

In Defense of a Liberal Education: The Language and Politics of Academic Freedom

Cynthia L. Weber

Certain professors have been refused reelection lately, apparently because they set their students to thinking in ways objectionable to the trustees. It would be well if more teachers were dismissed because they fail to stimulate thinking of any kind. We can afford to forgive a college professor what we regard as the occasional error of his doctrine, especially as we may be wrong, provided he is a contagious center of intellectual enthusiasm. It is better for students to think about heresies than not to think at all; better for them to climb new trails, and stumble over error if need be, than to ride forever in upholstered ease in the overcrowded highway. It is a primary duty of a teacher to make a student take an honest account of his stock of ideas, throw out the dead matter, place revised price marks on what is left, and try to fill his empty shelves with new goods.

— President William T. Foster, Reed College
The Nation, November 11, 1915

Therefore it is a gross confusion to regard the university as consisting mainly of irrelevant scholars, of skeptics who throw doubt on the values men hold dear, of “radicals” who are working to undermine the social heritage. The university is engaged in perpetuating that heritage—and also in keeping it vital. For unless it is reinterpreted for the changing times, it hardens, loses its virtue, becomes obstructive, and dies.

— Robert Maclver, *Academic Freedom in Our Time* (1955), 260

Introduction

Freedom in the Academic Community

The lesson to be drawn is that these enemies of freedom will go to any lengths, will seek thereby more notoriety and power ... They bank on the inertness and the unenlightenment of the people. If the people could realize that their own liberties are more and more endangered with every new encroachment on the liberties of particular groups, that their own liberties are attacked, directly and indirectly, when libraries are censored and educators intimidated, that the fundamental liberty of opinion is closely bound up with the liberty of the scholar, the dominance of these noisemakers would speedily cease.

— Robert MacIver¹

This project arose out of a concern with the direction that American discourse has taken in this new century, especially that surrounding the work of the university. Beginning with the court decision that helped to seat George W. Bush as President in 2000 and compounded by the events of September 11, 2001, there has been a discernible shift in the way that civil liberties and liberal concepts such as freedom are referenced, discussed, and understood in the larger public sphere. At the same time, academics have been cited as lacking sufficient patriotism and aiding the enemy, as if their efforts to provoke discussion on foreign policy and teach Middle Eastern studies were somehow responsible for destruction of national culture on a scale equivalent to that of the terrorist attacks.

Limited portions of this work appeared in an article published in the journal *Women & Language* in 2008 titled “Academic Freedom and the Assault on Interdisciplinary Programs: Re-articulating the Language of Diversity,” and similar ideas have been broached in conference presentations over the years. The majority of this work, however, has arisen from countless hours spent in the pages of those before me who also were engaged in the free pursuit of knowledge. I am indebted to all of them.

¹ *Academic Freedom in Our Time*, 257.

However, the events of 9/11 did not create such conceptions, but only highlighted the tensions that had been building over the past decades between the “liberal” university and the conservative Right.

The onset of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq would only enhance these tensions. In his role as Commander in Chief, in George W. Bush the anti-intellectuals of the far Right had a cause célèbre, although the “good ole’ boy” model and limited public speaking skills he exhibited contrasted sharply with Bush’s privileged (in fact, elite) background and his family’s vested interests in Middle Eastern oil. Yet somehow those facts never held much sway with most of the conservative Right, and attempts to bring forth these and other concerns were often shouted down as “unpatriotic” speech.

The media declared that this was just a symptom of a growing “blue and red divide” — a positioning of the “real” (i.e., conservative, religious, hard-working) Americans in contrast to the liberals (i.e., leftist-leaning, radical Democrats), many of who could be found in the university. In this binary scenario there could be no purple, for recognizing that people did not necessarily fit into one of only two categories required the acknowledgement of complexity, and complexity was no longer fashionable as simplicity was the new order of the day. In addition, recognizing that there were shades of purple cast in most everyone would perhaps have led to calls for reasoned debate, but as reason is considered a primarily liberal concept, it was no longer a highly-valued commodity.

