

Valeria Vollmer

Daniel Gordon. *What Is Academic Freedom? A Century of Debate, 1915–Present*. London: Routledge, 2022. 178 pp. ISBN 9780367511708.

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In *What Is Academic Freedom?* Daniel Gordon discusses the history of free debate culture since 1915. Gordon's research interests include the history of European and American social and political thought, comparative law, and the history of higher education. The current book follows his recent work on Alexis de Tocqueville and his key ideas in *Democracy in America* and on Hannah Arendt's *On Revolution* (Gordon 2017, 2019), as well as analysis of the published diary of the French-Tunisian writer and philosopher Albert Memmi titled *Tunisie, an I, 1955–1956* (Gordon 2018). The core question of his latest monograph, which focuses on modern research universities in the United States during the twentieth century, is when and how freedom of speech can be distinguished from academic freedom. Based on a broad selection of sources, such as written philosophical debates, political speeches, court transcripts, university regulations, statements of principles, university bulletins, surveys, newspaper articles, television and radio programs, or blog posts, the author shows how the university debate culture has developed over the past 100 years, alongside the transformation of media technologies. Through the examples of the dismissal of civil rights activist Angela Davis from the University of California in 1969, philosopher and education reformer Alexander Meiklejohn's legal and educational ideals in relation to free speech and the First Amendment in the 1950s, intellectual historian Arthur Lovejoy's ideas of neutrality in teaching, and the history of the American Association of University Professors, Gordon reflects on the tensions between academic freedom and the role of university professors. He examines where the limits of freedom of expression and tolerance are, when indoctrination begins in classrooms, and whether academic boycott movements can be reconciled with academic freedom. The author emphasizes that he is not seeking to draw a universally valid conclusion about academic freedom, but rather make philosophical, political, and legal discourses visible in the context of controversies about academic freedom.

Already in the introduction, Gordon explains that he considers it relevant to offer the reader an overview of past controversies about academic freedom and "discuss the principle of 'debate' itself as a feature of historical inquiry" (p. 1), before offering an overview of what academic freedom could be (pp. 1–7). He states that his motivation for writing this book was to take a stand against political activism in the classroom. The book does not follow a chronological order, but instead presents independently complex case studies (p. 3). With the selected case studies, Gordon wants to show how differently academic freedom can be interpreted in the US. With his monograph, the author joins the ongoing debate about boundaries, challenges, and academic freedom in the twenty-first century,

represented by the multiple essay collections and anthologies published in the last decade (e.g., Bilgrami and Cole 2015; Ignatieff and Roch 2018; Lackey 2018; Özmen 2021; Seckelmann 2021; Ndasauka and Sandifolo 24; Rabban 2024). With his research, Gordon brings a specific attention to the US particularities in the development of the notions of academic freedom, in which he refers to disputes concerning the dismissal and boycott of university staff. In addition, he discusses the impact of the Middle East conflict on activism at American universities in the twenty-first century (pp. 124–145).

Using the case of Angela Davis, who was fired from her position of an assistant professor in the Department of Philosophy at UCLA by the Board of Regents of the University of California in 1969 because of her membership in the Black Panthers and the Communist Party USA, Gordon shows the multifaceted nature of the concept of academic freedom. Davis defined academic freedom as the right to participate in political activities on campus and to express communist views in public speeches. For the Board of Regents, the publicly communicated political membership could not be reconciled with research and teaching activities at a university. Davis's case went to the Supreme Court. Because of the First Amendment, Davis's freedom of speech was guaranteed. Legally, she could not be fired by her employer for her speeches. Her dismissal was withdrawn, but her contract was not renewed in 1970. While the US Constitution protects freedom of expression, it is silent on the issue of whether there might be a conflict between one's political statements and their role as an educator (pp. 10–30).

As a further example to show how differently academic freedom can be construed in American democracy, Gordon refers to Alexander Meiklejohn's absolutist interpretation of the First Amendment. The cornerstone of Meiklejohn's idea of free speech is that political speech should never be restricted, but universities should not be a place for free speech. Based on Jean-Jacques Rousseau's theory of identity, Meiklejohn pointed out that individual interests should be subordinated to a common will, including when it comes to the limits on free speech within educational institutions. According to Meiklejohn, students should first learn how to talk about political issues in a structured manner rather than freely. With these views, Meiklejohn sparked a controversy at the 1952 annual meeting of the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) when he argued that the First Amendment prohibited suppression of political speech, including propaganda. Unlike Meiklejohn, the AAUP understood academic freedom primarily to mean protection from political interference in the objective search for truth within the university. For Meiklejohn, academic freedom was an instrument of education, through which young people should be prepared for their political maturity (pp. 35–59). The founding document of the AAUP in 1915 defined the professional separation of science and politics. At that time, however, the First Amendment only applied to the federal government, rather than state governments and all other public institutions (pp. 3, 36–37). Meiklejohn's interpretation of free speech became popular when in 1964 the Supreme Court, in the *New York Times Co. v. Sullivan* case, protected the right to free journalistic expression of opinion by limiting officials' ability to sue for defamation (pp. 38–59).

Gordon also discusses the emergence of environmental studies, Black studies, and women's studies in the second half of the twentieth century. He argues that it was only through the popularity of French social theory in the United States, in particular the influence of Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida, that subjects such as women's studies and Black studies were developed, but that these were also shaped by the civil rights movement. Gordon sees the establishment of these disciplines as a "major crack in the anti-political orthodoxy" (p. 86) and thus as a reason for increase in political activism. Here it could be argued that the structures of these disciplines had already developed through other influences and simply became more visible worldwide since the 1960s as a result of the civil rights movement (pp. 63–86).

Chapters 4, "Eminent Conversions: 1990s–Present," and 5, "Israel, BDS, and Academic Freedom," of the book are concerned with the question of whether the debate about academic freedom has become polarized since the turn of the millennium. Gordon asks if American academics have increasingly taken a more radical stance on political issues since the 1990s and if this polarization has led to a rise in inappropriate hostility and incitement on campus. To this end, he analyzes the controversies surrounding the Academic Bill of Rights, a project that conservative intellectual David Horowitz began in 2003, and the firing of Ward Churchill, a tenured professor at the University of Colorado Boulder in 2007, ostensibly for academic misconduct. Gordon also studies the impact of the presence of the Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) movement against Israel on US university campuses since 2004 on the question of academic freedom and how the debate changed in this regard when the American Studies Association voted to support BDS in 2014 (pp. 90–145).

To highlight the ambiguity of academic freedom, Gordon closes his book not with a conclusion, but with a reflection on Edward Said's unpublished speech. In December 1992, Said gave a talk "Literary Criticism and Politics?" at the annual convention of the Modern Language Association, in which he argued for the separation of politics and pedagogy (pp. 149–159).

Gordon's position that politics and scholarship ought to be kept separate is clearly visible throughout the book, but he manages to avoid being dogmatic. It should be noted that this book provides an American perspective on the issue. The American perspectives could certainly be juxtaposed with global concepts of academic freedom. The book shows one of many ideas about what academic freedom can be in the twenty-first century.

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