



The Inaugural Global Ideas Lecture

Academic Freedom, Free Speech and Thinking for Yourself

Michael Ignatieff

November 1, 2021



uOttawa

Chaire de recherche de l'Université
en pensée politique mondiale
The University Research Chair on
Global Political Thought

Université d'Ottawa

CĒPI

Centre d'études
**EN POLITIQUES
INTERNATIONALES**



University of Ottawa

CIPS

Centre for
**INTERNATIONAL
POLICY STUDIES**

Thanks for joining me for this lecture. The University of Ottawa has had more than its fair share of controversy over issues of free speech and academic freedom in the past years, and I hope what I have to say will be helpful in clarifying what is at stake, as well as situating the debates inside the university in the wider world, where academic freedom, like democracy itself, is coming under attack.

First, a word is in order about freedom. There are those today who define freedom exclusively in terms of personal non-interference, as an all-licensing “don’t touch me.” We hear this in the anti-vaccination movements and in the libertarian fringes of conservatism. Isaiah Berlin, you will remember, distinguished between freedom from and freedom to, and these movements take freedom from to an absurd extreme and in so doing abuse

the very meaning of freedom. We are uniquely interdependent creatures and both our health and our freedom depend on the care we take of the health and freedom of others. My health is likely to be compromised if I fail to make any surrender of personal liberty for the sake of your health. My political freedom is unlikely to endure long if I am unwilling to defend yours. As with freedom in general, so with academic freedom in particular. Any community of thinkers that enjoys the privileges of freedom should want these to be shared by all such communities. Knowledge is borderless, and it is to the benefit of all for it to circulate without let or hindrance. Universal access to knowledge, in turn, acknowledges the fact that all human beings have the capacity to benefit from it, though this capacity dies in many souls, due to injustice, discrimination, and cruelty. We should value intellectual freedom not as the privilege of the

credentialed few but as the right of us all. If so, we should always do what we can to defend the freedom of others, especially those advocating positions we disagree with, in the hope that they will come to our defense when our freedoms are in danger.

In the 1930's, the British academics who raised hundreds of thousands of pounds to assist the emigration of German academics, most of them Jews, understood this. When the New School in New York invited the entirety of the Frankfurt School to rehouse itself in America, they understood the same. In both Britain and the United States, the contribution of these refugee academics has been immense. These luminous examples from the 1930's help to clarify that the defense of academic freedom is necessary to the defense of democracy itself. If intellectual freedom is in danger—and there is evidence that it is--

democratic freedom suffers. If democracy is in crisis today, it is, in large measure, an epistemological crisis: as citizens we no longer know whose facts we should trust. When we no longer know whom to trust, we lose trust in ourselves, and trust in our own judgement is the sheet anchor of democratic stability.

It is in this context, therefore, that discussions of academic freedom acquire a relevance beyond the academy and raise the question of what obligations follow from the freedoms that academics enjoy. The right, like all rights, entails a responsibility: to contribute academic learning for the benefit of society at large. Despite the populist pushback against expertise, academic experts play an ever more important role in winnowing the chaff of deception from the grain of ascertainable fact.

This responsibility in turn implies that we should use our authority judiciously. We should speak in public only about what we truly know and to avoid commenting on subjects beyond our proper sphere of competence. Unless we exercise some self-discipline, we make fools of ourselves and undermine the prestige of the disciplines and institutions from which we derive our authority.

The responsibilities that go with the privileges of academic freedom do not end at the border of our democracies. There is also a duty beyond our borders, a duty of international academic solidarity.

In 2021, the need for organizations like the Scholars at Risk in many American and Canadian universities has never been greater. The reason is simple: democracy is in recession,

authoritarianism and single party rule are in the ascendant, and wherever this is the case, academic freedom is in danger.

Consider the latest examples from around the world.

Afghanistan. In the wake of the Taliban victory women and girls have been sent home from schools and universities. Now Afghan academics are desperate to leave and write daily to their friends in the West, seeking assistance to emigrate.

Turkey. The Erdogan regime continues its crackdown on universities, with show trials, dismissals, suspensions of entire faculties.

China. Chinese scholars in the humanities and social sciences once able to freely join in the debates of the international scholarly community now must watch their words.

Surveillance of speech at universities is omnipresent. Uighur writers and thinkers face persecution and imprisonment.