Teaching during these times became particularly troubling as more and more students seemed to struggle with basic conceptions of objective research, including identifying fact versus fiction (this, of course, cannot be blamed solely on the political climate, but the culture of Fox News certainly did not help alleviate such disjunctures). Too many believed that any document published by whitehouse.gov was credible as it carried authority as well as neutrality, for the government would never misrepresent information or serve special interests. Personally, I began to feel increasingly disconnected not only from such stances, repeatedly echoed in dominant media messages, but also from the

pervading definitions of citizen, liberty, and freedom that appeared at the same time as civil rights were being eroded, partially under the guise of the ironically-named Patriot Act. However, I soon realized what was at issue — I was part of the “reality-based community” — a habitat constituted by a seemingly unimportant minority group that continued to labor in order to connect events with accurate statements, arguments with facts, reason with evidence. The concept of such a community appeared in a *New York Times Magazine* article by Ron Suskind, where he writes about a discussion he had with a White House aide:

The aide said that guys like me were “in what we call the reality-based community,” which he defined as people who “believe that solutions emerge from your judicious study of discernible reality.” I nodded and murmured something about enlightenment principles and empiricism. He cut me off. “That’s not the way the world works anymore,” he continued. “We’re an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality. And while you’re studying that reality — judiciously, as you will — we’ll act again, creating other new realities, which you can study too, and that’s how things will sort out. We’re history’s actors ... and you, all of you, will be left to study what we do.”²

Not only did I share this statement with my students in communication and writing classes that fall but I took this as a personal challenge. Hence, the motivation for this project: I set out to study what such “history’s actors” were doing, especially in regard to the manufactured claims once again being recycled against the liberal arts and humanities, a place, in my opinion, where the “judicious study of discernible reality” takes place in the academic community. In particular, I was interested in the resurgence of calls for student academic freedom that somehow, as Robert MacIver argued 50 years prior under eerily similar circumstances, meant the end of academic freedom for academics.

² “Faith, Certainty and the Presidency of George W. Bush.” *New York Times Magazine*, October 17, 2004.

Therefore, this investigation attempts to explore some of the many questions that emerged during this historical period, including: Who are “they” and why do they seem to despise not only the humanities but the university in general? Why the interest in academic freedom and what do they hope to accomplish with these campaigns? And finally, what has happened to language and to reasoned debate? Consequently, my journey moved from an investigation of the more recent campaigns targeting academic freedom, to the history of the rise of the conservative Right, and to the legacy of humanistic education in our society. Along the way, it became apparent that the story would not be complete without a more comprehensive understanding of the ways in which academic freedom emerged within American higher education as well as the struggles that have continually surrounded this freedom. For the events of today have roots in what has gone before, and perhaps until this is recognized and remedied, as with all liberties, we face losing what we have gained.

Thus, the scope of this project has been far-reaching and I must make clear the limits of this work. As the questions raised extend across multiple themes, this investigation is not meant to be definitive. Instead, my intention is to provide readers with an overview of these central topics, in the hopes that by doing so, we can further open debate on the current status of academic freedom as well as the work of humanistic education in the twenty-first century.³ In line with the conservative Right, I, too, see these areas as connected, although in contrast to their stance I argue for the protection of the liberal conception of academic freedom and more, not less, humanity in university education.

The following sections begin this work by exploring key theories that inform efforts to manipulate language and rearticulate meaning in order to meet conservative frames of understanding. These theories provide a crucial means through which we might examine both liberal and conservative frames surrounding the concept of freedom, as well as

³ References in this work to the “humanities” and “humanistic education” are meant to reflect a larger conception of humanistic education — traditionally that of the liberal arts, social sciences, and sciences. This is not intended to be a study of philosophical humanism.

evaluate the struggle that is taking place over language connected to humanistic education, including academic freedom.

