

The following is the text of the T.B. Davie Academic Freedom lecture delivered at the University of Cape Town, South Africa, May 22, 1991, by Edward Said, Parr Professor of English Literature at Columbia University.

IDENTITY, AUTHORITY, AND FREEDOM: THE POTENTATE AND THE TRAVELLER

Several weeks ago, as I was reflecting on what I might say at this occasion. I encountered a friendly colleague, whom I asked for ideas and suggestions. "What is the title of your lecture?" he asked. "Identity, Authority, and Freedom," I replied. "Interesting," he responded. "You mean, therefore, identity is the faculty, authority is the administration, and freedom . . ." Here he paused meaningfully. "Yes?" I asked. "Freedom," he said, "is retirement."

This prescription is altogether too cynical, and in its flippancy reflected what I think both of us felt that the issue of academic freedom in a setting like this one here in Cape Town is far more complex and problematic for most of the usual formulas to cover with any kind of adequacy.

Not that academic freedom has been a great deal easier to define, discuss, and defend for North American intellectuals. I hardly need to remind you that discussion concerning academic freedom is not only different in each society but also takes very different forms, one version of which in American universities today concerns the nature of the curriculum. For at least the past decade, a debate has been going on between those on the one hand who feel that the traditional curriculum of the liberal arts - in particular the core of Western humanities courses - has been under severe attack, and those on the other side, who believe that the curriculum in the humanities and the social sciences should more directly reflect the interests of groups in society who have been suppressed, ignored, or papered over with high-sounding formulas. For it is a fact that everywhere in the United States, which is after all an immigrant society made up of many Africans and Asians as well as Europeans, universities have finally had to deal with non-Western societies, with the literature, history, and particular concerns of women, various nationalities, and minorities; and with unconventional, hitherto untaught subjects such as popular culture, mass communications and film, and oral history. In addition, a whole slew of controversial political issues like race, gender, imperialism, war, and slavery have found their way into lectures and seminars. To this extraordinary, almost Copernican change in the general intellectual consciousness, responses have often been very hostile. Some critics have reacted as if the very nature of the university and academic freedom have been

threatened because unduly politicized. Others have gone further; for them the critique of the Western canon, with its panoply of what its opponents have called Dead White European Males (for example, Aristotle, Shakespeare, and Wordsworth), has rather improbably signalled the onset of a new fascism, the demise of Western civilization itself, and the return of slavery, child marriage, bigamy, and the harem.

In most cases, however, the actual changes in the canon that reflect the interests of women or African or Native Americans have been pretty mild: Western humanities courses now often include Jane Austen or Toni Morrison, and they might also have added novels by Chinua Achebe, Garcia Marquez, and Salman Rushdie. There have been a few extreme cases of silliness: younger teachers and scholars publicly attacking more senior scholars as racists, or pillorying their peers for not being "politically correct." Yet all of this discussion and controversy underlines the general fact that what goes on in school or university is somehow privileged, whether on the one hand it is supposed to appear "above" parochial interests, changes in fashion or style, and political pressure, or on the other hand, whether the university is meant to be engaged intellectually and politically with significant political and social change, with improvements in the status of subaltern or minority populations, and with abuses of power and lapses in morality, which the university must remedy, criticize, and align itself in opposition to.

Search for Academic Freedom

Although a thousand qualifications and conditions can enter into a discussion of either or both sides, one assumption is common to both: the idea that the status of university or school as well as what goes along with them intellectually and socially is special, is different from other sites in society like the government bureaucracy, the workplace, or the home. I believe that all societies today assign a special privilege to the academy that, whether the privilege exempts it from intercourse with the everyday world or involves it directly in that world, says that unique conditions do, indeed ought to, prevail in it. To say that someone is educated or an educator is to say something having to do with the mind,



with intellectual and moral values, with a particular process of inquiry, discussion, and exchange, none of which is encountered as regularly outside as inside the academy. The idea is that academies form the mind of the young, prepare them for life, just as - to look at things from the point of view of the teacher - to teach is to be engaged in a vocation or calling having principally to do not with financial gain but with the unending search for truth.

