

“Envisioning the Future of Democratic Engagement in Higher Education”

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I begin these remarks about the future of democratic engagement in higher education by reflecting briefly on a personal moment in the past. In 1976, I was an undergraduate student in law and literature at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, South Africa. Those were dark days—it was a decade and a half before Nelson Mandela would be released from prison—and on June 16 of that year resistance to the introduction of Afrikaans as a medium of instruction in schools would culminate in what is now remembered as the Soweto Uprising. 20,000 students took to the streets where they were fired upon with live ammunition and at least 176 were killed.

Exactly two months earlier, with the signs of the impending confrontation everywhere apparent in the environment around us, I went with fellow students to hear the eleventh Richard Feetham Academic Freedom Lecture, which was given at the university that year by Ronald Dworkin, the American legal philosopher and jurist who at the time was Professor of Jurisprudence at Oxford University. It would be no exaggeration to say that the lecture changed my life. Why it did so is complicated to explain: no doubt the political circumstances prevailing at the time made the occasion particularly electrifying. Although the lecture was open to the public, there was as I recall an atmosphere of conspiracy in the hall, as the university community once again engaged in its essential business—the free exchange of ideas and the pursuit of truth—in the knowledge that government was watching and might at any moment intervene with force to shut it down.

During those years it was not uncommon to see riot police vehicles at the ready, parked directly across the street from the entrance to campus. The Riotous Assemblies Act had been passed in 1956, the year of my birth, and by the time I arrived at university it was extraordinary how generously police were in the habit of construing the word “riot”: under the act, a gathering of

¹ <https://www.magna-charta.org/>

² <https://www.iau-ai.net>

³ <https://www.coe.int/en/web/education/global-forum-on-higher-education-2025> - accessed in June 2025.

as few as twelve people could constitute a “riotous assembly.” To remind police that the normal work of the academy required students and professors to gather and talk—that disputation was the essence and basic medium of academic life—it became common practice for university administrators speaking on controversial topics to do so in full academic dress. The reminder didn’t always work: some of my most vivid memories from that time involve the incongruous mixture of tear gas and medieval scholarly robes. I suppose the difference between a disputatious and a riotous assembly is in the eye of the beholder: when certain ideas seem dangerous and the motive of the beholder is control, everything the academy is, and everything it does, is potentially “riotous.”

So much for the circumstances of Ronald Dworkin’s lecture which, as I said, changed my life. As to the content of his talk, I am pleased to report that despite most of its philosophical nuances being lost on this wide-eyed twenty-year-old, its central message did, however, hit home. Academic freedom, he argued, was not to be justified by what Jonathan Suzman has called “the standard ‘market-place’ defence of freedom of expression... that the truth will survive competition with falsehoods.” Instead, the more reliable foundation upon which to argue for academic freedom is “the concept of a person as an autonomous agent”.⁴ To young ears which had hitherto found the “market-place of ideas” a peculiar abstraction and which had also wondered why truth would *necessarily* be discoverable in it, this insight offered a more concrete foundation.

“The concept of a person as an autonomous agent” sounded, after all, like the organizing principle for a just society, the goal which human institutions of all sorts should exist to serve. And in that moment I understood that academic freedoms and responsibilities were integral to the achievement of social and political health. The riot police across the road, the government leaders who repeatedly threatened to withdraw the university’s operating subsidy, who banned books, who proscribed racialized persons from attendance at university, or from study in certain fields: they were contesting the notion of personal as well as institutional autonomy and therefore the influence of the academy upon the construction and conduct of social relations according to those same principles. The effect of Dworkin’s argument was to suggest to me that the cause of social justice could be advanced as much by strenuous advocacy and defence of the academy and its values, as by an activist career in law or politics.

And that is how I come to be speaking to you today as a university leader, nearly fifty years later, at a time when in so many parts of the world, the riot police are again at the gates or even in control of university campuses, governments are withdrawing subsidies and grants in an

⁴ Jonathan Suzman, “The Political Neutrality of Universities—Defending Some Classical Views,” *Philosophical Papers* 8:1 (1979), 11. The text of Dworkin’s lecture is to be found in the Ronald Dworkin Papers (MS 2071), Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University.

attempt to curb institutional autonomy, the “market-place” model of freedom of expression is being cynically defended even while war is being declared on certain kinds of ideas, and—perhaps most alarmingly—many of these things are occurring within liberal democracies the populations of which seem inexplicably unaware that the attack on universities is nothing less than an attack on liberal democracy itself.