Myanmar, a university system just beginning to create the conditions for institutional autonomy has now been crushed by the junta.

Russia. Since the jailing of Alexei Navalny, oppositional scholars and journalists are fleeing the country, concluding that it is no longer possible to sustain free thought.

Hungary threw out Central European University in 2019 and forced it to relocate to Vienna. In its place, the Orban government invited a Chinese university, whose charter explicitly accepts the ultimate authority of the Communist Party, to take our place.

I was the Rector of CEU at the time and looking back now from the safety of Vienna, I conclude that despite magnificent

support from our fellow academics across Europe and North America, despite the European Court of Justice's ruling that the action was illegal, a member state of the European Union got away with the expulsion of a free institution. The defenses of academic freedom in Europe are weaker than we might think.

Authoritarian regimes now pose a new threat: the increasing invigilation of foreign students, and our researchers overseas, by the intelligence agencies of states such as China, Turkey, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Russia.

In January 2021, a CEU master's student in social anthropology, Ahmed Samir Santawy, returned to his native Egypt to visit his parents and complete his thesis research. He was arrested and charged with posting opinions hostile to the

regime on his Facebook while studying with us in Vienna. He is currently serving a four-year sentence in an Egyptian prison.

We should not suppose this Egyptian example is an outlier. When I taught at the Harvard Kennedy School, between 2012 and 2016, Chinese students told me, in confidence, that they chose their words carefully in class, lest one of their fellow Chinese students in the class inform on them to officials back home.

Intellectual globalization has done our institutions a power of good but authoritarian regimes have realized that globalization poses a threat to their power. When our foreign students learn in freedom with us, they inevitably ask why they cannot enjoy freedom at home. Foreign students, therefore, are

watched when they study abroad and when they return. This has the potential to chill the emancipatory impact of free learning.

These examples show that universities are the front line of a battle between autocracy and democracy, a battle in which the minds of our students, especially our foreign students, are the prize. It will be a challenge, as it was in the Cold War, to preserve the freedom of our classrooms and our research without enlisting in the ideological battles of our own governments.

So much for the threats to academic freedom from without.

Let me now change the focus to the threats from within.

Those who pay for universities or their programs—governments, foundations, alumni donors or corporations—necessarily exercise influence over what we research, what we teach, even what students we recruit. Whenever universities accept money, they expose themselves to pressures, which it is

the job of university administrators to manage without compromising the institutional autonomy on which academic freedom depends. This is a morally and politically complex area. It is wonderful for universities to have loyal cohorts of alumni who invest in their alma mater, but not so good when some of them use the money to manipulate the university's teaching and research. It's unacceptable when alumni attempt to interfere in hiring decisions, as appears to have happened at the U of T. It is good for universities to maintain research networks with Chinese or Russian universities, but it is not a good thing if the money that sustains these networks comes with strings attached, especially those that would forbid critical examination of government policy. It is good for universities to sustain close relationships with big corporations—pharmaceutical companies for example—and when the rules for these partnerships contain

clear specifications of public benefit—for example, the Oxford University partnership with Astra Zeneca on Covid vaccines—the public, the university and the private corporation all profit. But where the deals between universities and their corporate or government paymasters are opaque, where strings are attached, university autonomy comes into question. Universities are political communities, and its members have a right to know the particulars of any arrangements that university administrators make with governments, corporations, and foundations. Where the public benefits are not defined, where profits prevail over public good, the university community should say so, since institutional autonomy is the foundation of individual academic freedom.

All of this puts pressure on university leaders and underscores the point that there is nothing stable or secure

about university autonomy in the 21st century. This is because the university has never been more powerful. The university's knowledge creation and credentialing authority have become the engine that powers the modern economy. University-created knowledge generates enormous value. Where value is generated, interests pernicious to academic freedom can easily gain an unhealthy degree of influence. Universities should not allow their science departments to become adjunct research labs for private corporations. Canadian universities need to push back against any attempt by provincial governments and legislatures to follow the American example of using the power of the purse to tell universities what to teach and how to teach it. Academics must be allowed to pursue apparently useless knowledge for its own sake: pure science, pure archival research, pure experimentation divorced from social use, in the confident

expectation, of course, that in time, the most apparently ‘useless’ research turns out to benefit us all.