These are very high and important matters, and for those of us who have made education our life, they testify to the genuine aura surrounding the academic and intellectual enterprise. There is something hallowed and consecrated about the academy: there *is* a sense of violated sanctity experienced by us when the university or school is subjected to crude political pressures. Yet, I believe, to be convinced of these genuinely powerful truths is not entirely to be freed of the circumstances - some would call them encumbrances - that impinge on education today, influence our thinking about it, and shape our efforts in the academy. The point I want to make is that as we consider these situational or contextual matters, the search for academic freedom, to which this occasion is so manifestly dedicated, becomes more important, more urgent, more requiring of careful and reflective analysis. So whereas it is universally true that contemporary societies treat the academy with seriousness and respect, each community of academics, intellectuals, and students must wrestle with the problem of what academic freedom in that society at that time actually is and should be.

Let me speak briefly about the two parts of the world that I know most about. In the United States, where I live and work, there has been a distinct change in the academic climate since I was a student a generation ago. Until the late 1960s, it was assumed by most people that what took place within university precincts was removed from any steady, or collaborative, or - in the worst case - collusive association with the world outside. Yet because the experience of war in Vietnam was so powerful, and because there was so much traffic between the academy and the institutions of government and power, the veil was rent, so to speak. No longer was it taken for granted that political scientists or sociologists were sage-like theoreticians or impartial researchers; many of them were discovered to be working, sometimes secretly and sometimes openly, on such topics as counterinsurgency and "lethal research" for the State Department, the CIA, or the Pentagon.

Yet after the university's apartness was seen as an idea to have been abandoned, an equal and opposite set of reactions set in. It became almost a cliché that the university was to be regarded only as an arm of the government, that it reflected only the interests of corporations and establishment power and should therefore be

wholly transformed into a place where students would be educated as reformers or revolutionaries. Relevance was the new watchword. And while a new set of materials was introduced into the academy for the first time - I refer once again to women's studies, minority studies, studies that deal with the effect of war, racism, and gender oppression - there did in fact seem to be a new worldliness in the university that denied it the relative aloofness it once seemed entitled to.

As a reaction to all this, academic freedom was the phrase given to the movement that claimed to want to return the university to a now very much regretted sort of impartiality to, and distance from, the everyday world. But here all sorts of exaggerations and polemical distortions were introduced. During the 1980s, the American university was portrayed as being in the possession of a Marxist revolutionary conspiracy. This of course was a ludicrously false notion. Also, the argument put forward in the name of academic freedom claimed that because so many new courses and ideas had been introduced into the traditional curriculum, the university's age-old standards had diminished, had fallen prey to outside political pressures. To restore the university's true freedom from everyday life meant returning to courses, ideas, and values that derived exclusively from the mainstream European thinkers - Plato, Aristotle, Sophocles, Descartes, Montaigne, Shakespeare, Bacon, Locke, and so on. One of the most famous and commercially successful books of the past decade was *The Closing of the American Mind*, a long diatribe against an assorted set of villains, including Nietzsche, feminism, Marxism, and Black Studies; the author of this work, who had been a professor at Cornell University when for a short time the university had been shut down by a group of armed African-American students, was so embittered by his expedience that his book argued quite frankly for the university's freedom to educate not large numbers of the deprived and disadvantaged but a small, carefully prepared and instructed elite. The result would be, as the book was quite explicit in explaining, that only a small handful of works by the Greeks and some French Enlightenment philosophers would survive the rigorous tests of inclusion in the newly "liberated" curriculum.

This may sound funny to your ears. I think it does happen to be funny because the prescription for curing the university of its woes, for liberating it from political pressures is in a sense worse than the malady. Surely one would have thought that to use the concept of freedom about the academy is not on the face of it to talk mainly about exclusion but about inclusion, and surely it would seem to be true that the university ought to be the place not where many vigorous and exciting intellectual pursuits should be forbidden but where they ought to be encouraged on as wide a front as possible. I will grant, as everyone



must, that the concept of freedom cannot be a license for, as Matthew Arnold put it in another context, entirely doing as one likes. But it must be the case, I think, that advocates of freedom for university communities to undertake intellectual pursuits cannot spend most of their time arguing that only a handful of approved books, ideas, disciplines, and methods are worthy of serious intellectual attention. The realities of social life are viewed in this perspective as sordid and demeaning, although it needs to be noted that professors such as the author of *The Closing of the American Mind* have no difficulty accepting money from corporations and foundations outside the university who happen to espouse their own deeply conservative views. To say of such practices that they represent a double standard is no exaggeration. For you cannot honestly impugn people as enemies of academic freedom just because they welcome worldly concerns into the academy while, when you do more or less the same thing, you consider yourself to be "upholding standards."

