



# EDUCATION IN AMERICA

GEORGE CHARLES ROCHE III

## 9. *Academic Freedom for What?*

PROFESSOR SIDNEY HOOK has quite justly criticized the great quantities of “sloppy rhetoric” poured forth on the subject of academic freedom. The overdiscussion of such a topic usually stems from chronic underdefinition, reflecting the painfully human trait of having the most to say on a subject when we are least sure what ought to be said.

Higher education is plagued by this lack of a workable definition for *academic freedom*, and this is rooted in a singular fact: *Never*

has there been a formal statement of the relationship between the academic community and the rest of society. Is the academic community merely to teach our young? Or do we ask that it also discover new truths? Perhaps we also wish our teachers to serve as philosophers of the realm. In short, no lasting answer seems to have been given the questions: Should society decide what is taught in the grove académé? Should the academy decide society’s course? Or, does some workable third alternative exist?

Perhaps the best means of getting at the relationship between the academy and society is to clar-

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Dr. Roche is Director of Seminars for the Foundation for Economic Education. He has taught history and philosophy in college and maintains a special interest in American education.

ify what we have in mind when we discuss the education of the individual student. The student is the vital link between academy and society, since it is the student in whom both have a common stake. In the last analysis, we want one thing for the student: freedom — i.e., the achievement of that capacity for *internal* self-determination allowing him to become a whole man, his own man. How is this freedom to be achieved? It must be achieved through knowledge, through the development of a capacity for self-discipline, through an understanding of the obligations and privileges involved in life.

Freedom for the student surely cannot be attained without freedom for the teacher. Freedom to think, to challenge the common view on occasion, would therefore seem an absolute requirement if education is to achieve the full development of the individual student. Does this freedom to develop and state one's own views have no limitation? Many of those who discuss academic freedom insist that *any* restraint is unwarranted, since it interferes with a mysterious and ill-defined "universal dialogue." Others would insist that, while the freedom of *research* must be unlimited, society has a right to censor what its young people are taught. In effect, the

teacher would be told, "Think what you like, but teach only what the majority approves."

Both of the above positions tend to be mere caricatures. Few actually advocate a literal freedom to teach *any* idea, however socially unacceptable it might be. An equally small number actually advocates a literal enforcement of censorship over the classroom teacher. The desirable norm lies somewhere between the two. Surely anyone qualified to teach the young should ideally already possess the inner freedom, the self-discipline, the necessary internal check of the truly civilized man, to maintain the standards of his ideas and values on such a high plane that parents should have no grounds for complaint. By the same token, parents should have sufficient confidence in the standards of teachers to allow them a free hand.

The trouble lies in the fact that many teachers no longer seem to operate within the framework of values constituting civilized behavior. Such teachers seem to have adopted the totally relative standards so damaging to modern society. Parents are not to be blamed for recognizing that teachers who themselves lack standards of value are ill-prepared to impart the proper values to the young. This may explain why some par-

ents desire to censor the classroom offerings of the teacher.

Such a desire may be understandable, but it is unacceptable if freedom for student and teacher is our goal. Merely substituting one set of wrong ideas for another set, trading license for repression, will not produce the desired effect.

If the teacher is to lead the student on the high road to internal freedom, to his development as a unique person, he must be free himself; free to pursue his speculations, free to express the results of his findings. Such a teacher is more than an employee hired to teach the young. He becomes a seeker after truth, dedicated to explaining that truth to those who will follow. Academic freedom thus becomes an expression of sufficient confidence in the teacher to allow that process to operate.

### **Relativism**

Still, the search for truth carries with it the assumption that truth *does* exist. The alleged "objective" approach of many present-day educators contains no such assumption. All ideas are to be presented to the student without that evil of evils, the "value judgment." Such relativism finally denies *all* values, thus destroying the framework of civilized value within which meaningful individual choice must be made. Christ,

Socrates, and the other great teachers of history had at least two things in common: They distinguished between right and wrong; and they did not hesitate to announce that distinction to all who would listen. In short, they recognized a framework of values.

There is also another historical lesson to be learned on the necessity of values. Those societies denying the validity of a value framework have invariably proven to be societies on the decline. The Sophists who finally destroyed the Greeks serve as a graphic example.

Unfortunately, truth will not necessarily rise to a dominant position in a totally "objective" teaching situation. Teachers who fail to believe strongly enough in the existence of truth as a premise for their teaching often serve as the ideal foils of those who would "stack the deck" against the free choice of the individual. Witness the twentieth century history of Russia or Germany, where totalitarian control came as the aftermath of periods of so-called "free inquiry."

