

ACADEMIC FREEDOM AND THE ENCLOSURE OF KNOWLEDGE IN THE GLOBAL UNIVERSITY

A discussion of 'academic freedom' is timely as everywhere, across the planet, this long fought-for principle is under siege. Trends, already emerging in Africa in the 1980s, are extending to every part of the world, contributing to what we can call 'a global enclosure of knowledge.' This is the restriction of access to education to the 'happy few,' as knowledge and education are becoming commodified and profitability is becoming the sole logic by which the university is structured.

Here I examine the most salient ways in which academic freedom is affected by these developments (with special reference to the United States) and, most important, how we can resist them. First, however, I consider what we mean by 'academic freedom,' since it is a concept that has been evolving, taking on new meanings, and is presently used with different connotations.

One tendency, at least in the United States, is to equate academic freedom with 'freedom of expression,' a right that, in principle at least, in many countries is guaranteed by the Constitution. This is the meaning given to academic freedom by *Scholars at Risk*, a network of organizations, founded in Chicago in 1999, whose objective is to defend 'academic rights.' This meaning stands out because historically the most egregious violations of academic freedom have taken place on this terrain, with teachers and students often muzzled by the state or clerical authorities and forced into political and religious conformism. Today too, the vilification – and in some cases incarceration—of non-conforming teachers and students is a constant presence in the academic life of many countries.

However, a more current interpretation of academic freedom is that espoused by the American Association of University Professors (AAUP), the academic staff union in the US, in its 1915 'Declaration.' According to this definition, academic freedom is a professional prerogative, and it is the right to teach, write and speak as a public intellectual according to standards decided by the profession. The argument is that the goal of academic teaching and research is the expansion of knowledge and this task by its very nature demands that we are free to explore ideas, according to accepted professional criteria. The principle of the academicians' right to 'self-government', self-regulation, we could say 'workers' control', is something that the AAUP has defended throughout its history and has proven useful in the McCarthy period, when teachers were forced to take loyalty oaths and declare that they were not communists to maintain their jobs. It is argued that its adoption redefined the role of university teachers and their relation to the universities administrations, limiting their right to hire and fire them at will.¹

But already by the 1960s this concept of academic freedom had shown its limits, as the defense of academic standards and self-regulation proved to be quite compatible with acceptance by many faculty of the university's involvement in the war effort. It was the students who in the 1960s and 1970s defended 'free speech' and mobilized against the army's presence on the campuses and the research programs the Department of Defense was carrying out in the American universities, directly related to the Vietnam War.

Since then, the restructuring of the world economy and academic life has made the definition of academic freedom as

the right to professional self-government even more problematic. Today, in fact, the attack on academic freedom stems not only from the state's interference in academic life but from the material conditions of academic work, which place teachers and students in precarious conditions restricting their ability to choose what to teach, study and research.

Since at least the 1980s, universities have gone through an accelerating process of *corporatization* as on one side, corporations are becoming an intrinsic part of academic life — with companies financing and sponsoring programs, shaping the curricula, conducting profit-oriented research on the campuses—and, on the other, *the university itself is becoming a corporation*, applying to education the same principles and values that prevail in the business world.

My first experience with this transformation in the the organization of the university was the 1980s, when I had the opportunity to teach in a Nigerian university, at a time when the country was facing the effects of the 'debt crisis' and debating on whether or not to take a stand-by loan from the IMF and the World Bank. Even before a decision was made, the austerity program that the IMF/WB demanded was applied to every aspect of social and economic life, including public education. As a consequence, departments were told that they had to fend for themselves, find their own money, learn to swim or sink. By the late 1980s, this was the situation in most African universities. The results have been powerfully described by Mahmood Mamdani in *Scholars in the Market Place, The Dilemmas of Neoliberal Reform at Makerere University, 1989-2005 (2007)*, where he shows that the need to be economically self-supporting led to a balkanization of the university, as departments started competing with each other,

teaching the courses that would bring more students and more money, and resenting turning their surpluses to the institution. Soon, 'cost sharing', tuitions were introduced on most African campuses, at the moment when these were undergoing a process of 'democratization,' with the recruitment of students coming from sectors of the population generally excluded from Africa's tertiary education. Subsidies for food, transport, books were cut; in response to student protest, student organizations were brutally repressed, many were driven underground. Meanwhile, faced with a wage freeze and deteriorating academic conditions, teachers began to reduce class time, doing consultancy work for companies off campus. For both teachers and administrators the withdrawal of state support to public education also triggered an incessant quest for 'links' with foreign institutions and NGOs, that soon were running classes on their campuses and reshaping their curricula.