Universities as Political Institutions

An altogether different challenge to the concept of academic freedom is found in national universities in the Arab world, which is where I originally come from. I speak here of most of the large public universities in countries like Jordan, Syria, Iraq, Egypt, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, and other Gulf states. Most of these countries are in fact run by secular governments, although some - like Saudi Arabia - have secular governments with a religious mandate. What is important to understand, however, is that with few exceptions Arab universities are not only nationalist universities but are also political institutions, for perfectly understandable reasons. For several centuries, the Arab world has been dominated by Ottoman or European colonialism. National independence for countries like Egypt and Syria, say, meant that young people at last could be educated fully in the traditions, histories, languages, and cultures of their own particular Arab countries. In my own case, for instance, I was educated entirely in British colonial schools in Palestine and Egypt, where all study focused on the history of British society, literature, and values. Much the same was true in the main British and French colonies, such as India and Algeria, where it was assumed that native elites would be taught the rudiments of intellectual culture in idioms and methods designed in effect to keep those native elites subservient to colonial rule, the superiority of European learning, and so forth. Until I was about sixteen I knew a great deal more about the eighteenth century enclosure system in England than I did about how the Islamic *waqfs* operated in my own part of the world, and to me - irony of ironies - colonial preconsuls

like Crome and Kitchener were more familiar to me than Haroun al-Rashid or Khalid ibn al-Walid.

When independence was achieved as a result of anti-colonial struggles, one of the first areas to be changed was education. I recall, for instance, the after the Revolution of 1952 in Egypt a great deal of emphasis was placed on the Arabization of the curriculum, the Arabization of intellectual norms, the Arabization of values to be inculcated in schools and universities. The same was true in Algeria after 1962, where an entire generation of Muslims were for the first time entitled and enjoined to study Arabic, which had been forbidden except as a language in mosques while Algeria was considered and ruled as a department of France. It is important to understand, therefore, the passion that went into reclaiming educational territory that for so long had been dominated by foreign rulers in the Arab world, and it is equally important to understand the tremendous spiritual wound felt by many of us because of the sustained presence in our midst of domineering foreigners who taught us to respect distant norms and values more than our own. Our culture was felt to be of a lower grade, perhaps even congenitally inferior and something of which to be ashamed.

Now it would be wrong and even absurd to suggest that a national education based on Arabic norms is in and of itself either trivial or impoverished. The Arab-Islamic tradition is one of the great cultural contributions to humanity, and in the old universities of Fez and al-Azhar as well as the various *madrasas* throughout the Arab world, a rich educational experience has been provided to uncounted generations of students. Yet it is also true to say that in the newly independent countries of the Arab world, the national universities were reconceived, I believe, as (rightly or wrongly) extensions of the newly established national security state. Once again it is clear that all societies accord a remarkable privilege to the university and school as crucibles for shaping national identity.

Yet all too often in the Arab world, true education was short-circuited, so to speak. Whereas in the past young Arabs fell prey to the intervention of foreign ideas and norms, now they were to be remade in the image of the ruling party, which, given the Cold War and the Arab-Israeli struggle, became also the party of national security - and in some countries, the only party. Thus adding to the vastly increased pressure on universities to open their doors to everyone in the new society - an extremely admirable policy - universities also became the proving ground for earnest patriots. Professorial appointments were, as they are in many places in the world today, civil service appointments. Alas, political conformity rather than intellectual excellence was often made to serve as a criterion for promotion and appointment, with the



general result that timidity, a studious lack of imagination, and careful conservatism came to rule intellectual practice. Moreover, because the general atmosphere in the Arab world of the past three decades has become both conspiratorial and, I am sorry to say, repressive-all in the name of national security-nationalism in the university has come to represent not freedom but accommodations, not brilliance and daring but caution and fear, not the advancement of knowledge but self-preservation.