Framing Freedom

The center of any debate depends on where the margins are drawn. If committed fanatics prepared to employ unscrupulous tactics are permitted to drive political discourse to the extreme right, as they have attempted to do in the name of balance, then the center will have been completely redefined.

— Joel Beinin⁴

In *Why Societies Need Dissent*, Cass R. Sunstein argues that trends toward conformity inhibit society's application of the democratic principle of checks and balances. Sunstein maintains that conformity in practice often leads to failure as valid critiques may not be heard, and therefore, never acted upon. Conformity in society, he proposes, inhibits the information that people need to know in order to make sound decisions, but in contrast, societies that support a wide range of views ultimately reap the benefits of such diversity. However, American society today struggles to support a diversity of views. Instead, even as issues have grown more complex opportunities for vital discussion and reasoned debate have diminished. Yet disengaging from debate or silencing dissenting opinions can have significant and lasting consequences for all of us. Richard Hofstadter writes that such an atmosphere was pervasive prior to the Civil War, when positions on the issue of slavery became so polarized that reasonable debate was shut down, eventually leading to a situation where what began as a "war of positions" became actual physical war. Consequently, he reminds us that a historical juncture such as this serves as a potent reminder that societies "unable to meet the costs of free discussion are likely to be presented with a much more exorbitant bill" (1955, 261).

Nevertheless, in the new millennium we have experienced increasing polarization and partisan conformity in both thought and discourse. To examine the forces that have led to

⁴ In "The New McCarthyism: Policing Thought about the Middle East" (2006), 261.

such a state a number of books by both liberals and conservatives have recently been published, including a growing body of literature that seeks to address the role of reason in public discourse. Such works as *The Assault on Reason* by Al Gore, and *The Age of American Unreason* by Susan Jacoby, build upon Hofstadter's classic *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* in examining the factors that have contributed to the more recent rejection of reasoned debate and a growing preference for confrontational styles that shut down and discredit opposing views while trumpeting partisan positions — modeled by such media personalities as Rush Limbaugh. Although there has always been opposition to the liberal concept of reason, the current backlash against civil liberties and scientific investigation, for example, appear particularly incongruent in modern society. On a broader scale, when reasonable debate is sidestepped there is little recourse for discussion of complex issues such as freedom, liberty, and war — all of which require the willingness to consider evidence and change stance on a topic.

In *Toward a Civil Discourse: Rhetoric and Fundamentalism*, Sharon Crowley argues that current discussion of such civic issues is hampered due to the fact that public debate “takes place in a discursive climate dominated by two powerful discourses: liberalism and Christian fundamentalism” (2). The continuing presence of liberal conceptions in civic debate is due partly to the fact that, as Crowley notes, liberalism serves as “the default discourse of American politics” for most founding documents were based on liberal values including “individual rights, equality before the law, and personal freedom” (3). Although fundamentalist discourse purports to support these same values, George Lakoff argues that conservative definitions of such terms are often diametrically opposed to liberal intentions.

Like Crowley, Lakoff recognizes that this discursive polarization plays out in the public sphere and proposes that such polarization is partly the product of two different frames of reference. The discourse of liberalism, for example, relies on reason and evidence, while the discourse of fundamentalism and that of the “radical conservatives” who favor fundamentalist discourse, relies on a strict moral authority or “father” figure, demands

conformity of thought, and refuses to acknowledge contrary or conflicting evidence. In *Whose Freedom? The Battle over America's Most Important Idea*, Lakoff refers to recent findings in cognitive science when he suggests that words, including such political terms as freedom, are products of our mind. Some of the key relationships between words and mind he posits are as follows:

- Repetition of language has the power to change brains.
- All thought uses conceptual frames.
- Frames have boundaries.
- Language can be used to reframe a situation.
- Frames characterize ideas; they may be “deep” or “surface” frames.
- Most thought uses conceptual metaphors.
- Most thought does not follow the laws of logic.
- The frames in our brains define common sense.
- Frames trump facts.
- Conservatives and liberals think with different frames and metaphors.
- Contested concepts have uncontested cores.
- Rational thought requires emotion.⁵

