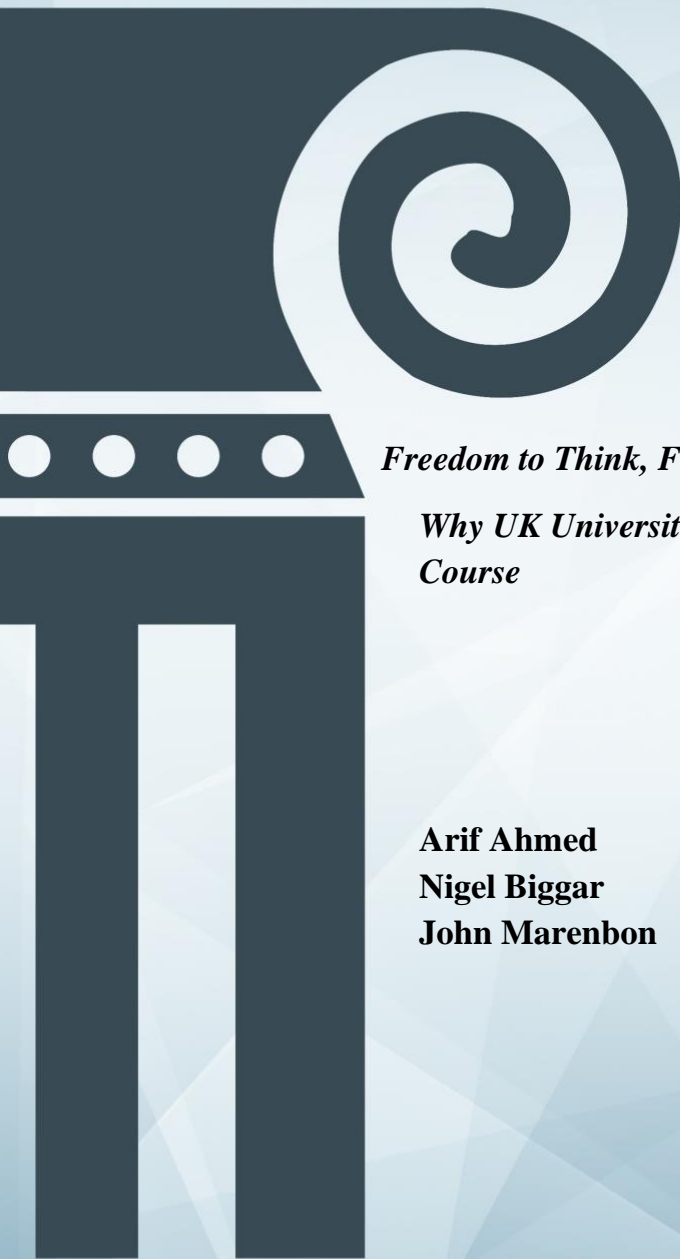


POLITEIA



Freedom to Think, Freedom to Speak

*Why UK Universities must Change
Course*

Arif Ahmed

Nigel Biggar

John Marenbon

A FORUM FOR SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC THINKING



POLITEIA

A Forum for Social and Economic Thinking

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Introduction The Enemy Within

Sheila Lawlor

This month the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Bill though altered passed its Third Reading in the House of Lords. Clause 4 in particular, which allows individuals to bring legal proceedings against an institution or students' union if it breaches the duty to protect free speech and academic freedom, was the victim of group think.

Time and again critics in both Houses of Parliament seemed determined on watering down a very modest measure, so as to keep things as they are. They included Labour and Lib Dem politicians, those defending the interest groups who run our institutions, those speaking for the status quo and its established orders, and those making common cause with the students' unions. They claimed the measure was unnecessary; that it would pose difficulties for the institutions; that the new statutory tort provision would lead to increased litigation that the universities would be obliged to defend, that it would cost money; and, as if to hoist the government with its own petard, that it would give more power over individual institutions to government bodies – the OFS (Office for Students) and the new adjudicator (the OFS Director).

The Bill, though not as strong a measure as it might be, gives the small some protection against the big bureaucracies of higher education. The government should be credited for making a stand against the totalitarianism that threatens not merely free speech, but free thought.

In the pages that follow, three academics consider the problem: academics' freedom to teach their subjects, to engage in research and scholarship, to speak, lecture and think freely, is often inhibited. Individuals can be penalised for holding legitimate views, obliged to self-censor, hounded into 'approved' teaching or speaking, or kept off short lists for jobs and promotion. Though the bill is welcome, the authors suggest that in the first place the institutions should themselves change course. Reform will involve the clear steps set out here to change governance, heart and culture. What emerges from these pages is a picture of a dangerous enemy within, which if unchecked will destroy the universities.

In this battle, political leadership matters, both in the universities and in the country. Although the Higher Education (free speech) bill may seem small beer in a bigger battle to uphold our freedoms under law, it gives those who fight for academic

freedoms, a tool, albeit more blunt than initially intended, to take on the ideologically driven authorities and others within some of Britain's universities

Sheila Lawlor,
Research Director, Politeia

I

Academic Corporatism

A More Pervasive form of Tyranny

Arif Ahmed

Freedom in British universities is currently at a low ebb, possibly lower than at the previous nadir in 1687. That was when James II tried to expel those Fellows of Magdalen College, Oxford who had resisted his choice for their President. The attempt failed. It was one of several disasters that together fatally undermined that monarch.