Not only did many brilliant and gifted people leave the Arab world in a massive brain-drain, but I would say that the whole notion of academic freedom underwent a significant downgrading during the past three decades. It became possible for one to be free in the university only if one completely avoided anything that might attract unwelcome attention or suspicion. I do not want to make a long, anguished recital of how badly demoralized and discouraged a place the Arab university, in most of its contemporary aspects, has become, but I do think it is important to link its depressed situation with the lack of democratic rights, the absence of a free press, and an atmosphere bereft of well-being and confidence elsewhere in the society. No one can say that these things are not connected to each other, because they so obviously are. Political repression has never been good for academic freedom, and perhaps more importantly, it has been disastrous for academic and intellectual excellence. My assessment of Arab academic life is that too high a price has been paid in sustaining nationalist regimes that have allowed political passions and an ideology of conformity to dominate-perhaps even to swallow up-civil institutions such as the university. To make the practice of intellectual discourse dependent on conformity to a predetermined political ideology is to nullify intellect altogether.

Education and Identity

For all its problems, however, the American academy is a very different place than its counterpart in the Arab world. To suggest that there are any obvious similarities at all would be to misrepresent each seriously. Yet I do not want to celebrate the greater manifest freedom of inquiry, the generally higher level of intellectual attainment, the quite extraordinary range of interests demonstrated in the American academy at the expense of the much more obvious constraints and difficulties in Arab universities, which after everything is said share the fate of many other universities in the Third World. That sort of almost bullying praise of the virtues of Western education today would be too easy and far too simple.

Nevertheless it is important to show the connection between such different circumstances as those that

obtain in the Middle East and in the United States by remarking how it is that in both a very great premium is placed upon the cultural and national *identity* of the education being offered. I spoke earlier about the debate between upholders and opponents of the Western canon in the American university; I also spoke of how in the post-independence, post-colonial Arab universities a great degree of emphasis was placed on the *Arabness* of what was being offered. In both cases therefore, ordinarily so different and so far removed from each other, one idea - that of national identity - shines through. It is precisely this idea, American and Western in one case, Arab and Islamic in the other, that plays an astonishingly important role as authority and as point of reference in the whole educational process. I want to raise the question of how the central importance and authority given the national identity impinges on and greatly influences, surreptitiously and often unquestioningly, academic freedom - that is, what transpires in the name of academic freedom.

When I discussed earlier how the specific social and cultural circumstances of the academic situation in each society define the problem of academic freedom, national identity was very much what I had in mind. Certainly this is true of a society like that of South Africa, now undergoing particularly difficult and stressful transformation. But as one looks elsewhere in the world, one finds that many places are experiencing much the same contest of what the national identity is or ought to be. This contest, almost more than anything else, defines the political and cultural situation of the late twentieth century: that as the world grows smaller and more interdependent economically, environmentally, and through the revolution in communications, there is a great sense that societies interact, often abrasively, in terms of who or what their national identities are. Consider on a global level the importance today of the Western European community as one large cultural block interacting with the Eastern European community and the Soviet Union, with Japan and the United States, and with many parts of the Third World. Similarly, look at the contest between the Islamic world and the West, in which national, cultural, and religious self-images and self-definitions play a powerful role. To speak of hegemony, attempts at domination, and the control of resources in this global struggle is, I strongly believe, to speak in very accurate (if also melodramatic) terms.