Ultimately, the teacher must be free to do his own thinking and the student must be free to choose what ideas he will accept or reject. But the whole process of orderly thought becomes impossible unless some framework exists for the

process of thinking. A completely relativistic stance is doomed to endless internal contradiction. If, as a relativist, a man insists that one opinion is as good as another, what defense has he against a totally contradictory view? If all views are equally valid, one man's denial is as sound as another's affirmation. Such thinking can only "agree to disagree" in an endless (and pointless) discussion foredoomed never to reach a conclusion.

In a situation where "academic freedom" is so abused, it is small wonder that society finally balks at the prospect of the deforming educational process which results. Most men sense that freedom involves far more than the license to do as one pleases. Meaningful freedom has always implied responsibility, and responsibility demands self-control. Self-control presupposes guidelines within which the individual attempts to live in accord with accepted and acceptable standards. The denial of those standards and of the necessity for self-control in the name of "academic freedom" is as much a denial of true *freedom* for the individual as is an attempt to censor student and teacher in the classroom. Either way, genuine academic freedom suffers.

Much of the "sloppy rhetoric" on academic freedom to which

Sidney Hook referred originates within the ranks of the "intellectual" community — authors, editors, critics, and scholars, many of whom tend to be enamored of their own company. This love affair is sufficiently ingrown that all too often these mutually congratulatory purveyors of "modern" thought have come to regard any criticism of their position as an assault upon "academic freedom." The strength of this delusion is verified by the spectacle of the many professors who seem to view themselves as part of an embattled nonconformist minority despite the fact that in many cases all the members of their respective departments share the same ideological position.

#### **Outside Threats to Academic Freedom**

The pressures on academic freedom originating outside the academy are sometimes exaggerated. Most men of good will are extremely reticent to lend their support to any thoroughgoing censorship over ideas on the campus. The danger to academic freedom is perhaps less likely to result from public concern over what is being taught on campus than from increased control of the purse strings by governmental and quasi-governmental agencies. This very real threat to academic freedom, especially in research, is

rooted in the use of tax monies in the manipulation of higher education. This important matter will be further discussed a bit later in the context of public versus private financing of education. Let it suffice here to mention the serious threat of government control in higher education both directly, through subsidy of education with tax money, and indirectly, through corporate agencies holding government contracts.

#### **Threats from Within**

Though quick to complain of external threats to their academic freedom, professors seldom look to themselves, to the academic community itself, as the source of the trouble. As a case in point, consider the decline in standards which often has accompanied the mass production techniques of modern higher education:

To want to extend the boundaries of knowledge, or to conserve the wisdom of ancestors, some faith in the importance of learning, and in a Good that is more than private gain, is required. That lacking, the teacher becomes a hired hand, paid to do a chore . . . The automobile-worker on the assembly line enjoys no special freedom; he has no duties which require a special freedom. And if the teacher willingly assists in the reduction of formal education to a mere degree-mill intended to keep young people very mildly occupied, as if they were in

an inordinately expensive kindergarten, then he surely will lose his academic freedom. . . .

Just what sort of academic freedom do these professor-employees expect? And just what sort do they deserve? What sacred trust are they guarding? Just how much do they themselves care about Truth? Some of them have on their shelves no books but a few free copies of textbooks; some of them talk, when they meet together, only of salaries and faculty scandals; some of them say that this state of affairs is a positive good, and look forward with relish to the demise of private foundations which, with intellectual snobbery, still cling to standards.<sup>1</sup>

Academic freedom is further endangered from within by the growing tendency to substitute slogans for thought. Examples of such slogans abound. Appeals for increased emphasis upon proper training of individuals and higher standards within education are often denounced by teacher and administrator alike as "undemocratic." Secure in tenure, many professors seem more irritated than stimulated by a student with an inquiring mind or a colleague who holds differing views. Nicholas Berdyaev might have been addressing himself to the American scene when he remarked: "With sorrow we must recognize the fact that freedom is dear only

<sup>1</sup> Russell Kirk, *Academic Freedom*, pp. 163, 177.

to those men who think creatively. It is not very necessary to those who do not value thinking.”<sup>2</sup>

With due allowance to the many creative thinkers and teachers throughout American education, the truth of Russell Kirk's severe indictment remains:

Though they may go through the motions of “research,” they care precious little about the duty to extend the boundaries of knowledge, and not very much about the duty to conserve the knowledge of our civilization. The humiliating pressure which many administrators endeavor to exert upon teachers to *publish* — to publish just anything, anywhere, for the sake of the record — or to draw up enormous committee-reports about trivialities suggests that both administrators and teachers are ignorant of the true nature of academic freedom and academic dignity. All the administrator wants is some tangible evidence of busy-work to present to his trustees or to the state legislature; all the teacher wants is some sham-proof of his liveliness of mind that may bring him a two-hundred-dollar increase in salary. How much freedom do such men have? And how much do they deserve?<sup>3</sup>

### **Political Activism**

In addition to those who misinterpret academic freedom as a

<sup>2</sup> Nicholas Berdyaev, *The Realm of Spirit and The Realm of Caesar*, p. 110.