Things are not worse today because there is more direct interference from the state. In the absence of state interference, you might expect an institutional commitment to the unfettered pursuit of truth. After all, this *is* what we have seen, more or less, at some US institutions, like the [University of Chicago](#).

Instead dirigisme from the centre has given way to more localized, and in some ways more pervasive, forms of tyranny.

Recently these have taken three dominant forms. They are: direct intimidation and cancellation of speakers and academics; universities taking a corporate position on contentious issues; and micro-management of speech, typically via harassment and discrimination policies.

Intimidation and cancellation of speakers

The first form is well known. Many readers will have heard about the Philosophy professor Kathleen Stock, who was subject to violent intimidation and harassment for years following her interventions on the Gender Recognition Act. In 2021 police advised her to avoid her own place of work, to employ a bodyguard if she did venture onto campus and to install CCTV outside her home. Shortly before she [left Sussex](#), protestors had distributed posters and stickers across her workplace demanding that she be fired. Several of them, their faces concealed with balaclavas, also let off flares on the Sussex campus.

If a lecturer or student had suffered such treatment for their *race*, it would have been a matter of national outrage, and any employer, particularly a public body, would (you'd expect) have stamped it out in about twenty minutes. Kathleen Stock suffered victimization for holding and legally stating the *beliefs* of a gender-critical feminist. Although these beliefs, like race, constitute a [legally protected](#) characteristic, her employer seems to have permitted the harassment to continue, and to escalate, for three years.

Stock's case is not unique. More than 500 students [petitioned](#) Oxford to force two Professors to include trans women in their research into women's equality, so as not to create a 'hostile and exclusionary atmosphere'. One of them, Selina Todd, had to be accompanied to lectures by [security guards](#) because of credible threats to her physical safety.

In December 2019 Prof. Jo Phoenix was due to speak at Essex University on trans rights and the prison system. (Phoenix is Chair of criminology at the Open University.) There followed protests and death threats at Essex, including the circulation of a flyer depicting a gun, labelled 'Shut the f- up, TERF'. Essex cancelled the talk. An eighteen-month independent inquiry by a barrister [concluded](#) that in that case Essex had failed to uphold free speech.

Steven Greer, a world-renowned human rights scholar, had in 2020 been teaching at Bristol for about 15 years. Because he criticized Sharia Law, Bristol Islamic Society complained. In [a petition](#) it wrote that Bristol should not permit a Professor to mention the Charlie Hebdo massacre in connection with Islam's stance on free speech.

Bristol conducted an eight-month inquiry. Greer was cleared of all charges. But he was subject to a social media campaign that made him fear for his life (as he may still). Further, the University [restructured Greer's course](#) so as to make it 'respectful' of student 'sensitivities'.

Cases of this form seem to arise from the joint activity, or inactivity, of two separate groups.

First there are the activists, typically but not always a minority of students. The activists attempt to shut down the legal and legitimate intellectual activities of academics. Sometimes they do this by directly intimidating the academic. This seems to have happened in Stock's case. Other times they do it by petitioning the university authorities to do the same. That is what seems to have happened to Greer.

Second, there are the university authorities. Instead of supporting the academic activities of their employees, these authorities too often cave in. For instance, instead of defending Joe Phoenix's right to speak, the sociology department at Essex cancelled the speaker's invitation. Later it decided not to reschedule her talk and to blacklist her from any future invitation.

Similarly, Bristol University seems to have failed to defend Greer as it should. Greer has [written](#): 'To suggest that it was necessary to restructure the degree unit at the heart of [these] baseless allegations, in order to be "respectful to the sensitivities of students on the course", is totally at variance with the result of the official inquiry and review. It is also grossly defamatory... The modification of the syllabus... also calls the University's commitment to academic freedom into question.'

Failures of institutional neutrality

Freedom of speech includes the freedom to adopt, and defend, any position you like on the controversial moral and political questions of the day. Within universities, this is what you would expect from *individual* students and academics. It should not be for the institutions themselves to take a stance. But *it is* what they have been doing.

One form that institutional non-neutrality takes is through officially sanctioned 'training' for students and/or staff. It was reported earlier this year that St Andrew's [insists](#) on students' passing a 'diversity' module to matriculate. Questions include: 'Acknowledging your personal guilt is a useful starting point in overcoming unconscious bias. Do you agree or disagree?' The only permitted answer is 'agree'.

My own university, Cambridge, wanted academic staff to undergo ‘race awareness’ training. This advises you to ‘assume racism is everywhere’ and that ‘this is not a space for intellectualizing the topic.’

It isn’t just Cambridge and St Andrews. There is anti-racism or ‘unconscious bias’ training being recommended to, possibly thrust upon, staff and/or students at [Aberdeen](#), [Edinburgh](#), [Goldsmiths](#), [KCL](#), [Liverpool](#), [Oxford Medical School](#), [Sheffield](#), [Solent](#), [Sussex](#) and many other institutions across the country.