But that is not all. Within societies such as this one and those in other parts of the Western, African, Asian, and Islamic world, there is also a contest as to which concept of national identity ought to prevail. Although this question is principally of philosophical and historical derivation, inevitably it leads one to the urgent political issue of how, given the definition of identity, the society is to be governed. To look closely at the recent history of imperialism and



decolonization is to grasp the centrality of the debate. In Algeria, as the works of Frantz Fanon eloquently testify, Algerians were viewed by the French as a subordinate race, fit only for colonial and subaltern status. Even the distinguished humanistic writer Albert Camus, who was a native-born member of the French settler population, embodied the Algerian in his fiction as an essentially nameless, threatening creature; during the late fifties Camus explicitly said in his *Algerian Chronicles* that there was no Algerian Muslim nation. Of course there was. After the liberation in 1962 one of the principal tasks of the FLN was to re-establish the integrity, the centrality, the paramountcy and sovereignty of the Muslim Algerian identity. With the creation of a new governmental structure of Algeria came an educational program focused first on the teaching of Arabic and on Algerian history, formerly either banned or subordinated to programs stressing the superiority of French civilization.

Surely in South Africa much the same dynamic will be and doubtless already is embodied in the nature of the educational program, as the country moves out of apartheid into a new system of democratic, racially unbiased government. However, there are some further points I wish to make about all this, as it has a bearing on the question of academic freedom.

Authority to Cultural Hostility

The first is that in a condition in which cultural conflict is, to all intents and purposes, universal, the relationship between the national identity and other national identities is going to be reflected in the academy. The question is how. All cultures teach about themselves, and all cultures naturally assert their supremacy over others. To study the tradition, the masterpieces, the great interpretive methods of a culture inclines members of that culture to reverence, respect, loyalty, and even patriotism. This of course is understandable. But my point is that no culture exists in isolation, and since it a matter of course that the study of one's own tradition in school and university is taken for granted, we must look at what of *other* cultures, *other* traditions, *other* national communities also is communicated as one's own culture is studied. I should like to argue that if the authority granted our own culture carries with it the authority to perpetuate cultural hostility, then a true academic freedom is very much at risk, having as it were conceded that intellectual discourse must worship at the altar of national identity and thereby denigrate or diminish others.

Let me explain. Historically, every society has its Other: The Greeks had the barbarians, the Arabs the Persians, the Hindus the Muslims, and on and on. But since the

nineteenth century consolidated the world system, all cultures and societies today are intermixed. No country on earth is made up of homogenous natives; each has its immigrants, its internal "Others," and each society, very much like the world we live in, is a hybrid. Yet a discrepancy exists at the very heart of this vital, complex, and intermingled world. I have in mind the discrepancy between the heterogenous reality and the concept of national identity, to which so much of education is in fact dedicated. If we recall once again the two examples I gave earlier of debate about what is Western in the American university and of politicization of the Arabness of the Arab university, we will note that in both instances a faltering and outdated concept of a single national identity more or less lords it over the true variety and manifold diversity of human life. In both cases a kind of supernational concept - that of the West in the United States, and that of the Arabs or Islam in countries like Algeria, Syria, and Iraq (each of which has large minority populations) - is pressed into service. This scarcely improves things, since in both a combination of authority and defensiveness inhibits, disables, and ultimately falsifies thought. What finally matters about the West or the Arabs, in my opinion, is not what these notions exclude but to what they are connected, how much they include, and how interesting are the interactions between them and other cultures.

I do not have an easy way of resolving this very serious discrepancy. I do know, nevertheless, that the meaning of academic freedom cannot simply be reduced to venerating the unexamined authority of a national identity and its culture. For in its essence the intellectual life - and I speak here mainly about the social sciences and the humanities - is about the freedom to be critical: criticism is intellectual life and, while the academic precinct contains a great deal in it, its spirit is intellectual and critical, and neither reverential nor patriotic. One of the great lessons of the critical spirit is that human life and history are secular - that is, actually constructed and reproduced by men and women. The problem with the inculcation of cultural, national, or ethnic identity is that it takes insufficient note of how these identities are constructions, not god-given or natural artifacts. If the academy is to be a place for the realization not of the nation but of the intellect - and that, I think is the academy's reason for being - then the intellect must not be coercively help in thrall to the authority of the national identity. Otherwise, I fear, the old inequities, cruelties, and unthinking attachments that have so disfigured human history will be recycled by the academy, which then loses much of its real intellectual freedom as a result.

