

What's academic freedom anyway?

Freedom has taken a bit of a pounding over the last few years. So, as Cambridge celebrates 800 years, we might contemplate what academic freedom means, where it comes from, and where it might go.

History tells a surprisingly complex tale. Although Cambridge was founded in 1209 by scholars fleeing persecution in Oxford, the right to heresy wasn't one of our original goals. By 1238 there were Dominicans training at Cambridge to hunt heretics, and when King's College was founded in 1441 all the fellows had to take an oath not to follow the teachings of Wyclif. Scholars were quite prepared invoke authority against their rivals.

Academic freedom seems to have put up its first tender shoots in the early 16th century: Erasmus remarked that Cambridge became much more open in the mid-1510s. A critical factor was self-governance: changes to the curriculum only had to be agreed with colleagues, not with the King. College rivalries also helped. When a fellow of John's was accused of heresy in 1527, the chancellor John Fisher changed the statutes so that heretics could be sacked – yet there was great reluctance to do so, perhaps related to the fact that Fisher had promoted some colleges over others.

As universities grew and academics interacted more with the state, there were attempts to impose discipline. Elizabeth I changed our statutes in 1570 to give college masters more power over dons, in the hope that they'd clamp down on heresy; the reaction was the Puritan movement that led within a century to the Civil War and the settlement of America.

The law of unintended consequences tangles up the next few hundred years too. Cambridge Puritans like Cromwell and Milton greatly helped the process of turning religion from an instrument of state power into a matter of conscience, although this wasn't always what they intended. Newton's discovery of physics in the seventeenth century blew away the medieval idea of a God who micromanaged the world – yet Newton himself was religious. The philosophical space he cleared enabled Halley to become a Professor at Oxford in 1703 despite being an atheist; yet Cambridge itself did not break the church's stranglehold until the 19th century. As late as late as 1813, Charles Babbage's thesis was considered to be blasphemous and he wasn't allowed to graduate!

The human scale of a collegiate university has been a strong bulwark against external repression. It hasn't always prevented the internal variety; Bertrand Russell was sacked by Trinity College in 1916 for being a conscientious objector to World War I. But on balance it's been a great strength that most decisions are taken in colleges and departments, rather than by the centre.

Self-government has also been hugely important; we were a self-governing community of scholars right from the start, unlike universities such as Bologna that started out as communities of students who banded together to hire teachers. Time has proved our

model to be the best. The best science, and the best scholarship, are disruptive; Cambridge troublemakers from Erasmus and Cranmer through Newton and Darwin to Turing, Watson and Crick created the space for the growth of evangelical Christianity in the sixteenth century, science in the seventeenth, atheism in the nineteenth and the new sciences of life and information today. The societal returns on academic freedom of speech have been huge. We are all much freer and richer as a result.

Indeed, the Treasury might usefully pause to reflect: every penny spent by Oxford and Cambridge has been repaid a hundredfold to later generations by the progress that we troublemakers have made possible. In the wake of the Stern Report, with the Government committed to intergenerational equity on environmental matters, let's see the same principle applied to scholarship. The taxpayers of 2800 AD won't care much about today's near-market research; it's the other variety they'll celebrate.

And when freedom fails, so does academic productivity. The worst was in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries when Cambridge colleges weren't allowed to admit nonconformists. That simply handed the baton for a while to the Scottish universities, and to new institutions such as UCL. Another dreadful missed opportunity was the emancipation of women: although we admitted women from 1869 we didn't give them proper degrees and let them vote until 1947. Yet Oxford enfranchised women in 1920. *Nostra maxima culpa!*

Where next? Freedom of speech in academia can't be totally separated from the same freedom in the rest of society. And even although academics have led the way for centuries, there are always questions about whether we'll be able to in the future. Each decade brings its own challenges, and our current challenge comes from employment law. If we have to offer academic and other staff the same terms of employment, should we level academics down (as our bureaucrats propose) or level everybody else up? I believe we must level up. I can't see that granting freedom of speech to librarians, computer officers and museum curators will damage the nation. But removing it from researchers and scholars – that surely will.

Cambridge has made a huge contribution to human freedom and precisely because we have been the greatest iconoclasts. Just as fire rejuvenates the forest by burning away the rubbish and clearing space for new things to grow, so we have done the same for human culture – over and over again. In the year in which we celebrate eight hundred years of creative mayhem, the last thing Cambridge (or Oxford) should do is abandon the decentralised, self-governing model that has worked so well. Civil servants may sniff, but our management-free zone has created the intellectual space that's needed to nurture the big, disruptive ideas that in turn create the cultural and scientific space for really major progress. Academia may be a golden goose, but it needs to be free-range.

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