A second form of institutional non-neutrality is through the highly selective use of official ‘statements’. Many universities routinely describe themselves as *anti-racist institutions*, where this means: actively campaigning for a political end. For instance Sussex [says](#): ‘[a]s an institution we must actively play our part in dismantling the systems and structures that lead to racial inequality, disadvantage and under-representation.’ Bristol [expects](#) all its members to ‘stand up’ to racism ‘wherever it occurs’.

But ‘official’ statements are selective. Racism is bad, but so is much else. In summer 2020 you could hardly move for universities loudly asserting ‘solidarity’ with victims of racism. But you won’t find similarly vocal (and maybe not any) support, from the same sources, for free speech in Hong Kong or for the non-extirpation of the Uyghurs.

I myself have recently been on the receiving end of such statements. In October 2022 I organized a talk at Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge. The speaker was Helen Joyce, former Britain editor of the *Economist*. She was due to speak about her best-selling book, *Trans*. In it, she criticizes aspects of Trans activism. As soon as I advertised the event, there were protests from students. More disturbingly, senior University figures (including a Head of Department) [wrote](#) to disparage it, actually or effectively in their official capacity. One wrote to apologize to her Department that I had circulated an *advertisement* for this ‘potentially harmful’ event.

The effect is predictably chilling. Even before these letters came out, I was having to [smuggle](#) students into the event because they were afraid to be seen there. Since then I have heard from many students (mostly women) whose

gender-critical views now make them feel even more alienated. They are even less willing to approach academics with thoughts or questions. They are even more likely to think that the best thing to do, for their three years of student life, is to shut up.

Micro-management of speech

The third issue is the proliferation of elaborate rules governing speech. The philosophical driving force behind this seems to be the inflation of *harm*. In too many places, the consensus now is that by even discussing certain issues – and thereby suggesting that they are ‘up for discussion’ – you are harming an audience whose identity feels threatened.

For instance, the [harassment and discrimination policy](#) at Imperial College includes, within its sweeping definition of harassment, pretty much anything that anyone might find offensive. This could include, for instance, jokes about religious beliefs and rituals. That is an example that the policy explicitly cites. It also notes: ‘Harassment, bullying and victimisation are viewed as gross misconduct, and disciplinary action, including dismissal, may be taken if any complaint of harassment, bullying or victimisation is upheld.’ Judging by that, anyone at Imperial would hesitate before disseminating the anti-religious rhetoric of Gibbon or Voltaire, to say nothing of [Life of Brian](#), [The Book of Mormon](#) or [Jesus and Mo](#).

Again, in May 2021 Cambridge [launched](#) a new discrimination and harassment policy, called ‘Mutual Respect’, which seemed to encourage staff and students to make anonymous (not confidential – *anonymous*) reports of anyone committing ‘micro-aggressions’ or indeed more serious crimes. Even if it resulted in no action, that report could then stay on the accused person’s file for several years and may have to be disclosed to funding bodies, conceivably also to potential employers. Because the reports are anonymous, there could be no credible sanction for submitting a false report. In my view the potential for abuse is as obvious as it is terrifying.

The ‘micro-aggressions’ listed include many odd-looking examples: avoiding or turning one’s back on certain people; asking a black person if that is their

‘natural’ hair; endorsing religious stereotypes; not using someone’s preferred pronouns. The document also included a highly political definition of ‘racism’ as something that white people can perpetrate but cannot suffer.

Although Cambridge withdrew its policy following a public outcry, other universities *have* adopted a similar system.

The way forward

These three kinds of restriction exacerbate the fear of speaking openly that now haunts our universities. Already in 2017, a large [survey](#) of academics (by the University and Colleges Union) reports 35.5% of academics self-censoring (cf. 19.1% for the EU). As the authors wrote then: ‘Self-censorship at this level appears to make a mockery of any pretence by universities of being paragons of free speech and that of being advocates of unhindered discourse in the pursuit of knowledge and academic freedom.’ Those words remain true today.

In all of the examples that we have examined, one common feature is a failure of leadership. As I have said [elsewhere](#), it is clear that the senior academics and administrators running most universities are faced with conflicting pressures from students, staff, funding bodies and central government. It is not surprising that in trying to balance these demands, even the most well-meaning vice-chancellors sometimes forget that free speech must be non-negotiable.

I have discussed three possible remedies [elsewhere](#); I paraphrase that discussion here. One possible remedy would be for each university to appoint someone whose job it is never to forget the importance of free speech. Universities should each have their own free-speech officer, whose sole duty is to enforce compliance with the statutory duties on universities to promote free speech. If we cannot stop bureaucracy from growing, we can at least channel its energy in a benign direction.

A second useful step is the immediate and permanent scrapping of any politically or ideologically oriented training or induction. It has no place in a university.

A third is explicit institutional neutrality. In February 1967 the President of Chicago University asked First Amendment scholar Harry Kalven Jr to chair a committee to report on ‘the University’s role in political and social action.’ the resulting [Kalven Report](#) stated clearly why the essential function of the University entails political neutrality.:

The mission of the university is the discovery, improvement, and dissemination of knowledge. Its domain of inquiry and scrutiny includes all aspects and all values of society... A university, if it is to be true to its faith in intellectual inquiry, must embrace, be hospitable to, and encourage the widest diversity of views within its own community... It cannot insist that all of its members favour a given view of social policy.