Now let me speak personally and even politically if I may. Like so many others, I belong to more than one



world. I am a Palestinian Arab, and I am also an American. This affords me an odd, not to say grotesque, double perspective. In addition, I am of course an academic. None of these identities is watertight; each influences and plays upon the other. What complicates matters is that the United States has just waged a destructive war against an Arab country, Iraq, which itself had illegally occupied and to all intents and purposes tried to eliminate Kuwait, another Arab country. The United States is also the principal sponsor of Israel, the state that as a Palestinian I identify as having destroyed the society and world into which I was born. Israel now administers a brutal military occupation of Palestinian territories of the West Bank and Gaza. So I am required to negotiate the various tensions and contradictions implicit in my own biography.

It should be obvious that I cannot identify at all with the triumphalism of one identity because the loss and deprivation of the others are so much more urgent to me. There is some irony in the fact that as I speak as an American to South Africans at a South African university on the subject of academic freedom, the universities and the schools in Palestine are closed and opened by willful and punitive decree of the Israeli military authorities. This situation has obtained since February 1988: during that time, the main universities have been kept closed. When you consider that well over two-thirds of the population in Occupied Palestine is made up of people under the age of 18, the sheer massive brutality of denying them school and college or university by systematic edict is extraordinary. At the same time, Jewish children and young people freely attend classes in their schools and universities, which are of a decent standard. There is now a generation of Palestinian children virtually being made illiterate, again by Israeli design and programmatic vision. To the best of my knowledge, there has been no really systematic campaign by Western academics and intellectuals to try to alleviate this situation; of course individuals have protested, but Israel continues these and other practices intended to deny, if not altogether to obliterate, the Palestinian national identity, and it does so with little Western objection. Certainly the subsidies from the United States continue and celebrations of Israeli democracy also continue. More to the point I am trying to make here, the Israeli practice of attempting to deny, efface, and otherwise render impossible the existence of a Palestinian national identity except as nameless, disenfranchised "Arab inhabitants" of "**Judea and Samaria**" (as the West Bank and Gaza are known in official Israeli parlance), this practice is carried out not just by modern colonialists, but by the descendants of a people, the Jews, themselves the victims barely a generation ago of such practices. For the victim to become the

victimizer of another people is a reversal of history quite awful to ponder. That this new victimizer has persecuted the very people it dispossessed and exiled, all the while benefitting from munificent Western moral support for Israel, is an appallingly cruel truth.

Why then is it carried out, if not in the assertion of a new national identity and a new nationalism, the Israeli, that decrees the absence of a conflicting (and pre-existing) national identity and nationalism, that of the Palestinian? I cannot and will not try to explain why Israel does this to the Palestinian people. But I can say with understanding and compassion that most Palestinians today who suffer such tribulations naturally long for the day when they can practice their self-determination in an independent state of their own, when Palestinian universities and schools can instruct young people in the history and traditions of Arab culture and in those of the other cultures that make up human history. Surely a majority of South Africans feel the same pain that we do, feel the humiliation and the oppression of seeing our representatives denied their right to represent their people, of our struggle labelled only "terrorism," of our political rights denied, our self-determination endlessly postponed, our collective punishment enacted on a minute-by-minute basis. Is it not a fact that what makes all these things more intensely painful is that they are carried out very often in the name of Western as well as Biblical morality, with its magnificent lineage of sagacity, learning, advancement, and technological proficiency to back it up? How delinquent, how morally repugnant are natives made to feel, that they dare to resist so compelling a cultural identity, that they have the effrontery to call such actions as the closing of schools and universities carried out by such authorities cruel and unjust practices.

To anyone who knows a little about the history of colonialism in the non-European world, these things too will pass. It took dozens of generations, but the British finally did leave India, and after 130 years the French left Algeria, and after a time apartheid will pass. So too for us Palestinians, our oppression will end, and we will have our self-determination, not at the expense of another people, but through a Palestinian state alongside Israel. The challenge is what intellectually and academically do we do with our earned liberation? I pose the question as perhaps the most serious one to be faced not just by those of us who have been on the bottom but by those of us who belong to the side that will at last win liberation.

The conclusion of this lecture will appear in the next issue of *Pravada*.