

What to do about academic freedom?

Academic Freedom, by Conrad Russell, London, Routledge, 1993, 130 pp

There are many articles and books about academic freedom, but there remain many worthwhile ways to approach the topic to show its relevance or otherwise for contemporary universities. There are historical studies showing how academic leaders preferred a tame interpretation of academic freedom in order to ensure professional prerogatives (Furner 1975). Comparative sociological analyses of educational systems in different countries can provide insights into the shaping of academic work by state and other interests (Archer 1979). Studies of professions as power systems can provide insights into the way academics have claimed privileges for their occupation (Collins 1979). Studies of the relations of intellectuals to the state and capitalism can provide insights into academic strategies (Derber et al. 1990; Gouldner 1979). Yet another approach is to look at the 'university-industrial complex,' assessing the effect of the incorporation of academia into the economic system (Newson and Buchbinder 1989) or, more specifically, the military-industrial complex (Feldman 1989). Perhaps academic freedom is irrelevant because most academics are absorbed in their specialist careers, with little interest in public debates (Jacoby 1987). There is also a rich source of material on the 'new social movements' since the 1960s, not the least of which was the student movement; their implications for social engagement by academics remain to be fully explored. Yet another approach would be to examine the concept of 'academic freedom' using all the usual tools of postmodernism.

Conrad Russell's book on academic freedom deals with none of this. It is a very traditional treatment, replete with male pronouns, which could have been written in the 1950s. Russell sees the problem in simple terms: the state versus the universities, specifically the British state, which wants to expand access, cut costs and control academic life, versus British universities which want to pursue knowledge for its own sake. He argues for academic freedom on the grounds that academics know best how to do certain things, such as decide how long a degree should take, whether students should be allowed to take outside work while doing a degree, what research should be funded, what appointments should be made, and how many students should be admitted. He allows that the government should have certain powers, such as whether universities should exist at all and how much money they should receive in total.

The orientation of the book is quite compatible with Russell's personal circumstances. As noted on the cover, he is professor of British history at King's College, University of London and a member of the House of Lords. As a professor, he defends the traditional idea of universities as places of pure scholarship, with appropriate professional autonomy. As a member of the House of Lords, he appreciates the need for the government to economise.

Within its constraints, the book is well argued and well written. It is just the thing for traditionalists who want a defence of universities in the face of a British state intent on expanding access while cutting costs. But it does not begin to tackle the many challenges facing academics and intellectual endeavour in a society with numerous groups seeking to mould universities to their ends. There are no cases described of suppression of intellectual dissent; there is no analysis of the implications of massive funding of directed research by government and industry; there is no assessment of the impact of increasing

managerialism in universities; there is no clear conceptual distinction between academic freedom as institutional autonomy and academic freedom as freedom of academics to speak out (a distinction that is often difficult for university administrators to grasp); and there is no mention of any form of social action except voting.

Because Russell deals only with the arguments about academic freedom from the narrow perspective of finding a suitable balance between universities and the state, he has no solution to the problem of a government that rides roughshod over traditional academic values. All he can suggest, in a pessimistic epilogue, is for universities to become independent of government by becoming private, thus retaining the independence that he believes is necessary for an institution to be called a university. He does not think this is promising - commenting that Britain could probably support only two private universities of high quality - but sees no alternative. If he had a broader vision of the complex politics of higher education, he might have realised that there could be common cause with other groups in society. But this is not likely when it is assumed that universities should be ivory towers.

Amazingly, Russell gives no references to any other work dealing specifically with academic freedom. (Some useful studies are Arblaster (1974) and Kaplan and Schrecker (1983).) There are some 60 citations in the book, of which the most frequent are 23 to the *House of Lords Official Report*, 6 to the *Independent*, 5 to J. S. Mill's *Essay on Liberty*, 5 to *History of the University of Oxford*, and 3 to the *Autobiography* of Bertrand Russell, the author's father. Conrad Russell seems of the school of thought that when writing for a public audience, becoming versed in scholarly literature relevant to the subject is unnecessary.

But at least he has written for a public audience. The book undoubtedly will have some useful effect in certain circles. How many academics who are so proficient with the latest theories can claim to have done the same?

References

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