Every university in the country should adopt something like the Kalven Report. They should commit, publicly and non-negotiably, not to take a corporate stance, in any direction, on any controversial social or political question.

A fourth option, which I have also [discussed](#) elsewhere, involves two steps. First, at the start of a course, students consent to the risk of exposure to ‘ideas that are legally expressed in ways that they find shocking, disturbing or offensive’; and they also agree that continuation on the course is an implicit renewal of consent. To withdraw consent, you simply withdraw from the university. In this way, signing up for a university education resembles stepping into a boxing ring.

Second, any complaint against a lecturer’s or student’s speech would need to show that it failed one of two tests: Is the speech legal? And did the audience consent at the start of the course? If in both cases the answer is yes, the complaint is immediately and automatically dismissed.

This waiver would not cover *illegal* speech (e.g. harassment). It would cover expression of ideas, but not speech that directly impaired the functioning of the university, for instance publicising confidential information; nor would it preclude regulation of the time, place and manner of speech. (You can’t bring a megaphone into an exam hall.)

More importantly, it would remove the power of veto. A student who withdraws consent is not preventing any teacher or fellow student from saying or hearing anything ‘offensive’, but rather excluding *themselves* from a university where that speech will happen anyway. Students are generally (and legally, if over 18) adults; and consenting adults should be free to discuss with (and hear from) their professors, and propose to them, whatever ideas they like.

These four options are not the only ones, and they may not be the best. There always have been, and probably always will be, threats to freedom of speech; but here and now – in this age, and in this sector – it is taking a form quite unlike its historical antecedents. Our response to this will therefore inevitably involve trying out new things. Be that as it may, what remains clear is that unless we are prepared to fight for this freedom *now*, we are at serious risk of losing it.

II

Taking the Illiberal Politics out of University Teaching

Nigel Biggar

Intimidating and chilling

There is no need to take politics out of university teaching. Rather, we should bring it out into the open and learn to manage it well.

As things now stand, in a number of British universities high level committees have decided that the ‘decolonisation’ of teaching and research is a desirable thing. They have also written to the faculties beneath them requiring them to explain what they are doing to ‘decolonise’ in terms of appointments, curricula, and reading lists. Note: these committees do not give any indication that they expect dissent from the assumptions that undergird their policy. Nor do they make any provision for conscientious objection. Rather, they proceed as if ‘decolonisation’ were incontrovertible common sense among all decent, intelligent, right-thinking people. It is as if they dare anyone to object.

The effect is intimidating and the atmosphere is chilled. Academics who harbour doubts about the policy observe that it carries the weight of institutional authority. They notice that the manner in which it is presented appears to brook no dissent. They consider whether this is yet another battle against the overbearing powers-that-be that is worth fighting. Looking around them to see if anyone else is voicing doubt, they hear silence. They mistake the silence for consent (whereas much of it in fact betokens intimidated scepticism just like their own). And so, they decide that in this case, as in so many others, it would be more prudent and less exhausting to let the institution get its way and somehow find a way of working around it. They censor themselves.

Making political assumptions accountable

What needs to be brought to the surface, therefore, is the fact that the concept of ‘decolonisation’ involves historical, social scientific, moral, *and political* assumptions that are highly contestable, do not comprise common sense, and to which many intelligent colleagues reasonably object. Its moral and political

contestability needs to be acknowledged, so that the institution ceases to promote ‘decolonising’ policies in an authoritarian manner, and instead becomes deliberate in creating opportunities for open debate at the very outset and in making room for conscientious dissent. That is, the politics needs to be brought out into the light, so that it can be deliberately subjected to the constraints of liberal values and virtues.

And not just in the particular case of ‘decolonisation’. Certainly, in the Humanities, and even in the Social Sciences, where the subject-matter comprises human attitudes, conduct, and social structures, academics will often encounter phenomena—including political phenomena—that elicit their moral admiration or disapproval. Even if they strive conscientiously to withhold themselves from judgement in their teaching and research, they will probably not succeed entirely. Their moral and political views will find subtle expression in what they choose to focus on, in the terms in which they seek to understand, in their very choice of adjectives. In my own field of ethics, and specifically Christian ethics, where the subject-matter is human goods, moral norms, and ethical judgements—often about political matters—it is impossible for me not to express my own moral and political views. So rather than express them covertly, I warn my students of them, inviting them to add pinches of salt according to taste. But then I say that my aim is to present alternative views as fairly and charitably as possible, before explaining why I think them wrong. In other words, I bring my politics to the surface and allow myself to be held accountable to the requirements of fairness and charity. In this way, I hope to model two things for my students: first, academic and intellectual endeavour that cares enough, and is serious enough, to make moral and political commitments; but, second, academic endeavour that is honest and humble enough to expose its moral and political commitments to criticism and correction, and strives to do generous justice toward opposing views. In sum, while keeping political commitments *in* university teaching and research, I strive to govern them with a set of virtues that upholds those commitments liberally, and to show students how that can be done.