Subsequently, Lakoff describes frames as “mental structures of limited scope, with a systematic internal organization” and maintains that all words are defined with frames (10). Therefore, to redefine a word one must change the frame by which others understand that word. In addition, language itself can be used to reframe a situation by choosing associative words that create new cognitive models of understanding. For example, conservatives have reframed the debate surrounding privatization of K-12 education by referring to it as “school choice” — specifically choosing a term that activates positive frames as the concept of “choice” is highly valued in our society, in contrast to privatization, which as a business term is less emotionally appealing and thus more difficult to defend. Frank Luntz refers to this same process of reframing when he claims that it is not *what* you say, rather what’s important is what people *hear*, or in

⁵ See Lakoff 10–14.

reference to Lakoff's model, what they *think* you are saying. In his own writings, Luntz discusses how the term "liberal" has undergone reframing over the last decades, moving from a positive association in the early 1960s to a negative association by the 1980s.⁶

In reference to freedom, liberals and conservatives have fundamentally different "deep" frames through which they understand this term. In contrast to surface frames, which are more often associated with words and phrases, deep frames "structure your moral system or your world view" and are therefore often tied to deeply-held beliefs (Lakoff 12). Freedom is, for the majority of Americans, a central concept of our country's identity; at times we even equate freedom with *being* American. Even so, freedom is also a "contested" term, which means that although there may be agreement on a central core definition, more complex aspects of the term are open for redefinition by whoever has the means and resources, for example, the *power* and *language* to alter others' perceptions. Lakoff cautions: "The danger is not just a matter of words, a quibble over semantics. This is a war over an idea. If the idea of freedom changes radically, then freedom as we have known it is lost" (17). In this same manner, I would argue that current campaigns by the conservative Right pose similar consequences for academic freedom — a radical redefinition of the concept as we know it and the potential loss of this freedom altogether.

Consequently, it is important to evaluate the degree to which the conservative Right has the potential means and resources to accomplish this objective, specifically by acknowledging how power is accessed through discourse, and examining the ways in which the Right attempts to reframe, or rearticulate, language to serve conservative ideology. Michel Foucault, in his study of discourse and power, argues that "there are manifold relations of power which permeate, characterise and constitute the social body, and these relations of power cannot themselves be established, consolidated nor implemented without the production, accumulation, circulation and functioning of a discourse" (93). Therefore, positioning and maintaining power requires that a movement

⁶ See Luntz, *Words that Work*, 62–63.

garner alliances in order to maintain the dominant discourse, ideas that were explored in detail in the writings of Antonio Gramsci.

Articulating Conservative Interests

In military war, when the strategic aim — destruction of the enemy’s army and occupation of his territory — is achieved, peace comes. ... Political struggle is enormously more complex: in a certain sense, it can be compared to colonial wars or to old wars of conquest — in which the victorious army occupies, or proposes to occupy, permanently all or part of the conquered territory.

– Antonio Gramsci⁷

In *The Prison Notebooks*, Antonio Gramsci examines the complexity of maneuvering for power, as well as those factors underneath a struggle that enable certain factions to create a dominant leadership in peace. He refers to this maneuvering as a “war of positions,” and proposes that the current underlying such efforts, the unifying force, can be identified as hegemony.⁸ For Gramsci, hegemony lies in the skill of one particular group to rally support and create a system that infiltrates the moral and intellectual beliefs of various groups as they develop allies in their struggle.

According to Chantal Mouffe, Gramsci’s definition of hegemony is “no longer a question of political alliance” but rather “a complete fusion of economic, political, intellectual and moral objectives ... brought about by one fundamental group and groups allied to it *through the intermediary of ideology*” (181). This ideology, or world view, provides the mobilizing force that enables people with different objectives to band together for a common goal, in hopes that individual interests will also be achieved at the same time. Lawrence Grossberg argues that hegemony then relies on popular “assent to a particular social order, to a particular system of power, to a particular articulation of chains of equivalences by which the interests of the ruling bloc come to define the leading positions of the people” (1996, 162). Hence, hegemony is not domination, but rather

⁷ *The Prison Notebooks*, 229.