This was the state of affairs that, in 1991, led to the drafting of the *Kampala Declaration* which defined the academic freedom as the 'right to study.' They were also the conditions that led myself, George Caffentzis and other colleagues from Africa and the US to found, in the same year, the Committee for Academic Freedom in Africa, which chose its title inspired by the Kampala definition of academic freedom. For 16 years, CAFA published a newsletter that recorded the struggles of students and teachers in Africa², trying to mobilize support for them on American campuses, and at the same time analyzed and denounced the plans of the IMF and the World Bank for African universities.

² For the formation of CAFA and its campaign against the World Banks' program for universities in Africa, see S. Federici, G. Caffentzis, O. Alidou eds., *A Thousand Flowers. Social Struggles Against Structural Adjustment in African Universities* (Africa World Press, 2000).

At the time, the 'adjustment' of tertiary education in Africa may have seemed contingent to the economic crisis unfolding across the continent. But on returning to the US it became clear that the same trends were taking hold also in North America and Europe, signifying that knowledge production and education were being subsumed everywhere *directly* to the needs of the corporate world and the logic of profitability.

In the US as well, as the state reduced its investment in academic institutions, companies have stepped in with 'donations', presumably entitling them to use their facilities, to conduct their research programs and ensure that curricula are in conformity with their needs. The decision in 1981 by the US government to allow the universities to give patents to companies conducting research on their campuses was a milestone in this context, accelerating business' entrance in the academic world and the further transfer of public wealth into private hands.

While business now shapes the life of the universities, the university itself has become a business, whose main concern is profitability. Not only have we seen a proliferation of *for-profit-universities*, whose funds depend on the fluctuations of the stock-market. Even the public universities are now mostly preoccupied with fund raising and profitability in everything they do. Typically, teachers are presently expected not only to teach and publish, but to bring money to the campus applying for grants from foundations. This means that many nowadays research not what they consider pedagogically necessary, but what they think will be funded. Universities are also cutting programs (especially in the humanities) deemed 'uneconomical,' boosting, instead, departments and disciplines (like biology and other scientific programs) that are most likely to be financed by state or private enterprises. Permanent

faculty is also being reduced; tenure, if present trends continue, is on the way to extinction, while classes are staffed with adjuncts, now representing, on average, more than 50% of the faculty).

University administrations are also demanding property rights on what teachers produce (syllabi, papers, etc.) enabling them to standardize educational materials, so that anybody can then teach them. In the same vein, they are boosting 'on line education' – now a center-piece on many public and private campuses. Central to all these development, has been the constant increase of the tuitions that students must pay, which forces them to resort to government or bank loans and fall more and more into debt. The rise of students' loan debt - now amounting to more than one trillion - has been accompanied by an ideological campaign defining education and knowledge as 'global commodities,'³ and students as 'consumers,' or micro-entrepreneurs, for whom college education is an investment in the future. The idea that education is for 'the common good' is now replaced by an individualistic ethos, stressing its impact on future wages and competition in the global market. [Arguing that education makes a country 'globally competitive' and is therefore an ingredient of 'national security,' the Greek government, in the Spring of 2013, threatened to call martial law against teachers who were going to strike].

These developments—that in different degrees are occurring worldwide— jeopardize academic freedom in all its connotations. The invasion of the financial world in academia,

³ So prominent has become the idea that education is a commodity that the US government has even tried to have all educational services included into the GATT Agreements.

the precarization of teaching, the teachers' constant search for funding for their researches, the students' need to finish school as soon as possible not to accrue too much debt, their need to work at one or more jobs while taking classes to pay their debt, are changing life on the campuses. They undermine the type of sociality that was once possible; and condition what anyone can study, write, research, in ways even more insidious and difficult to challenge than overt political repression.

This is not to suggest that political repression is no longer important. Even limiting my examples to the US, I can conclude that it has, if anything, intensified, especially after September 11, when the attack on the New York Trade World Center unleashed a 'national security' legislation severely limiting legal and political freedoms. FBI officers have knocked at the door of students' organizations, informers have infiltrated campus activities in ways reminiscent of what occurred with the anti-Vietnam war students' movement in the 1960s. Foreign students and teachers, especially from the Middle East and Muslim countries or engaged in Middle Eastern studies, have been especially under surveillance. Foreign students have been threatened with deportation for even temporarily failing to maintain the 12 credits requirements that is the condition for them obtaining a student visa. Librarians have been instructed to turn to the FBI their records, indicating who was taking out of the library certain books. Fortunately, the association of the Librarians has courageously refused to comply. Meanwhile, the persecution of teachers critical of US policies, particularly as they refer to foreign policy, war and Israel's treatment of the Palestinians, has continued unabated. Private organizations have also come into existence, like *Campus Watch*, who encourages students to denounce teachers who show sympathy/support for the Palestinian cause, as was the case of the late Prof. Edward Said at Columbia University in

New York. Nevertheless, it is the economic forms of repression⁴ that are most difficult to resist, especially when they take the form of student *debt*, which is a highly individualized form of constraint.