That last point is an important one because, even *inside* universities, the connection between academic principles and the health of society is insufficiently understood. In the Canadian academy within which I have worked for most of my career, for example, academic freedom has been fiercely defended—more against administrative than against governmental threat, I should note—since the Harry Crowe affair of 1958. But that defence focuses on academic freedom more as a right or an entitlement of scholars, rather than as a principle that brings benefit to society and therefore is complementary to academic *responsibility*. It is little wonder, then, that threats to academic freedom very rarely engage the interest of the general public, in whose eyes it is an irrelevant or perhaps even offensive privilege, available only to a mysterious elite. As we think about the future of democratic engagement in higher education—or perhaps better if we reverse that phrasing and talk about the engagement of higher education in and with the advancement of democracy—universities need to be more deliberate, more explicit, and less self-interested when talking about their relationship with the communities and societies that sustain them and which they exist to serve.

In *What Universities Owe Democracy*, his excellent book from 2021, Ron Daniels—my fellow Canadian and President of the Johns Hopkins University—writes with dismay about the level of civic literacy amongst students in the United States. “The fact is,” he observes, “that our students, who show such remarkable sophistication and mastery across so many different fields upon entering university, are woefully undereducated in democracy’s core precepts.”⁵ The case for free speech, for example, “this most foundational of American ideals, this cornerstone of citizenship, was somehow overlooked (or, more perplexingly, expunged) from our students’ high school education.” Daniels goes on to assert that universities have “the capacity and responsibility” to address this deficit in their students—a very valid point; but that they have not already been doing so confirms my observation earlier on that universities are, or have become, self-serving and indifferent to their integral relationship with democratic institutions. Or to be more generous, we might simply say that they are inclined to take that relationship for granted rather than as an ongoing project requiring work, dedication and commitment.

Both of these things—on the one hand, the self-deluding assumption that students attending university learn by some sort of strange osmosis the core precepts of democracy, and on the other, the arrogance of presuming that academic freedom has an inherent value that need not

⁵ Ronald J. Daniels, *What Universities Owe Democracy* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2021), 88.

be demonstrated or proven with reference to society—are symptoms of a kind of decadence in higher education that has made our institutions especially vulnerable as the post-war consensus in favour of liberal democracy has in recent years begun to unravel. Indeed, to properly understand what has recently been playing out between Harvard University and the administration in Washington—perhaps the most flagrant and ambitious assault on university autonomy in recent memory—one has to first acknowledge that before any President could dream of taking on his country’s oldest, richest and most powerful university he would have had to be confident that popular support for what the American Philosophical Society in 1795 called “the best system of liberal education and literary instruction, adapted to the genius of the Government of the United States”—a university system which Benjamin Rush, one of the founding fathers, imagined would “begin the golden age of the United States”⁶—was on the wane. It is darkly ironic that a President taking office 230 years later should also announce that “the Golden Age of America begins right now,” yet apparently seek to do the very opposite of Benjamin Rush and attack one by one the bastions of the American academy.

Ron Daniels writes that “liberal democracies and universities are both collective enterprises whose existence depends on the vigorous contestation of ideas.”⁷ It is an observation that neatly captures the degree to which they are part of the same act of human creativity, and it also effectively evokes the symbiosis which joins them. If universities have now become vulnerable, therefore, it stands to reason that this is somehow connected to the increasingly well-documented and commented-upon decline of liberalism. In *Why Liberalism Failed*, for example, Patrick Deneen wonders whether America “is not in the early days of its eternal life but rather approaching the end of the natural cycle of corruption and decay that limits the lifespan of all human creations.”⁸ Given my comments earlier about the way in which the defence of academic freedom in some cultural contexts is currently vitiated by an attitude of entitlement, it is interesting to note that Deneen identifies as one of the symptoms of Liberalism’s decline the replacement of community, religion and tradition with self-interest.⁹

In a review of Deneen’s book,¹⁰ *The Economist* conceded the accuracy of its analysis, but argued that the proper response should not be to abandon Liberalism, but rather to return to and reaffirm its premises. The book was, in other words, “a call to action: up your game, or else.” As I look at the future of democratic engagement in higher education, I would say the same thing.