⁸ First used by Lenin to describe the leadership of the proletariat over the peasantry in the Russian revolution.

represents the struggle to form an “articulation of interests” that enable a political faction to maintain authority and leadership at a specific historical juncture.

This theory helps to explain the seemingly incongruous “banding together” of the intellectual neoconservatives with the primarily anti-intellectual religious Right, for all conservatives share the “strict father” moral frame that would provide a common reference for mobilization, and although their reasons may differ, these groups also share a common goal of dismantling liberal thought in society and in the university. Consequently, identifying and mobilizing the “articulation of interests” between two different, and at times opposing, factions of conservatism enables the conservative leadership to work toward a hegemonic power and create a dominant discourse in American society, using language based on conservative frames as the means to reinforce their ideology.

Additionally, examining the ways in which the conservative Right attempts to reframe language hinges on an understanding of the theory of articulation. Developed and refined in cultural studies, the concept of articulation enables us to map the conservative Right’s manipulation of language by highlighting the “continuous struggle to reposition practices within a shifting field of forces” that takes place as the Right works to redefine meaning “by redefining the field of relations—the context—within which a practice is located” (Grossberg 1992, 54). In this way, articulation moves beyond determination to acknowledge the “linkages” that can be made or unmade between word and meaning, for articulation “links this practice to that effect, this text to that meaning, this meaning to that reality, this experience to those politics” and helps make clear the associations that the conservative Right would like to attach to and popularize for words such as liberal and academic freedom (*ibid.*). Consequently, it is not really the meanings of the words — in their rudimentary dictionary definitions — that matters. Rather, what matters and what gives these words their powerful political affect is the less-obvious context in which the words are embedded, a context that ultimately shapes their perceived meanings in ways

that exert affective power in debates over the work of the university. By thinking in terms of articulation, we can access and assess that context or, using Lakoff's term, the frame.

For example, in debates over the work of the university, conservative critics rearticulate, that is, forge new connections surrounding, such concepts as tolerance and diversity by identifying with certain aspects of these (for example, positioning themselves as the minority or the oppressed); linking these concepts to long-held affective American values (thereby activating "deep" frames); and then using the concepts in ways that serve to betray their liberal humanistic meaning in order to refashion the terms to serve conservative ideology. This effort can be seen in the critique of conservative author Jim Nelson Black, who argues in *The Freefall of the American University: How Our Colleges are Corrupting the Minds and Morals of the Next Generation* that it is in the university, where administrators exercise absolute control over students, that one finds the enforcers of political correctness, the mandatory sensitivity classes, the seminars on race and gender, and the encounter sessions through which students are indoctrinated, often by invasive and manipulative means, including various kinds of role-playing, in the dogmas of "diversity" and "tolerance" that are a mask for the anti-American and hyper-sexualized agenda of the universities. (5)

He further argues that these exercises and ideas are "forced" upon students, a situation he deems as "distinctly countercultural and contrary to any interpretation of traditional morality" (ibid.).

Looking at this critique through the lens of articulation enables us to contextualize and name the connections that Black forges in order to create certain perceptions regarding the university. Here he associates tolerance and diversity with dogma, and as dogma usually appears in a negative context (e.g., theological dogma, political dogma) it follows that these concepts are also negative. Additionally, Black's use of passionate and militant terminology to describe the work of the university, exemplified by such words and phrases as "absolute control," "enforcers," "mandatory," as well as "invasive and

manipulative means” works to rearticulate the relationship between student and teacher as oppressed/oppressor, and reframe education as indoctrination. These terms, more often associated with a police state than a democracy, are also contrary to deeply-held American values (such as individual rights and privacy) and trigger powerful emotional responses. Therefore, the language Black has chosen articulates to a vision of the university as a site of oppression rather than of engagement. In this way, the work of the university he describes might legitimately be named “distinctly countercultural and contrary to traditional morality” — *if* you accept his frames of reference.