<sup>3</sup> Russell Kirk, *Academic Freedom*, p. 162.

“freedom to do nothing,” higher education is also faced with political activists who use their positions as a sanctuary from which politically motivated attacks can be launched against the rest of society. “Sanctuary” is a well-advised term. Such political activists never question the justice of their attacks, yet are the first to raise the cry of “academic freedom” over the inevitable reaction to their activity.

Learned Hand once remarked, “You cannot wear a sword beneath a scholar's gown.” He was quite right. No one can simultaneously be advocate and scholar. Refusal to face this fact makes the political activist on the campus a primary offender against the academic freedom he constantly evokes.

Much of the student unrest on campus is directly traceable to faculty agitation, in which a privileged academic position is used to subvert the entire process. Such professors are often so busy in such causes that they neglect the very teaching and research which is the reason for the academic community's existence. Unless the teacher fulfills his duties to the system and convinces society he is discharging those duties, he can expect to lose the privileged base he has been granted. Academic freedom is not some irrevocable

grant. If it is lost, we all suffer, because the process of creative thinking suffers as does the development of truly free, inner-directed students. But any right is doomed unless its inevitably accompanying responsibilities are discharged.

While the professor has every right to take part in politics on his own, the current tendency to use the academy as an arsenal and staging ground for political combat is both unwarranted and dangerous. Considering the enormous overextension of government in our society, we may expect that when the academy is willing to lend itself to indoctrination and activism rather than education, the end result will be political regulation of that indoctrination. The state will prove to be a poor guardian of academic freedom.

The need is great for the academic community to put its own house in order. The image and the fact of an intellectual community devoted to pursuing the truth must be renewed. Meanwhile, the number of genuine teachers and scholars quietly pursuing their proper function is the cement which still holds the system together, despite all the destructive forces at work upon it.

This community of scholars needs protection on two fronts: from those outside the academy who would destroy freedom through excessive regulation, and from those inside the academy who would destroy the system through license. Unless faculties can regulate themselves from within, they may rest assured they will be regulated from without.

The central question remains then, "Academic Freedom for What?" The answer is two-fold: the pursuit of truth; and the simultaneous responsibility for developing individual students so self-disciplined, so internally free as the result of their knowledge of civilized standards and human responsibilities, that the core of values constituting civilization will be consistently reflected in their behavior. That is the road to salvation for not only the academic community, but for everyone in society. In a word, academic freedom is the freedom to perform the task peculiar to proper education. When the academic community takes other roles unto itself, it does so at the dual risk of failing in its own function while tempting other elements in society to usurp and corrupt the educational function. ◆

*The next article of this series will discuss  
"Revolt on the Campus."*

## The Fallacy of "Intrinsic Value"

*If people value something, it has value; if people do not value something, it does not have value; and there is no intrinsic about it.*

RT. HON. J. ENOCH POWELL, M.P.

"IDEAS DIE HARD," says an old proverb. Even in an age of rapid change, such as our own, the slogans, clichés, and errors of earlier times seem to persist; it often seems that the truths that once brought peace, stability, and steady progress are the first things to be abandoned, while the errors persist undaunted. Henry Hazlitt once wrote of John Maynard Keynes that the true things he said were not new, and the new things he said were not true. Yet it is the new aspect of Keynes' "New Economics" that has fascinated today's guild of economists.

The triumph of the slogan is understandable. We are limited creatures. We cannot attain exhaustive knowledge of anything,

Gary North is a member of the Economists' National Committee on Monetary Policy. He teaches at the University of California at Riverside while working on a doctorate in Economic History.

and certainly not of everything. As a result, we find ourselves at the mercy of the expert; simultaneously, we live our day-to-day lives in terms of ideas that we cannot be continually re-examining. Some things must be accepted on faith or by experience; we have neither the time nor capacity to rethink everything we know. Still, no intelligent person dares to neglect the possibility that his opinion in some area or other may be open to question. At times it is vital that we reconsider a subject, especially if it is a barrier to clear thinking or effective action. If our error is in a realm of life in which we claim to be experts, or at least skilled amateurs, then the necessity of careful reasoning is exceptionally important. The persistence of some erroneous line of reasoning here, simply because this unexamined train of