



Interdisciplinary Political Studies

<http://siba-ese.unisalento.it/index.php/idps>

ISSN: 2039-8573 (electronic version)

IdPS, Issue 3(1) 2017: 7-10

DOI: 10.1285/ i20398573v3n1p7

Published in December 11, 2017



EDITORIAL

Free to think, free to research: challenges to academic freedom in the context of contemporary global politics

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The protection of academic freedom through international norms, advocacy networks, and institutional dispositifs is not new, and yet it remains both contested and violated in many ways and at different latitudes. While it has been often associated with basic human rights (freedoms of opinion, expression, and speech as well as right to education), it has also been questioned as a form of academia's privilege, contouring a safe zone to communicate ideas and facts that would be disturbing, inconvenient or in contrast with a certain legal/constitutional order. This latter narration has paved the way to multifaceted forms of censorship and repression specifically targeting scholars, students and in general, university staff. Inquiring over allegedly "sensitive" matters, organizing a seminar with "troublesome" invited speakers, and carrying out fieldwork research in "dangerous" contexts have been subject to restrictions by political establishments, security officials and bureaucrats in a worrying number of countries worldwide. These trends obviously challenge the

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emancipatory potential of teaching, learning, researching, and making science advancing.

According to the 2017 edition of the report “Free to Think” released by “Scholars at Risk”, 257 attacks on higher education communities, campuses and institutions have been reported over the last 12 months before its publication, having occurred especially in African, Asian, Central-Latin American and Eastern European countries. In contexts where only one official and institutionalized narration is permitted and accepted, the very process of knowledge production is considered as a threat to state authorities: the latter indeed ultimately aim to maintain their key role as gate-keepers and occasionally seek to coercively ensure that alternative narratives to their own do not emerge.

It is misleading, though, to think that academic freedom is at risk only in those countries with disputable democratic credentials, weak human right protection regimes, and authoritarian leaders. On the contrary, there are elusive mechanisms at work in Western high education institutions, whose ultimate objective is to make knowledge production disciplined, deterred or even policed and under surveillance. We only have to look at how counter-terrorism/counter-radicalisation policies are impacting on the functioning of university activities across Europe; or how the intellectual labour is increasingly complying with managerial logics at the expense of university autonomy.

In other words, academic freedom in countries with strong democratic traditions should not be taken for granted. The concept of academic freedom is subject to contending definitions; however, its content ultimately travels across different cultural and political contexts and a critical engagement with it may contain the risk of overstressing its normative core. Furthermore, continuous vigilance on the extent to which free enquiry is enabled, respected and not endangered, may spot

very diverse attacks on academic freedom. In stable liberal democracies, the personal safety of academic researchers may not be at risk; however, the principle of free inquiry can be limited or even hollowed out in more subtle ways. What is the limit above which budget cuts to public universities actually impair the freedom to research? To what extent can research priorities be decided by the government (or by one of its agencies) without interfering with the bottom-up creative approach that has characterized the academic environment since the middle ages? How free are the young researchers who know that only certain kinds of publications will help them to obtain a tenured job?

Some of these questions are increasingly debated among scholars who have developed a critical stance against the neoliberal turn that, in the last two or three decades, has profoundly affected the higher education system. During this period most OECD countries have implemented reforms to introduce a new style of management, aimed at improving the efficiency and performance of public universities. Although these reforms enhanced the accountability of the academic system in different ways, they also had some side effects that need to be discussed. . Academic freedom is ultimately a matter of degree, and in an age of multiple crises, epochal changes and painful adjustments, only a genuinely free academy can contribute to criticize, evaluate and perhaps replace the ideas which brought us here.

By re-launching Interdisciplinary Political Studies we aim to give our contribution to promoting the free circulation of ideas by breaking down the barriers between disciplines and adopting an Open Access policy. We are aware of the many challenges that a young journal should overcome to find its place in the publishing jungle and stand out from the crowd. However, we decide that it is worth the risk. IdPS is committed to offering free-of-charge publications to those scholars who want to share their findings well beyond the boundaries of their scholarly affilia-

tions; above all, we intend to challenge the barricades of journal subscriptions that too often leave scholars at the margins of the academic debate.

We have embarked on the re-launch of *Interdisciplinary Political Studies* with the collaborative drive that - we believe - should characterize all intellectual enterprises. Behind the executive work of our editorial board, there are many friends and colleagues (as well as institutions) that share our commitment to the Open Access principle and thus support our project. Therefore, we inaugurate the journal by thanking the former IdPS editors, Nelli Babayan and Stefano Braghiroli, and the members of our Advisory Board. Starting this enterprise would not have been possible without the support of the Department of History, Society and Human Studies of the University of Salento, which believed in our project. We also thank three academic institutions for their support: the Center for the Study of Political Change at the University of Siena; the Department of Human and Social Sciences at the University "L'Orientale" of Naples; and the Institute of Law, Politics, and Development of the Sant'Anna School of Advanced Studies, Pisa.

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