So, I do not think that we should take political commitments out of university teaching and research, but I do think that we should urge universities to be deliberate in handling those commitments well—reasonably, honestly, openly,

fairly, charitably—and in teaching students how to handle them well. Insofar as the good handling of politics in academic teaching and research involves the unintimidated expression of novel or unfashionable points of view, in order to test, correct, and perhaps improve what currently passes for common sense, we are talking about keeping academic politics liberal in the sense of *free*. And insofar as the good handling of politics involves doing justice to alien points of view, even being charitable to them, we're talking about keeping academic politics liberal in the sense of *generous*.

Preventing polarisation by promoting liberality

But in order to keep politics in university teaching and research liberal, we do need to take *illiberal* politics out of it. There is evidently a view prevalent among some students and professors that intellectual positions that differ from their own are not to be taken at face value, dealt with rationally, and subjected to criticism, because those positions are merely the rationalisation of unjust interests in maintaining economic status or social power. Since such intellectual positions—it is supposed—are held in bad faith by morally corrupt people, the appropriate response is not to argue with the positions, but rather to attack the persons who hold it, smearing them as racist or white-supremacist or transphobic, and clamouring that their research be shut down or that they be disciplined or even dismissed. Insofar as such self-righteous political zeal dominates academic teaching and research, universities will produce graduates who are incapable of tolerating views that differ from their own, of restraining their visceral reactions in order to listen and reflect, and of engaging in the give-and-take of reasons. If illiberal politics come to dominate our universities, the days of self-restrained liberal political culture in Britain are surely numbered and a new era of radical political polarisation, tending toward civil war, will be with us. The stakes could not be higher.

So, what is to be done? Ideally, of course, universities would get their own houses in order. They would accept and discharge their civic duty to promote liberal virtues and discourage illiberal ones. Unfortunately, there is little sign that universities in general have begun to recognise either the scale or the seriousness of the problem. While it is true that Louise Richardson, Oxford's VC, did admit, in an interview earlier this year, the need for greater political

diversity in universities, the body known as ‘UK Universities’, in its initial response to the Government’s Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Bill, argued that the problem is confined to a tiny number of ‘cancellations’ and merits no special measures. Now it may be that Kathleen Stock’s being hounded out of her job and career at the University of Sussex has caused the scales to drop for their eyes. But if that is so, I have not heard it.

There is a role for Government intervention, even in the form of legislation such as the Freedom of Speech Bill, which is in its final stages Parliament. Law has a pedagogical function, and this law will assert on behalf of the whole of society the high value of free speech and academic freedom in universities. Moreover, it will impose on universities a statutory duty to protect and promote academic freedom, including, presumably, the freedom to dissent from decolonising policies. Further, it will create a new post in the Office for Students of Director of Freedom of Speech, whose reason for living will be to monitor Universities’ performance and its compliance with the law. And further still, it will enable beleaguered dissidents to appeal beyond their universities directly to the OfS. At the very least, this will provoke universities into thinking harder and talking a lot more about what the preservation of a liberal political culture requires, and about their duty to help preserve it.

III

Truth Under Attack in the Universities

John Marenbon

Universities under threat

The intellectual life of the world's great universities, in Britain and elsewhere, is under threat, as never before in modern times. Some of the dangers are external and long-standing, especially those created by governments that see universities as nothing more than training institutions and so upset the delicate balance between teaching, practical aims and pure enquiry. There is also an internal threat, which was hardly evident before the turn of the millennium but with each year looms larger. The threat comes from the academics themselves, the very people who should be guardians of the intellectual ideals of the universities. This threat is the subject of the following pages.

It is more serious than any external one, and not just because its internal origins give it the capacity to take over the universities step by step, without the concerted opposition external intervention would provoke. More importantly, the internal threat is rooted in the rejection of the very principle that founds intellectual life, a belief in truth, and with it the special way in which truth has been sought within universities. Many academics, who are horrified at those who envisage universities as intended only to provide economically valuable training, are happy to see them turn away from searching for truth in order to pursue what they consider to be socially valuable objectives, such as promoting equality, diversity and inclusion; happy, therefore, to see universities stripped of their reason for existing and turned into institutions for promoting various practical, non-academic ends.

This chapter will first discuss what is meant by 'a belief in truth', and why it should be the guiding principle for universities. Then it will consider some of the different particular ways in which scorn or forgetfulness of this principle is manifested in British universities and academic life today: through discriminatory appointments policies; through twisting the curriculum in the arts and humanities to serve the spectre of decolonization; and through suppressing dissent, which in the universities has always been the engine driving the search for truth.

A belief in truth

‘A belief in truth’ is used here as a shorthand. Taken literally, the phrase may seem to demand both more and less than is intended. On the one hand, nothing about the metaphysics of truth is implied. On the other hand, a belief in truth, in the intended sense, requires much more than simply accepting that some sentences are true. A fuller version might be: ‘a belief in the possibility, fruitfulness and value of the disciplined search for truth in many fields.’ There are, according to this belief, many types and areas of enquiry, from mathematics, physics and astronomy to history and philosophy, in which various methods have been developed that have a reasonable claim to lead towards the truth. In some areas, such as mathematics, they reach unchallengeable truths. In most other areas, the truths claimed remain always provisional, coming in time to be recognized as approximate, partial or simply not truths at all. A belief in truth might be accompanied by one in progress – that this process of revision and rejection is moving in the direction of full and genuine truth – but it need not be. It is enough to accept that each move follows the established and proven methods of a discipline.