Yet is this an accurate portrayal of the university? Although for many conservatives tolerance and diversity are viewed in opposition to conformity and national identity (and therefore could be construed as countercultural and anti-American), these concepts are intrinsic to liberal conceptions of democracy and are consequently of high value to those who generally accept liberal conceptions. If one does not accept these concepts as dogma, the claims Black makes here lose much validity. However, as Lakoff argues, the majority of people do respond in some way to emotional and passionate appeals and in recent decades, the conservative Right has been much more adept at forming “emotional” messages such as Black’s passionate diatribe that contrast sharply with the often dry facts presented by academics in defense of such claims. In addition, during this same period the conservative movement has gained the money and influence to repeat their messages again and again, knowing that “repetition has the power to change brains” (Lakoff 10).⁹ Perhaps more appropriate questions would then be: Does it matter whether or not this portrayal is accurate? Or is the goal, as Luntz would likely argue, to be *heard*?

Such an analysis reminds us of the power language has to enter our consciousness and change perceptions. Without effectively responding to the conservative Right’s use of language, we neglect the power of the affective responses to the articulations they broadcast to the public. Consequently, I argue that if we fail to acknowledge and stymie

⁹ Tellingly, Luntz also stresses the power of emotion and repetition in his writing and in the conservative policy documents he prepares.

such conservative articulations, academics stand to lose control of the definitions of our own work, and more importantly, the freedom to pursue such work. For I believe recent attempts by the conservative Right to rearticulate academic freedom are part of a larger system that works, consciously and unconsciously, to change the scope of higher education, and particularly that of humanistic education. The goal of this investigation then is to make clear the linkages between the system of American higher education, the purpose and ideals of humanistic education, the rise of the conservative Right, and the development of academic freedom in order to address why this effort is taking place and how it is being enacted. Thus much of this work examines the historical conjunctures that have brought these forces together and the ways in which such moments effect perceptions of academic freedom today.

Chapter 1 begins this journey by exploring the connections between humanistic ideas of liberal education and intellectual freedom in concert with the rise of the conservative Right in order to understand why recent challenges made to academic freedom primarily focus on the work of the humanities. Chapter 2 then traces the historical legacy of academic freedom from its roots in medieval universities to its role in the development of American higher education. Moving from the foundation of the colonial colleges to the ideals that shaped the first universities, the chapter also highlights key moments that served to either inhibit or support the growth of intellectual freedom in the developing nation until the Civil War. Chapter 3 continues this project by examining significant factors that led to the emergence of both the research university and principles of academic freedom at the end of the nineteenth century. In addition to highlighting key challenges made to academic freedom throughout the twentieth century, this discussion makes clear that the majority of these challenges derived from forces within the conservative Right and showcases the ways in which strategies employed by these forces begin to move from direct attacks, such as investigative committees, to the more subtle manipulation of language in public debate by the end of the century. Chapter 4 explores challenges to higher education and to academic freedom in the twenty-first century, looking explicitly at the ways in which humanistic language is being used against itself in

order to shift understanding of academic freedom away from freedom for academics to a student-centered model. Examining conservative arguments for balance and intellectual diversity and analyzing proposed legislation for student freedom highlights efforts by the conservative Right to rearticulate language to meet conservative frames of understanding, and makes evident a shift in focus to more indirect methods of attack. Finally, chapter 5 offers some concluding thoughts on the future of academic freedom and considers ways in which academics might respond to these current challenges.

I have taken as my model for this journey Edward Said's conception of the academic traveler who "depends not on power, but on motion, on a willingness to go into different worlds, use different idioms, and understand a variety of disguises, masks, and rhetorics" — one who "*crosses over*" in order to "transform what might be conflict, or contest, or assertion into reconciliation, mutuality, recognition, and creative interaction" (1996, 227). Such a journey is made possible through *libertas philosophandi*.