

Ignatieff, Michael; Roch, Stefan: *Academic Freedom. The Global Challenge*. Budapest: Central European University Press 2018. ISBN: 978-963-3862-339; 161 S.

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Most academics have followed the crisis of the Central European University (CEU) – the first forced university closure in a European democracy since 1945 – with great concern. Early in that crisis, in June 2017, CEU convened a conference to discuss the problems confronting beleaguered universities. The resulting collection¹ analyzes external and internal threats to academic freedom and offers a dissection of the CEU crisis.

The collection's strong point is that it discusses a host of core issues related to academic freedom: the relationship between academic freedom and freedom of expression (Ayşe Kadioğlu), including censorship on campus (Nirmala Rao, Leo Botstein, Allison Stanger); the difference between public and private universities (Joan Wallach Scott, László Vass); the tension between academic freedom and university autonomy (Rao, Liviu Matei, Jonathan Cole, István Kenesei), including the imposition of neoliberal efficiency (Helga Nowotny) and criticism of campus governance (Rogers Brubaker); the dual role of students as enablers and disablers of academic freedom on campus (Cole, Stanger, Brubaker); public trust in science (Michael Ignatieff, Nowotny); the role of critical thinking in scientists and citizens (Ignatieff, Scott, Mario Vargas Llosa); the relationship between universities and the state (Scott; Attila Chikán, Valéria Csépe), including attacks on universities (Kadioğlu); non-state pressure upon universities (Rao); the relationship between the meritocratic university and political democracy (Ignatieff, Scott); and the purposes of universities (Scott, Catharine Simpson, Katalin Tausz). The collection's weak point is that many contributions merely touch upon these core issues as they are tantalizingly short: the collection consists of no less than seventeen contributions in 150 pages.

The focus of the book is both Hungarian and global because the CEU crisis can be

seen as an exponent of a larger crisis of academic freedom across the globe: examples indicating such a global crisis come from some two dozen countries, authoritarian as well as democratic. Several chapters also explore the work of Scholars at Risk with its worldwide annual overviews of the state of academic freedom.² It is a bit strange, however, that a stark example nearby is glossed over. I mean the European Humanities University, the first university in Europe after 1945 that went into exile: in 2005 it escaped Lukashenko's iron grip and moved in its entirety from Belarus to Lithuania, where despite setbacks it still survives.

In his introduction, CEU president and rector (and Canadian historian) Michael Ignatieff broaches the crucial relationship between universities and public confidence. Universities have lost much of their public support, he argues, for various reasons, including the increasing resentment against what many view as untenable academic privileges. He recommends (partly overlapping) strategies to regain public confidence: universities should act more responsibly and remove barriers; they should tell the public that academic freedom serves to protect minority opinions necessary to build a truly free society; that it alone helps produce the expert knowledge necessary for democracies to survive; and that, with its medieval origins, it is one of democracy's ancestors. Ignatieff offers sharp insights and valuable recipes. But in his last recommendation he confuses the concepts of academic freedom and university autonomy. These concepts did not originate together. In the middle ages, universities had much autonomy, their academics little freedom. Scholars largely adapted to political and religious traditions and orthodoxies. In contrast to university autonomy, the idea of academic freedom found firm ground from the nineteenth century only. This means that academic freedom and university autonomy only joined forces seven centuries after the first university was established in Europe. The emergence of academic freedom is not – or barely – anterior to the rise of modern democracy.

¹ <http://real.mtak.hu/73757/1/af-bookweb.pdf>

² <https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/resources/free-to-think-2018/>

Although internal threats to academic freedom (such as free expression issues on campus) fill one entire part of the book, the major internal threat to academic freedom is not treated because of what I think is a widespread bias: most contributors – with very notable exceptions, though – entertain a rosy conception of the relationship between academic freedom and university autonomy, thinking not only that both *should* go together but also that they always *do*. This is not the case, and not only because university autonomy originated centuries prior to academic freedom. More importantly, while the *raison d'être* of university autonomy is to protect academic freedom, in practice they often have a tense, even inimical relationship. Why? University leaders guaranteeing university autonomy regularly take very controversial policy decisions that may threaten academic freedom at its core: when they dismiss or do not promote staff, when they annul courses or subjects, when they reorganize or close departments, when they reallocate staff, when they decide to associate or merge their institution with other institutions. Efficient governance often threatens academic freedom from the inside. Only some contributors of this collection seem aware of this major internal threat to academic freedom.

The collection also tends to simplify the crucial problem of the justification for academic freedom: those that discuss it, see the enemies of academic freedom as a diffuse, populist group of disgruntled taxpayers who reject the supposed arrogance of experts and resent their privileges. This is indeed a strand of thought that should be tackled, but it comes from only one group that is skeptical about academic freedom. Another, far more serious critique, stays completely out of sight: I mean the human rights critique of academic freedom. Indeed, human rights scholars have sometimes maintained that academic freedom is unnecessary because all the rights needed to realize the purposes of the university can be found in the universal human rights instruments of the United Nations.³ According to this persuasive view of academics (which I only partly share), there is nothing like academic freedom, only a combination of human rights of particular importance to aca-

demics. I cannot develop this important critique within the framework of a review, but it is overlooked in this book. The discussion of the justification of academic freedom is more complex than it pretends.

In the last instance, it is the answer to the question which purposes the university serves that determines the answer to the question why academic freedom exists and merits its protection. Several contributions discuss these purposes, which we can, I think, summarize as a trias: first, develop a culture of critical and independent thinking; second, advance knowledge through the search for important truths; and, third, educate future experts and leaders and strive for active citizenship, democracy, and welfare. The collection could have underlined that although these three purposes can also be achieved outside the university, nowhere does this happen with the same intensity and critical mass necessary to make a lasting difference. In addition, the first two purposes require distance and long-term thinking, whereas the last one requires immediate engagement with society.

Despite these omissions, the collection achieves its most important goal: engage the reader in a host of recent preoccupations entangling academic freedom and unpack them in global perspective. The book triggers the critical attitude it stubbornly preaches on its pages. Applying its own philosophy here and now, I salute it as a work that deserves to be read and criticized widely.

Antoon De Baets über Ignatieff, Michael; Roch, Stefan: *Academic Freedom. The Global Challenge*. Budapest 2018, in: H-Soz-Kult 15.06.2019.

³ <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/UniversalHumanRightsInstruments.aspx>