⁶ Quoted by Emily Levine in *Allies and Rivals: German-American Exchange and the Rise of the Modern Research University* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021), 24-25.

⁷ Daniels, 253.

⁸ Patrick Deneen, *Why Liberalism Failed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018), “Introduction: The End of Liberalism,” paragraph 5, at 12%, Kindle Edition.

⁹ See Introduction *passim*, but especially Section: Science and Technology, paragraph 4, at 16% Kindle Edition.

¹⁰ “The Problem with Liberalism,” *Economist*, 25 January 2018.

Like most of you I still believe as I came to believe listening to Ronald Dworkin, that universities are intrinsic to democracy and to the cultivation of personal autonomy. In the face of current threats, however, we will certainly have to “up our game.” And instead of simply lamenting that the old Golden Age of universities has mysteriously been supplanted by a new “Golden Age” potentially without them—in which, to paraphrase the Irish poet W.B. Yeats, the educators lack all conviction, while the ignorant are full of passionate intensity—we should work actively to restore and re-energize that symbiotic relationship between universities and liberal democracy.

To do that we could begin with two things. First, following the suggestion of Daniels, we could ensure that students—whatever their field of study—are deliberately educated in the core precepts of democracy and understand that with the privilege of their education comes the responsibility to contribute to the achievement to a just and equitable society. Related to that, as academics we must stop thinking of “academic values” as timeless and handed down by a God in whom respect for higher education coexists with love and all the other divine virtues of equally mysterious origin. Instead, we must renegotiate the relationship between the academy and the world, recognizing that the price of academic privilege is human responsibility and that our institutions must be engaged actively in the ongoing project of building democracy.

Our mistake—if we can be said to have made only one—has been increasingly to behave as if the purpose of democracies is to support universities, rather than the other way around. And now that the consequence of that peculiar inversion is being revealed in the decline of democratic institutions, logic suggests that a point must exist beyond which the situation cannot be rescued. The extraordinary process of academic expansion and development that began with Wilhelm Von Humboldt, his *Theory of Bildung* (1793), his letter to his king extolling the civic benefit of higher education, and his conception of the modern research university as a shaping force in the state and society: could that possibly all be subverted by executive orders, bureaucratic manipulation, and outright political mendacity? At some level the attack on America’s Ivy League universities has kindled fears around the world that the answer to that question could be yes.

The Humboldtian notion of *Bildung*—in which human beings realize their full potential through a holistic education that enables them eventually to bear full social responsibility—provides an intriguing parallel to the idea of the individual as autonomous agent that Dworkin spoke about in his defence of academic freedom. It is also relevant to my complaint about universities and the sense of entitlement that has supplanted service to democracy as their *raison d’être*: assuming their divine right to exist, they have progressively surrendered autonomous agency to powers which have little sympathy for universities, and over which they now find they have limited or no control.

In some parts of the world institutions face open hostility, as in the United States where the Vice-President has declared professors “the enemy” and universities are under concerted attack. And in that situation, when the balance of power seems irreversibly to have shifted and universities are close to losing their influence over politicians and the formation of society, it must be admitted the options for higher education are few. The Magna Charta Universitatum, the 1988 “declaration and affirmation of the fundamental principles upon which the mission of universities should be based” does not envisage universities becoming estranged from the body politic, although its 2020 supplement does acknowledge the existence of a “social contract” to which the academy is party. “To fulfil their potential,” it declares in language reminiscent of Humboldtian *Bildung*, “universities require a reliable social contract with civil society, one which supports pursuit of the highest possible quality of academic work, with full respect for institutional autonomy.”¹¹

The conclusion of my rather bleak analysis today is that universities find themselves in a broken relationship with society—partly because they have to some degree taken a tautological and self-serving turn, and partly because societal values, mores and aspirations are in flux around the world. And if I can put it this way, waving the Magna Charta Universitatum in the face of politicians will likely not help, but enrolling in the Living Values Project derived from it might do so. The social contract which binds higher education institutions to their communities simply requires work: in some contexts all that may be needed is routine maintenance, in others the natural compatibility, affinity or even blood tie that connects universities to liberal democracy may require a fundamental recalibration or reset.