Why should a belief in truth, so understood, be a guiding principle for universities? Because that is what the universities came to be for, early in the development of the institution: not perhaps Bologna, the earliest of the universities, which was at its inception chiefly a training establishment for lawyers, but certainly the great thirteenth-century universities, Oxford and, above all Paris, which were the models for later foundations. The dedicated search might have taken place under different circumstances, in a different sort of institution, or non-institutionally; or it might never have taken place at all. All these possibilities have, indeed, been exemplified in different cultures. But in medieval Latin Europe the universities grew and flourished, and now this invention has been taken up in every corner of the world. These universities owe their existence, ultimately, to a belief in truth. If belief in truth disappears from the universities, the buildings will not crumble; the students will continue to come, pay their fees, receive qualifications and be trained to take their place in their world. But the universities will have lost their intellectual life.

Discriminating against academic excellence: Equality, diversity, inclusion

It is a familiar scene to any academic today. You are one of a committee responsible for making an appointment. The sub-committee has drawn up a shortlist of three. To everyone's horror, there is no woman on the list. Chair explains, shamefacedly: yes, there had been female candidates and they had considered them very carefully, but none was suitable for the job, whereas the three men shortlisted are all highly qualified and able. The committee is not impressed. 'We were doing better now than before. This will be a real setback', one of them explains, and everyone nods. The reference, obvious to everyone on the committee, is to the ratio of male to female members of the department. To have more women is to 'do better'; any percentage less than 50 is evidence that something is going wrong. Another committee member joins in: 'We must, of course, select on the basis of excellence', she says, 'but you' – and she looks pointedly at the three men on the sub-committee – 'are victims of hidden bias. You want to appoint people who are like you.' Chair explains falteringly that it had been impossible to find any sufficiently senior female to join the sub-committee, but he is cut short by the administrative officer, who makes it clear that an all-male shortlist drawn up by an all-male sub-committee is unacceptable. Chair is quick to acknowledge his error and agree to a rethink. A woman is added to the list and, although she is placed third after the interviews, the same sorts of considerations that led to her being shortlisted end by making her the successful candidate.

Of course, the same initial scenario could easily be imagined in reverse, with the three short-listed candidates all female and no plausible male contestants. But the situation would unroll very differently. Everyone would congratulate the sub-committee on a choice of candidates that ensures 'we shall continue to do better.' No need to re-think *this* list.

Although the example is fictional, it is not a caricature. In the sciences, maybe, purely academic judgement more frequently prevails, but in the arts and humanities the desire to increase the ratio of female department members has led over the last decade to frequent discrimination against white males (males from minority ethnic groups, which are also considered to be underrepresented, do not usually suffer). Even those, that is to say 90 per

cent or 95 per cent of academics, who go along with the way of thinking evoked above, accept that white males are disadvantaged – regretfully: they are the eggs that must be broken to make the omelette of equality, diversity and inclusion.

Female academics were greatly outnumbered by male ones until recently, not because they were less able, but because social, economic and institutional circumstances made it difficult and at some times and places impossible, for women to make a career in the universities. The arrangements have now changed in much of the world, and anyone who values the search for truth rejoices at the change, since doubling the numbers of potential academics should ensure that standards rise sharply. There is no reason to believe that, given time, numbers of male and female academics will not be roughly equal, though perhaps skewed one way or the other in different disciplines, since for all sorts of social reasons men may incline towards different fields of interest than women. Or, indeed, it is very possible that, overall, the academic profession will be come to be dominated by women. Nothing need be done except what always should have been done in academic appointments: the best person academically and intellectually for the job, most suited for its teaching, research and other requirements, should be chosen.

Why, then, have academics as a group pursued a different, discriminatory policy, instead of patiently awaiting a change that, had it been allowed to happen gradually and of its own accord, could not but have raised standards? Why have they, rather, adopted a policy that might be calculated to harm those female academics, the great majority, who would have won their places in a genuinely open competition but can now never be sure of that -- a policy that, through a few unsuitable appointments, puts the reputation of all female academics at risk?

One answer is that academics simply do not care, because they consider a social aim – equality in numbers of male and female academics – is more important than any intellectual one. This diagnosis may be true of some in the universities, especially the administrators, but for most the explanation is more complicated, although it comes down ultimately to the same problem. They no longer believe in truth.

Academics who believe in truth can make fine judgements about excellence in their own discipline and many related ones: that this idea, argument or piece of work is more outstanding than that one. They may sometimes be biased by their own support of a particular method or view, but they can look beyond their own preferences, and most do, because they can ask themselves what contribution the idea or argument, piece of work or person is making to the search for truth in their field. Since the search for truth is dialectical, those judging should not be disturbed if a candidate hold views that they, the judges, believe false. What are important are the mastery of the subject and the vigour, imagination, tenacity and cogency with which the truth is sought.