In addition to these economic pressures on academic autonomy, there are the pressures generated by our culture, our politics, and the inveterate human susceptibility to intellectual fashions. The question is whether universities remain capable of sustaining true freedom of thought and intellectual creativity, or whether as some critics currently charge, universities have become covens of progressive political correctness that smother contrarian thought, cushion students in progressive platitudes and in so doing betray the universities’ commitment to teach students, not *what* to think, but *how* to think.

My text here will be the motto of the British Royal Society: *Nullius in Verba*, “take nobody’s word for it.” The founders of

the Royal Society in the 1660's understood a paradox that makes intellectual freedom possible: creativity is sociable, but truth is not. On the one hand, thinking is a sociable business. Your best thoughts often occur when listening silently to someone smarter than you. Your most important contributions emerge when you find a way to respond to some searching criticism of an idea you thought was unshakeable. Knowledge creation may be a social process, best conducted within institutions, but the test of truth is not social: it is not what a community says, or a majority of its members says is true, but rather what the facts and the evidence will support, and this process of falsification and validation must not be dependent on opinion, convention or received wisdom.

Universities have always had to manage the paradox that the best thinking is done in company with others but that original

thinking that establishes new truth, is contrarian, refractory to ‘common sense’, antithetical to ideology, doctrine, or dogma.

These strange new groundbreaking ideas do not come out of nowhere. Increasingly, they are incubated in universities. Why? Because paradoxically, it is impossible to think creatively or originally without first learning the disciplines of thought.

Our modern academic disciplines are supposed to preserve these traditions. When they work as they should, they curate knowledge worth retaining and strain out opinions, doctrines, dogmas and theories that can be safely discarded. This has the effect of funneling creative minds away from questions that have been answered to questions that need answering. This is the vital work that universities do for society—curating the knowledge that still illuminates, clearing away the knowledge that has failed us or needs to be improved. When we do our jobs

properly, students develop a map in their minds of where the frontier line of knowledge lies in any given field. Once we give them the skills to cross this line and move into uncharted territory, we teach them to 'take nobody's word for it'.

That is what university education is supposed to do, but recurrently, in the social sciences and humanities at least, we do something very different. Precisely because thinking is such a sociable enterprise, in which what we think depends on those we admire, respect or fear, we allow our own minds to be taken over by the trends, fashions, movements and dogmas that, thanks to new technology, now circulate with the speed of light. From my own days as a graduate student in the 1970's, I remember vividly how intellectual winds blew through the campus, sweeping all of us students before them: first Marxism, then structuralism, then post structuralism, then

deconstruction. Some of our professors stiffened our resolve to assess these fashions critically, while others succumbed and began preaching the new gospel. These creeds promised liberation from outmoded academic dogmas and allied themselves with progressive movements outside the campus. In the 1970's, my work as a historian was changed, and I hope for the better, by the influence of some wonderfully ecumenical and imaginative social historians who worked in the Marxist tradition.

While some of these intellectual movements in the 1970 and 80's did stimulate free thought, others degenerated into closed language games for initiates, but not before the ability to speak this language was made the condition for hires, promotions, book contracts and other indices of academic prestige. In many a campus, there are still professors on staff

whose initial contract was earned by mastery of the language games of the 1970's and 1980's.

What I take from my own academic training in that period is that thinking for yourself in a university—using the freedom that the academy promises-- is about keeping your balance in the midst of tidal waves of intellectual fashion. None of this is easy. It sometimes feels like trying to keep your footing in the middle of a gale.

There is the same challenge today to rescue what is liberating from the new currents of thought at work in the 21st century university from what is dogmatic and intolerant. What is sweeping through the 21st century campus is a wave of new thinking about race, empire, colonialism and gender that is transforming every discipline in the humanities and social sciences.

Now that a backlash against these trends is in full-swing, led by conservative forces outside the university, it is important to remember the productive and liberating aspects of these movements. Thanks to the campaigns for women's rights that began in the 1960's and now have widened out to bring freedom and marriage equality to gay and trans people, we all live in a world somewhat freer from shame, stigma and oppression.

The same transformative experience has occurred in relation to race and empire, with especially troubling impact on the national narratives we once learned as children. We now understand how much of the wealth and privilege of European and American institutions, including universities, was built upon slavery and colonial exploitation. We now know something about the systematic, institutionalized character of racial discrimination. In Canada, all of us now know, as we should have

known before, that the schools supposed to teach aboriginal children did many of them unconscionable harm. This has shaken, as it should, the Canadian national narrative itself, forcing us all to come to terms with the profound challenge that the aboriginal experience in Canada poses to the integrity of our national story.

