

EDITORIAL

Academic Freedom , Institutional Autonomy and the Critical Role of University Scholarship

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Each of the articles in this issue of JET is critical of something going on in our society either now or historically. Some will be offended by each and every paper included in this issue. Although one usually sees the role of the university as primarily that of instructing the next generation in the disciplinary studies of the academy, and the duty to further knowledge through research and scholarship, one does not often mention in the same breath that a university is a place where critical thought without limit is cheered and encouraged.

It is not long ago that the first president of the Czech republic had been a professor who found himself jailed in the then communist Czechoslovakia because he was critical of the policies of the governmental regime. Many international scholars, including Oxford's Bill Newton-Smith came to Vaclav Havel's aid and in due course he was freed and ultimately elevated to the presidency of his country. Bertrand Russell, at the time a lecturer in mathematical logic at Cambridge University, was critical of the government of Britain and the United States in their prosecution of the First World War and, like Havel, found himself in prison (where he wrote *An Introduction to Mathematical Philosophy*). Subsequently he too was freed, strongly supported by many colleagues at Cambridge and other British universities, including the great mathematician G.H. Hardy. Russell was a member of the Royal Society, received the Order of Merit and was a winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature. Critical work from the university may land you in jail. But it may also lead, when the smoke clears, to recognition of the importance of one's critique.

A recent case of critical commentary taken out of context has caused the more or less complete destruction of the life of a scholar at the University of Calgary. Tom Flanagan, a professor of political science at the U. of C. found himself at a seminar at another Alberta university in

which he was presenting on his studies of Federal Government-aboriginal relations in Canada and his recommendations for improvements. A member of the audience asked a rambling question that included the request for Flanagan's opinion on the criminality of viewing child pornography to which Flanagan answered that he held no truck for child pornography but he was not sure that merely viewing such material was necessary criminal. (One can imagine some who might even have good reasons for looking at such material including police investigators or perhaps parents or family members who have lost a child and are looking desperately for their whereabouts including on porn sites.) In this case the result was that the roof fell in on Flanagan. The person who asked the question sent his remarks out on the internet where it was read by the Canadian media and a media storm ensued, especially on Canadian television. Flanagan was a controversial conservative political commentator and had a job with the CBC and close connections to the Alberta Conservative party and with the conservative movement across Canada. The leaders of the CBC, the premier of Alberta and the leader of the opposition Wild Rose ultra conservative group in the Alberta legislature denounced him and distanced themselves completely from Flanagan on the strength of his reported remarks as carried by the Canadian television networks. Even the president of the University of Calgary felt compelled to announce that the University of Calgary did not support in any way child pornography or pornographers and that Flanagan had submitted his resignation from the University of Calgary, was presently on study leave and would no longer be an employee of the university after the 31st of June, 2013. It remains to be seen if Flanagan will in due course become a member of the Royal Society or win a Nobel Prize or even gain the Order of Canada. Yet it is certainly important that scholars raise difficult questions for discussion such as at that at which Flanagan hinted, namely, that it is not certain that all actions now criminalized ought ultimately to be so. For example, abortion and homosexuality are two human activities that have undergone decriminalization within my own lifetime. And while these, too, suffer continuing critique they illustrate the importance of our rethinking our present positions, of being critical of our past judgments. Harboursing a slave was once a crime in the both Canada and the United States, but following a speech by Lord Macaulay in the British Parliament in the early 19th century, slavery was abolished throughout the British Empire and therefore in Canada at that time. It took a civil war in the United States to effect the same change of law and heart.

But what are the conditions that permit the critical stance of the university researcher or scholar and her or his passing on to the next generation the gift of this stance? In some sense or other the university has to be isolated from, and independent of, the great external forces of power that may be threatened by such a critical stance. For many centuries the universities in Oxford and Cambridge were isolated from the law of the state due to their connection with the Catholic church. There are instances in mediaeval Oxford of students who had been caught up in town and gown altercations who may have killed a townsmen but were protected from the criminal law due to their status as "clerks", that is as religious men in training at the university and so subject only to the law of the church. (Very large oaken doors to the colleges helped too, of course, as did very high walls with broken glass embedded at the top.)

Often the universities had to balance themselves between the power of the King and the power of a local bishop or the pope. And their strategy was usually to try to steer an intermediate course between these powers and so safeguard their independence. That is a strategy in our own day used by nearly all universities in Britain, Canada and the United States. One of the reasons that universities work so hard to get sponsorship from corporate and private donors is that such sponsorship gives them some leverage in their constant struggle to resist the arbitrary will of the most powerful paymaster of our time for universities, the State. Indeed, one of the reasons that universities in Canada strive to get as much federal government research funds as possible is that such money enables the universities to balance off the research or program interests of their provincial governments who provide the bulk of the operating resources of the university, well exceeding student fees. It is hard for us to remember that not long ago the provincial governments in Canada provided very little money to universities in their jurisdictions. For example, in 1939 the entire subvention offered by the Government of Alberta of William Aberhart to the University of Alberta was \$100,000. And that was the result of a special request.

In our own time a professor at the University of Alberta, Dr. David Schindler, the Killam Memorial Professor of Ecology, the first researcher to notice that many Canadian lakes were turning acidic due to airborne pollution, has been critical of the governmental policies and business practices relating to the Alberta oil sands as he has found evidence that the negative effects of the oil extraction process has a wider range than

was previously suspected. As yet he has not been vilified or threatened with jail for his judgments. And that may be due, in part, to the degree of independence the University of Alberta has managed to maintain from both parties. Indeed he is a member of the Order of Canada, a Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada and a Fellow of the Royal Society and a former Rhodes Scholar. His 2010 co-authored report on contaminants in fresh water systems in the area effected by the oil sands development suggests that there is much wider spread of the dangerous effects of the oil extraction processes being used in the Fort McMurray area of Alberta than had been previously suspected.

Given this happy story, at least to date, I unreservedly recommend the reading of the papers that follow in this issue of the Journal of Educational Thought. Though there are dangers that may arise when one merely views materials that may horrify some, one hopes that our readers have sufficient academic freedom in their universities which retain a modicum of autonomy from the powerful forces of their day that they may read these articles freely and thoughtfully---and critically.

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