Since so many of them now no longer believe in truth, or do so half-heartedly, or shamefacedly, not for public consumption, they no longer consider it is right to make fine judgements about excellence in their own and related disciplines. They are happy to make broad judgements, especially when they can base themselves on external criteria (in a job appointment, for instance, an applicant's CV; how many articles in top journals; what areas of teaching experience), but when faced by a list of ostensibly well-qualified candidates, either in the same field or, even more so, in different fields, they do not know how to go further. Since they do not believe in truth, they have no general standards for judging intellectual work. They therefore conclude that, so far as they can judge, all the ostensibly qualified candidates are equally good, and so the selection among them should be made according to other socially responsible criteria, such as promoting diversity, combatting social disadvantage and, above all, achieving a gender balance. Since they are incapable of the sort of discrimination that is virtuous and needed, according to intellectual excellence, they engage, without intending it, in a type of discrimination that is vicious, by gender and race.

Truth, and decolonising the curriculum

'Decolonizing the curriculum' is a strange phrase, more suited in its literal meaning to what might be done in an ex-colonial state than in a former colonial power. In practice, the demand to decolonize can mean many very different things. Often, what is required under this banner is fully in accord with the ultimate aim of universities to seek truth. Academics in different fields are asked to consider whether the curricula they have inherited are too narrow and too limited to a single tradition or sub-tradition that flourished in

Europe, to the exclusion of the rest of the world. In Philosophy, for instance, this benign version of decolonizing would start by emphasizing that what is usually studied in universities under this name is, in fact, Western Philosophy, and that there are great traditions of, for example, Indian and Chinese philosophizing. It would go on to point out that the Western tradition itself, going back to Greek antiquity, has a far wider geographical and cultural reach than the usual history of it, which jumps from fifth-century Greece to modern France, Germany and Britain (and the anglophone world), admits: 'Western' Philosophy spread through the whole of the Islamicate world and developed under the aegis of all three Abrahamic religions.

Even in this form, however, decolonizing needs to be practised with discretion. It is important, for example, for philosophy students in British universities to realize that the Western tradition is just one among a number of philosophical traditions. But concentrated work on these other traditions should be left to those who have chosen to dedicate themselves to learning the necessary languages and acquiring the cultural background to make such study rigorous. Universities should always avoid parochialism in outlook, but without a certain parochialism in procedure, where what is closer to students linguistically and culturally is chosen for general consumption, academic standards are likely to suffer, and students, by trying to learn about everything, will end by learning nothing at all.

This benign variety of decolonizing is an attempt, by those who still cling to traditional academic values, to contain and adapt to good use the damaging plans of the radical decolonizers. By contrast, the radical decolonizers, who are the majority, see themselves as a political movement rather than a merely speculative one. So far from being the enemies of parochialism, they are the prisoners of a particularly stifling brand of it. Their view of the world begins from, and ends with, racial discrimination and oppression, by which they have in mind, in fact, only that of white people over black, in the context of the North Atlantic slave trade and the treatment of black and non-white people in the United States: this narrow prism is used as a lens for their whole understanding of history and culture. The decolonizers insist that racism is rife everywhere, even in countries like the UK, where it is ostensibly rare (except in the shape of anti-white racism in giving employment and public positions). Racism is there, they say, in hundreds of hidden details, such as the microaggressions supposedly suffered continually by people of colour,

imperceptible to whites. And it is there too in the social and economic structure of our society, the result of a free market that grew up, they say, on the back of slave labour and still works to oppress and exploit non-whites.

The position of the dedicated decolonizers involves an explicit rejection of a belief in truth. In line with Critical Race Theory, the decolonizers deny the universality of claims based on argument and evidence, contending that white people simply cannot gauge the extent of racism, evident to those of colour. The decolonizers regard philosophical and legal analyses of racial discrimination and attempts based on them to ensure equal treatment of citizens, whatever their race, as the results of an exercise of power designed to protect white interests at the expense of non-whites. When decolonized in this way, the disciplines in the arts and humanities turn into supposed case studies of white oppression, sometimes meshing with other sorts of dominance and oppression (men over women, the rich over the poor, the able-bodied over the disabled), with a narrow chronological range, starting only in the sixteenth century, and a geographical range limited to the United States and Western Europe and its colonies.

It is the business of arts and humanities departments in the universities to be open to all sorts of approaches and views, and so they should not exclude the ideas of the decolonizers, as one among many outlooks. But they need to be treated with caution, since as a result of their proponents' ideological claims their development has been cut free of the ordinary measures of evidence and cogency that guide academic argument.

Truth and dissent

Besides the widespread discrimination now taking place under the guise of its opposite, and the ever tightening grip of the tentacles of decolonization, the continued existence universities as places where truth is sought faces a third, and perhaps the most serious, threat: the suppression of dissent. This suppression is not absolute. Academics in the West are not explicitly required to sign up to a particular ideology and openly punished if they reject it – as happens in China, although even there some freedom exists to take different views within a technical area, and an academic can, with some courage, refuse party membership and so, implicitly, the aims it consecrates. But, here in the West, here is a steadily broadening area where, in practice,

those who do not agree with the views commonly held in academia (which are, in many cases, views not held by a majority of the general population) must keep silence or be silenced.