What then can be done to resist these trends?

The first thing to stress is that obviously there is more than one battle-ground, for each of the violations of academic freedom that I mentioned can become a ground of resistance. It is also clear that a condition for resisting the corporatization of the university and the limitations on academic freedom is the formation of networks of teachers ready to mobilize when individual teachers or students, or teacher or student organization, comes under attack. The Edu-Factory network that was established in 2005 has this objective and has demonstrated to be quite useful in promoting debates and circulating analyses and experiences of struggle. As it has often been pointed out, *there is nothing more demoralizing for a teacher or student when the repression they are subject to takes place among the indifference of colleagues and students*. More than that. We have seen that campus mobilizations can make universities administrators and authorities step back.

There are therefore many terrains of struggle. Nevertheless, we believe that there are strategic considerations that make certain struggles especially important, as they affect the very core of academic freedom, intended as the 'right to have access to the means of knowledge production' and guarantee that education serve the cause of social justice.

In the US, in the teachers and students circles I work with, that *strategic* struggle is the struggle against student loan debt. I

⁴ On this topic , I wrote an article in 1993 titled "The Economic Roots of the Repression of Academic Freedom in Africa" , now in *A Thousand Flowers...*

call it 'strategic' because debt is a disciplining mechanism that conditions every aspect of academic life. It conditions students' lives on campus as well as their future, and it conditions the teachers' work as well, since it is difficult to teach students who have no time to study because they must hold two or three jobs, and have to finish their studies in the shortest time not to accumulate too much debt. There is also an ethical consideration that we, as teachers, must consider. Do we want to become instruments for the creation of a population of students destined to become indentured servants to the banks? Do we want our teaching to become an object of commerce and a commodity from which many are excluded on purely financial grounds?

There is now an organization in the US, based in New York but extending to other cities, called *Strike/Debt* that is raising these questions. This is not the first organization to be concerned with the student debt crisis. But it takes a different position from the others that are fighting for the 'right to bankruptcy,'⁵ or for a reduction of the interest rates. *Strike Debt* argues that student loan debts should not be paid because *the loans were not legitimate* to begin with. They were not legitimate because knowledge and education are not commodities, to be bought and sold, and because students are told that they must have a university degree, otherwise they will be poor for the rest of their lives, and this is why they fall into debt. *Strike/Debt* insists that *students are workers* and their education contributes to every form of production. They object to the arguments that students must pay for their education because they are the only beneficiaries of it.

⁵ Student loan debt is the only one for which you cannot take advantage of bankruptcy procedures. No matter how impoverished you may be, on this account you cannot go bankrupt, but will be confronted with this debt for the rest of your life.

As I said, the struggle against debt is strategic because it touches on the fundamental principle that education should be a common good and should be free. But if academic freedom is conceived as the *freedom to study*, the freedom to have access to the means of knowledge-production and, above all, *the freedom to pursue knowledge in a way that contributes to social justice*, then our struggle must go further. It must begin with an examination of the practices in which we engage as teachers and students on our campuses. We need to determine whether our work contributes or not to this project, whether it contributes or not to eliminate the hierarchies and inequalities that exist in society, or contributes to deepen them and institutionalize them.

There is much work, then, that we have to do, and there are many questions that we have to ask, if we take seriously the principle that academic freedom must be, at all points, the freedom to make knowledge a vehicle for the creation of a just society.

For instance, should we not question our grading systems that serve as a ranking mechanisms, stabilizers and producers of inequality? In Italy, in the late 1960s and the 1970s, at the peak of the student movement, university students were able to win to right to present their work collectively and be given the same grade. It is a partial solution, but it suggests that other forms of evaluation are possible, less divisive and less productive of the competition and ranking now issuing from the grading systems of our schools. We must also overcome the separation on our campuses between student and teachers and the remaining staff, now defined as non-academic, and demystify the idea that only teachers and students are producers of knowledge, and only academic institutions are

the sites where knowledge can be produced. And we must engage in a serious reflection on what constitutes knowledge.

When education will be structured according to these practices and principles, then academic freedom will be achieved.