

ACADEMIC FREEDOM AS A SHIELD FOR ANTI-SEMITISM

BY MITCHELL BARD

The one place in America where anti-Semitism is still considered acceptable is in the university. The mantra of academic freedom has become a license for the sanctioning of teachings and forums that are anti-Israel and often cross the line to anti-Semitic.

For the last several years, for example, an anti-Semitic forum has been held by the Palestine Solidarity Movement. In 2004, the conference was held at Duke University. Organizers were asked to sign an innocuous statement before the event calling for a civil debate that would “condemn the murder of innocent civilians,” “support a two-state solution,” and “recognize the difference between disagreement and hate speech,” but refused to do so. By hosting a group that could not bring itself to object to the murder of Jews,

Duke gave their views legitimacy.

For the most part, the Jewish community accepts that this is a matter of free speech and is afraid to do anything that might suggest an effort



to stifle what is actually hate speech. If the conference were attacking African-Americans, however, Al Sharpton and Jesse Jackson would undoubtedly protest, students would take over the administration building, and no one would suggest that it was inappropriate to bar a racist conference.

The administration of the university would cave in like a house of cards. You would not hear pious invocations of academic freedom. This is why you rarely see attacks on other minorities on college campuses, and when you do, the response is usually swift and severe. But Jews are considered fair game.

Anti-Semitism on the campus is more subtle than swastikas painted on Hillels. The attacks on the Jewish people most commonly are manifested in discussions about Israel.

Some would argue that I'm objecting to legitimate criticism of Israel. But that is not what I'm talking about. There is a clear distinction between criticism of Israeli policy, which you can read every day in any Israeli newspaper, and anti-Semitism in which the attacks against Israel challenge its right to exist, or attacks that target Israel among all other nations for special criticism, as in the case of the current divestment movement being mounted on various campuses across the country.

Divestment proponents try to equate Israel with apartheid South Africa, which was the target of a divestment campaign aimed at ending racial segregation there. This is an offensive comparison that ignores the fact that all Israeli citizens are equal under the law. Moreover, the divestment campaign against South Africa was specifically directed at companies that were using that country's racist laws to their advantage. In Israel, no such racist laws exist; moreover, companies doing business there adhere to the same standards of equal working rights that are applied in the United States.

Harvard University President Lawrence Summers observed that the divestment efforts are anti-Semitic. "Profoundly anti-Israel views are increasingly finding support in progressive intellectual communities," Summers warned. "Serious and

thoughtful people are advocating and taking actions that are anti-Semitic in their effect, if not their intent."

Part of the problem is the failure of the university to teach critical thinking skills.

Students, especially self-described liberals, want to look at the issues in a seemingly neutral fashion—on the one hand, Palestinians do bad things, but, on the other, so do the Israelis—even if the facts are not symmetrical. And it is unlikely that students are going to find faculty who can teach them to make moral or factual distinctions because most colleges have no one who can teach the history of Israel. In fact, most of the faculty teaching about the Middle East today are openly hostile toward Israel—and it is these professors who shape the campus environment and the minds of students.

In an address on the subject of academic freedom, Columbia University President Lee Bollinger spoke about the need for faculty to "resist the allure of certitude, the temptation to use the podium as an ideological platform, to indoctrinate a captive audience, to play favorites with the like-minded, and silence the others."

Many faculty, however, do not resist temptation; rather, they embrace their position as an ideological platform. One unique aspect of the bias related to Israel is the tendency for faculty in courses and disciplines completely unrelated to the history and politics of the conflict to inject their anti-Israel views into their classes. For instance, an anthropol-

ogy professor at American University used as a text a comic book that was in the vein of the anti-Semitic Nazi publication *Der Sturmer*. Indeed, to get a sense of the academic environment nowadays, consider these examples:

- ▶ Prior to the U.S. invasion of Iraq, 1,500 academics signed a petition warning of a possible impending “crime against humanity”—that Israel would expel large numbers of Palestinians during the fog of the Iraq war.
- ▶ A Columbia University professor argued that Zionism is a European colonial system based on racist principles with the goal of eradicating Palestine, and that Zionists are the new Nazis.
- ▶ At American University, a professor crossed out the word “Israel” on a student’s exam and wrote in the margin, “Zionist entity.”

Columbia’s President Bollinger wants to retain the myth of the purity of the ivory tower, but he left out what has become a far greater influence on the university than scholarship, and that is money. Columbia, for instance, happily (some might say greedily) took money from the United Arab Emirates, among others, to endow a chair in Middle East studies named after the virulently anti-Israel Palestinian professor Edward Said (whose field was literature,

not Middle East studies), thereby institutionalizing an anti-Israel faculty position on the campus. Predictably, the chair was filled by an outspoken critic of Israel, Rashid Khalidi.

Legality is not the issue in evaluating the anti-Israel, sometimes anti-Semitic speeches and teachings of faculty and speakers on campus. No one questions that freedom of speech allows these people to stand up in the center of campus and howl at the moon if they want. The issue

is whether this type of speech should be given the cover of “academic freedom” and granted legitimacy by the university through funding, publicity, or use of facilities.

A related question is whether the presentations are in any way academic or scholarly. Few people would claim that a conference in which anti-black senti-

ments were expressed would be protected by academic freedom. The same is true for criticism of women, as we’re seeing at Harvard where some faculty want to run President Summers out of town for suggesting there might be a genetic difference between men and women that explains differences in performance in hard sciences.

One of the other ironies of the free speech debate on campus is that those who abuse it argue they have the right to say whatever pops into their heads, but no one should



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be permitted to criticize them. To suggest that a professor's views are wrong or their scholarship is faulty is to engage in McCarthyism. You don't even need to criticize these professors' views to drive them to apoplexy; just try to tape their lectures so that their views are documented. Better yet, test their commitment to freedom of the press by asking them to allow reporters to film or tape their lectures.

The campus demagogues and pseudo scholars have no problem imposing their views on students over whom they have almost complete power, but they are terrified of what might happen if the media or real scholars—people who are not their subordinates—have the opportunity to scrutinize their teachings.

I don't believe that we can or should silence everyone whose views we object to, but it is perfectly reasonable to question the scholarly credentials of the people expressing them, and the basis for their arguments. No science faculty would hire a professor from the Flat Earth Society to teach courses suggesting the earth is flat, but social science departments allow professors to teach the equivalent, at least as it pertains to Israel.

To change the culture that currently fosters the abuse of academic freedom will not be easy. Universities oppose any outside monitoring, but their internal methods of account-

ability have proven inadequate. The only strategy that is likely to have success in forcing change is to focus on the economic interests of the university.

Although universities' mission statements include eloquent expressions of their dedication to the advancement of higher learning through teaching, research, and service, there is no doubt that our nation's universities respond to economic incentives. Therefore, those economic incentives could be used to encourage the nation's universities to return to a definition of academic freedom that protects legitimate scholarly inquiry but does not shield ideological agendas.

Furthermore, if major donors withhold funds and make clear that support will be contingent on the university adhering to standards that do not allow for academic abuses or the tolerance of bigotry of any kind, progress can be made toward accomplishing the goal set out by the American Association of University Professors in 1915, namely, to train students to think for themselves. ∞

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