

# Intellectual Freedom: Permissive and Transgressive

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Two sorts of academic freedom are problems for us today. For the purposes of this provocation, I will dub them 'permitted' and 'transgressive' forms of freedom.

Permitted freedom is that enshrined in the policies and procedures which define what a university is. In these contexts, the academic is given permission to pursue thinking where it leads. In practice, of course, this is subject to all sorts of direct and indirect constraints. However, even aside from these constraints, permitted freedom is itself problematic.

Louis Althusser argued that we are ideologically shaped from the first, not only by forces of active repression, but also by the more subtle interpellations which determine our orientation as subjects in the world. We internalise the messages of culture, education, class position and so on, to the extent that we even appear to be the ones who emanate the signals that we receive. We can therefore appear and feel most free at precisely that point where ideology is most effective.

For Althusser, educational institutions play a huge role in this process. Along with the formal curriculum, we also learn 'know how'. We learn how to be good citizens, what it is appropriate to value and how we should behave in relation to different strata of society. I suggest that what is true in learning is true also in teaching and scholarship. That is, the 'how' of academic freedom – its place in the ideological and corporate priorities of the university, as shaped by wider market pressures – is as important as its overt 'what' or content.

In the UK, for example, research ‘outputs’ and ‘impacts’ are ranked and rewarded according to supposedly objective measures, directly tied to issues of funding. The number and level of outputs the individual academic must produce is becoming hardwired into performance management systems. Through these mechanisms, ‘permitted’ freedom comes to internalise the marketised freedom which is not only tolerated by the market, but actively promoted according to norms of productivity and competition. These norms become more and more entrenched (for example, in current government proposals to reflect the research ‘excellent’ framework with an equivalent measuring exercise applied to teaching).

Faced with this, academics might take refuge in forms of ‘transgressive’ freedom. By this, I mean forms of scholarly practice which in some way deviate from established disciplinary conventions. They might engage with genres, methods and interlocutors which challenge dominant norms of who and what counts as academically creditable.

The problem here is well known: the adaptability of capitalistic systems is such that transgressions are quickly absorbed and normalised. The gesture of transgression itself becomes a sign and driver of the productivity of the system. I may be free to write about queer politics, black metal, chaos magic and ecosocialism. The system, however, is indifferent to the actual content, as long as it can be assigned a certain abstract quality. Academic outputs, however ‘out there’, thus take on a kind of commodity form.

Stating the problem in this way also indicates the difficulty of responding. Defending ‘academic freedom’ may well be strategically necessary in certain contexts. At the same time, we cannot be ignorant of the ways in which norms of freedom can be made to serve agendas of domination and stigmatisation. There is an unholy alliance between the ‘freedom’ to publish material basically equating Islam with war and paedophilia, for example, and the drive to profile Muslim students and researchers in the name of the government’s ‘anti-radicalisation’ Prevent programme. In the name of freedom, a Muslim (or, let’s face it a ‘Muslim-looking’ – i.e. brown skinned) student on a masters course on global terrorism was questioned by one UK university’s security guards for reading books about terrorism in the library.

An alternative construction of freedom, therefore, cannot exist in blissful ignorance of power relationships. Freedom is meaningless without power, and academic freedom cannot be limited to the production of transgressive outputs which are shelved and graded. Sometimes freedom will mean a *refusal to produce*.

Echoing Marx, academic freedom needs to be shaped by revisiting the sensuous human practices of academic work. The ‘how’ matters: not just the

surface products, but the felt experiences, the solidarities, resistances and enjoyments which run through our intellectual factories. As bell hooks has argued, theory needs to be recast as a liberatory practice: freedom is not assumed as a given, but as a historical task, something to be constructed. And it can only be constructed with a certain partisanship in view: we must, in other words, choose sides.