

## Camille Paglia: on Academic Freedom and the "Obligation to Offend"

"It used to be that Academic Freedom was an issue in the post-war period, when there was a danger of intervention, in state universities, by trustees and the state government which provide money. Where you have a conservative political structure in a state, and therefore a meddling, to try to stop political activism on the part of faculty. So it used to be, what's so awful about this is, that it used to be a protection for progressive, or liberal, or radical professors, for free thinking, in a time of conservative political government and legislatures.

So what we have here (now) is an abomination, where we have the *liberal extreme* operating to censor. That seems to me, such an atrocity; going against all of the great principles of the Enlightenment and the age of Revolution. It's just appalling in terms of

the history of liberalism. It's incredibly dangerous and it just reminds us of the worst excesses of the French Revolution - Marat killed in his bath - that kind of thing, we don't want a return to that!

So as far as I'm concerned (about

Academic Freedom ... a professor should be able to say whatever he or she thinks about any issue, in any situation. The idea of hurting people's feelings - or going against currently-accepted dogma - my God, it's the professor's obligation to go against current dogma, it's a professor's obligation to offend, to stir up,

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to disturb, to unsettle. Far from the opposite, professor's are not there to console, to reassure, to coddle. What is this? That's being a nurse! I don't want to be a nurse, I'm an intellectual. People no longer know what it is to be an intellectual, because we've never had a tradition of it, really, in North

america. It's something that people

understand in Europe much more. The class of intellectual, the free-speakers, the free-thinkers, who is outside the establishment, from Sartre through Foucault - not that I respect Foucault - but they are all part of that tradition. It all goes back to Voltaire. My god, Voltaire, went against the dogmatism of his entire time. The man was notorious, he fought with everyone. Voltaire is a great role model; someone who travelled Europe ... and wherever he saw corrupt and entrenched authority ... he attacked it." (from *Brunswickan* interview Nov. 93)

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also heard about Yaqzan is that a Mathematics professor has no business discussing topics such as this in the classroom. In many ways, a lecture is a soapbox from which a professor is entitled to expound upon his/her views. So long as the course outline and its syllabus are satisfied, there is not really a problem with professors going off on a tangent. Hopefully, that tangent will be somewhat related to the course material, but this should not be insisted upon.

The problem cases are those professors who express hostility toward certain segments of the population, either inside or outside of the classroom. I must admit that as a French Canadian I would feel uncomfortable taking a course from any professor who wanted all of us "frogs" to stay in Quebec where we belong. However, I am not attending university for my comfort; I'm here to get an education. A professor who is anti-French would not deter me from taking a course from him/her if it was otherwise a course that I wanted to take. The only concession that I would make would be that if I thought that the professor's prejudice was going to adversely affect my mark, I would insist on having all of my grades assigned by an external examiner. Admittedly, this is not an ideal solution, but it is still superior to restricting that professor's freedom of speech.

The issue of academic freedom is an extension of this debate. What happens when a professor expresses an unpopular opinion in a field in which s/he is an expert? In other words, what happens when a professor is no longer representing his or her self but is representing his or her university? When I attended the University of Western Ontario a few years back, the controversy engendered by Philippe Rushton's research was in full flight. Rushton determined that brain size and penis length were related. He in turn related this to intelligence and reproductive strategy. His findings were that Asians were the most intelligent but least endowed race, while Africans were the opposite. Europeans were in the middle in both cases. His conclusion that Asians are accordingly the most intelligent race and Africans the least is obvious given his premises. Where it gets really bizarre is where he somehow relates this to penis length and says that the endowment of Africans is an evolutionary adaptation for the promiscuity forced upon them by their lower intelligence.

The controversy over academic freedom now has an even more recent case to argue about, that being the recent publication of *The Bell Curve*. This book argues that the lower scores of African-Americans on IQ tests is a matter of 'nature, not nurture.' The authors argue that this fact should become a major consideration in American social policy, since it shows that the very concept of equal opportunity is impossible. Obviously, this finding and that of Rushton are both going to be extremely inflammatory.

As much as I waffle between thinking that these findings are comically stupid or insidiously dangerous, I also think that their right of academic freedom to express such thoughts is just as inviolable as their right to freedom of speech. As such, I am unwilling to propose any sanctions for their expression of these so-called findings, regardless of how offensive certain segments of the population may feel these findings to be. Ultimately, the restriction of academic freedom means that the restricter thinks that s/he knows better than the restrictee. In many cases, this is quite obviously true, but it is the height of arrogance to enforce this supposed superior knowledge. The problem is that once any individual restricts the expression of any other person's opinion as unacceptable, there comes an implicit assumption that the former individual's opinion is intrinsically more worthwhile. With simple natural progression we end up with individuals or groups who decide for the rest of us what ideas we will be exposed to. I know of no one whose wisdom is so great as to deserve such a responsibility.

Universities have been given a sacred trust in that they are society's haven for thought. While many people deplore the ivory tower ideal as indulgent, and while many students and professors may abuse that ideal, it is extraordinarily important that that ideal be maintained. Unpopular ideas are the stuff of our species' quest for knowledge. If a researcher is afraid of pissing somebody off, then that researcher probably won't accomplish a thing. If researchers were all afraid of pissing off mainstream society, then the very concept of a paradigmatic shift would be an impossibility. Granted, Rushton and *The Bell Curve* are hardly a paradigmatic shift, but to restrict them runs the risk of restricting an unpopular idea which does change society's way of looking at the universe. It all boils down to the trap that Svend Robinson has fallen into: that of believing that we know better than the next guy. We can not, in a university, afford to be that presumptuous. To do so is to lose all legitimacy as an institution leading toward the future.

## THE GOVERNMENT OF CANADA is looking at changing Canada's social programs including federal support to post-secondary education.

### FACTS

Canada spends more of its Gross National Product on post-secondary education than any other industrialized country. Canadian university students now pay only about 20% of the costs of their education. They can expect to earn 40% more over their lifetime — an average of \$11,700 more per year — than those with no university diploma. Over 25% of people in the workforce want to upgrade their skills but can't afford it. It's also a fact that all governments are facing a financial squeeze and have to review their programs.

### THE CHALLENGE

#### WE NEED TO MAINTAIN A FAIR, ACCESSIBLE AND AFFORDABLE POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION SYSTEM. HERE'S ONE OF THE OPTIONS ON THE TABLE:

An expanded student aid program that would put more money in a new system of student loans and grants. **Repayment of loans would be based on income after graduation.**

Right now, the federal government's spending includes both student aid and transfers to provinces in the form of cash and tax points. The tax transfers will continue — and grow by an estimated \$2 billion over the next decade. That money will replace the cash portion which will run out over the next 10 years.

**One idea:** the federal government could replace the cash transfer with a new permanent \$2 billion loans and grants system. This option could put about \$10 billion more into the post-secondary system over a ten-year period and improve access to post-secondary education.

*Nothing is etched in stone. If you have comments on these ideas — or other ideas — we want to hear from you. Get your free copy of the Discussion Paper, the Summary or the booklet "Have your say". Fill in the pull-out question-and-answer section of the booklet and return it to us. To order or for more information:*

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