The area where this suppression of dissent has been most obvious and most publicized is the debate over gender, especially about whether someone born biologically male can claim to be a woman. Arif Ahmed gives examples above of how academics who insist on giving a negative answer have been threatened with injury or death, officially forced to change their courses or pressured out of their posts.

But the suppression of dissent is far wider. The decolonizing project is one of the instances. As explained above, even if decolonizing were just one strand of thought among many in the universities it would present a danger, because of its intrinsic assumptions – although we should still allow its exponents to make their arguments for it. In fact, however, decolonizing is not just one of many competing views among academics. Rather, the central bodies in universities *tell* academics that they must decolonize their curricula. And most academics are either happy to go along with the instructions, or prefer not to resist. Through a mixture of central control and tyranny of the majority, dissent is a reasonable option only for a few hardy souls, secure in their posts, and willing to brave the silent sneers of their colleagues.

Decolonizing is only one, and the most recent, of the political positions to be imposed on all academics, by this mixture of bureaucratic authority and peer pressure. Which university or college does not fly the rainbow flag to commemorate the month for ‘Pride’ and go out of its way to celebrate the month for Black History? What institution in higher education now does not list as among its values diversity and inclusiveness? Who would dare to raise their voice to resist? Indeed, the fashion of recent years for requiring universities, colleges and faculties to set down, in a sentence or two, their ‘values’ has been a powerful tool for ensuring conformity and suppressing dissent. Those who understand genuine academic values know that they cannot be set down, but grasped only gradually during a lifetime of intellectual work and striving. They might try to point those involved in the right direction by talking about truth and knowledge, but such language will

be given short shrift by most of their colleagues and by the university and college authorities. A list of extra-academic values will therefore be imported. Many genuine scholars will brush the whole business aside and go on with their work, believing that their colleagues will take no notice of such things – and they do not, at first. But little by little, these lists begin to be taken seriously, and thinking that does not reflect the institution's self-professed values becomes suspect.

Any unnecessary restriction on freedom of speech is bad but, so it may be argued, the present attack is limited to the edges of academic discourse, to public announcements and course guidelines. Within each of the specialized disciplines arguing for different views remains the usual currency of academic life.

True, academics do continue to ply their trade of argument-making, but now only within a restricted compass. It is not merely that, in various sensitive areas – areas fundamental to many subjects in the humanities – there are all sorts of arguments that simply cannot be made within the new norms of academic discourse. Nor just that when, as with decolonizing, the content of courses and research starts to be delimited not by subject, geography or chronology but by an external political aim, the direction of argument is set in advance and disagreements can only be superficial, except of course with the unenlightened, who cling to an ignorance from which they are yet to be awoken. Worse still: whole areas of speculation and intellectual activity, such as traditional political history (especially British political history), grand narrative, great literature are censored out of existence by the simple expedient of not making new appointments in them.

But is not argument within a restricted compass enough, a compromise between what some people would defend as valuable social aims, and the universities' traditional functions? There are fine books still being produced by British historians, literary scholars, philosophers and many other academics (and by their counterparts across the Atlantic, where the pressure of internal censorship has been even greater, although the defence of free speech, as always, more vigorous). Why not avoid a conflict and compromise?

Such a call for compromise is really a call to surrender, because universities are the home not just for argument-making, but for rational dissent. The universities must, indeed, remain the home for argument, but that alone is not enough. Rational dissent requires argument, but there can be argument without dissent. The intellectual freedom characteristic of the universities is not just the freedom to argue, but the freedom to dissent.

There are many ways in which truth can be sought: through the passing down of tradition, as in a religion; expressively, as through the arts; or argumentatively. Argumentative traditions can be untroubled and consensual, achieving rational progress through consent, not dissent, by means of conclusions that are agreed, refined and developed. Most argumentative traditions over the long history of the world have been of this sort. Not those of the universities: dissent is in their very DNA.

The greatest of the medieval universities, the University of Paris, grew out of the many schools of twelfth-century Paris, each with its own characteristic teachings to define itself against the others. The establishment of the university brought a measure of institutional unity, but the intellectual diversity became even greater. By the mid-thirteenth century, the biggest Faculty was devoted to studying the whole range of Aristotelian sciences. Since some fundamental elements of Aristotle's thought are incompatible with Christian doctrine, there was an essential tension, an ultimately inevitable conflict, which intensified or generated controversy in every area. The result was to create flourishing, vivacious intellectual communities, always sharpening their ideas, reaching towards more and more sophisticated conceptions. When they failed to respond to the new science of the seventeenth century with same critical openness that had been shown to Aristotelians and anti-Aristotelians, adopting it only belatedly and slavishly, the universities ceased for two centuries to be Europe's outstanding centres of intellectual life. By recovering the spirit of dissent that the universities became again in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the home of both scientific discovery and liberal learning and speculation.

Without dissent, universities will no longer engage in the search for truth in their special way, which is one of the most valuable heritages ancient and medieval Europe have handed on to modern times and to the world. No

wonder that those in the universities who do not love truth hate dissent and lose no opportunity to suppress it!

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