Just as universities are on the front line of the 21st century battle between democracy and authoritarianism, so they are on the front line of our overdue reckoning with the history of nation, race, empire and gender. This reckoning is already changing, and for the better, the curriculum we teach, the research subjects we chose, the work we publish and the contributions we make to public debate. The result will be, I hope, a more complex, troubling, pluralistic narrative of the

national life of our countries, one that includes the perspectives of those of our fellow citizens hitherto hidden from history.

It is precisely because these intellectual movements have such a liberating potential that they become dangerous. Because they promise liberation from dogma and prejudice, their adherents accord themselves the right to argue as if no sensible person can possibly disagree. Yet people do disagree: whether statues should be torn down, whether certain speakers should be 'de-platformed' or disinvited, whether certain texts should be discarded from the canon, whether words whose meaning we once thought were settled, like sex and gender, now need to be re-defined, which words we must never use again.

We owe it to ourselves to debate these questions out in the open, free from intimidation. The problem is that Intellectual views which promise liberation from dogma, prejudice and

racism sometimes do intimidate those who don't happen to share them. They are moral visions of what a good world should look and about who a person should be. To express allegiance to these views is to express who you feel you ultimately are and also to despise those who don't live in your mental universe.

We've been here before. Those who aligned themselves with the intellectual movements of the 1970's, from Marxism to deconstruction, all thought of themselves as 'progressive', and those who resisted as 'reactionary.' But the polarization of today has gone from ideological self-righteousness and closure to racial and gender-based closure.

When intellectual claims become identity claims, people feel radically threatened because their identities are challenged, and their reactions are likely to be strong precisely because they feel something essential, integral to their very selves is being

challenged. When you are not just defending an idea or a claim, but your moral identity, you are not likely to react with tolerant equanimity to disagreement. You are likely to be vehement in reply. This is the slippery slope that can lead men and women in academic life to decide to live within the protective shell of dogma, under the compelling illusion that they are at last being authentically themselves.

Universities have always given harbor and shelter to true believers, but it is difficult to sustain a climate of intellectual freedom in a campus full of true believers. Academic freedom—and the intellectual liberty that should go with it—presumes not just an ethics of civility, but a capacity to distance your own identity from the propositions you uphold. It is only possible to admit that you're wrong, if you can separate your identity claims from your truth claims; if you are sufficiently independent, even

of progressive thought, to assert your own right to ascertain truth for yourself.

In the face of liberating ideologies that insist that speech and thought should be silenced, we badly need clarity about the distinction between offense and harm, between conduct or speech which challenges a received doctrine and conduct or speech which assaults the dignity of a person. We need definitions of harm and offense that are believable for both sides of a controversy: the definition should not be the monopoly of the self-declared victim. We need a conversation about these incidents which is just, i.e. fair to those who are accused of harm and those who claim they have suffered the harm. We have been doing this for centuries—in the law of libel and defamation, and universities should align its speech codes with the standards of the law. It should also put the rights of both sides of a

controversy first, and the universities' own reputation second. When university administrators rush in to 'manage' a speech controversy because it harms their reputation, it almost always damages the rights of either party in a dispute.

There are occasions when the conduct of a professor, a student or a member of an administration does so much real harm to another person's integrity or dignity that dismissal should be considered. But we need, in all of these painful matters, to meet the basic standards of justice: due deliberation, careful consideration of the evidence on both sides, impartial justice and fairness. Universities need the rule of law as their guide, not public relations talk or 'reputation management'.

So—in conclusion—academic freedom isn't just a claim about the epistemological conditions for democracy; not just a claim about the interdependence of freedom here at home and

freedom abroad; not just a claim about the need to defend the institutional autonomy of universities in an age where university knowledge generates the value that makes the world economy turn; not just a question of distinguishing offense and harm more clearly; it is, in the last instance, a deep claim about the conditions of our own intellectual freedom: that we must be tough enough, to keep our identities out of arguments about truth; resilient enough to subject even liberating ideologies to the test of our intelligence; and finally, resolute enough to “take nobody’s word for it” but our own.