In recent months we have learned with dismay how rapidly a negative unilateral alteration in the social contract can put universities in jeopardy. And in that context it is sad that no response available to universities can ever be comparably dramatic or rapid, and a great deal of damage can be done before their relationship with society stabilizes. But that is a disadvantage that arises from the essential function of universities, which is to place circumspection before impulse, truth before falsehood, and knowledge before ideology. So we have to accept that our attempt to reanimate the relationship between the academy and liberal democracy, say, will proceed slowly--and without any certainty of success, I should add, because with all due respect to the wisdom of Aesop, there is absolutely no guarantee that the tortoise will outrun the hare. So these are difficult, frustrating, and frightening times for university advocates and leaders.

They are also times of temptation, and it is with some thoughts on that subject that I would like to end. During the course of this talk I have several times spoken of the “attack” upon universities and on the liberal democratic values that they are predisposed to uphold. At a time when antidemocratic elements around the world have instigated real physical conflicts, it is not

¹¹ See <https://www.magna-charta.org/magna-charta-universitatum>

unreasonable to use metaphors of war to talk about the situation in which the academy finds itself, especially when the actions of governments in certain parts of the world explicitly pose an existential threat to institutions of higher learning. And from the lexicon of war there comes another word that has relevance to my subject today, and that is *appeasement*. It is appeasement which makes these times of difficulty, frustration and fear also times of temptation.

I began this talk with a personal reflection from 1976, and I would like to end it with a personal reflection from current experience. Speaking as one of those university leaders apprehensive about the future and looming threats to a system of values I had hitherto assumed to be unassailable, I have watched with curiosity and interest the emergence of appeasement as a strategy for self-preservation in the university sector. Of course, in order to survive, public institutions have always had to accommodate themselves in some way to the discourse and policy priorities of the governments who fund them, and that is an entirely reasonable part of the social contract, compensated for by considerations that flow back to and benefit universities. So, when Columbia University in March responded to the demands of the Trump administration by agreeing to overhaul its protest policies, security practices and Middle Eastern Studies Department, eyebrows were raised—yes—but the sector was not scandalized. Why? Because any person with inside knowledge of the ongoing *quid pro quo* that is university-government relations would understand that Columbia—a private institution deriving considerable research revenues from public sources—was probably acting on the reasonable assumption that although the terms of the deal they had been offered were unattractive and probably damaging to the reputation of the university, there nevertheless was an actual deal on the table and the \$400 million which had been withdrawn would be restored.

It remains unclear as to whether this has happened and therefore whether or not the deal was real. If it was not, the administration's withdrawal of funding from Columbia was less a bargaining gambit than an assertion of power, an act of intimidation. And that means in retrospect that Columbia's acquiescence turned out to have been not accommodation but *appeasement*. And nowhere in the world but here in Prague would the futility of appeasement be better understood. Columbia was a kind of ironic victim: as one of the first institutions to be targeted, it did not yet realize it was in fact at war.

In my own country, until a recent election dramatically altered the national trajectory, universities seemed headed for a clash with government not unlike the one now raging south of the border. The populist-leaning party that until earlier this year was expected to take power in Canada had signalled its intention to repudiate progressive social values, anathematized generally as “woke” but focused particularly on equity, diversity and inclusion—what in the United States is referred to as “DEI.” This gave rise to an extremely interesting debate amongst

university leaders who, with proper concern for the future wellbeing of their institutions, began to wonder about the risk of retaining programs that would be ideologically unacceptable to a changed government, about at least pre-emptively changing the language with which inclusion was discussed, and about generally finding ways to keep their heads down in anticipation of an attack on universities and the progressive democratic values associated with them.

In the absence of better or easier alternatives, and in the belief that the university community was about to be plunged headlong into the culture wars, appeasement emerged as a real temptation, apparently the only way the interests of universities could be protected until, to paraphrase Martin Luther King, Jr, the moral arc of society bent once again towards justice and the principles of liberal democracy reasserted themselves. One or two institutions pre-emptively dismantled their EDI policies and offices, replacing them with others that were supposed to be less ideologically problematic; many more developed and then distributed lists of words recommended for use with a conservative government, along with lists of those to be avoided wherever possible.

The election, as I said, rendered all of this moot and war was averted—at least for now—but Canadian leaders like myself remain pondering a complicated set of questions. When, for example, does accommodation become appeasement? In what circumstances would neither be possible? And what then? Fortunately, or perhaps unfortunately, the continuing situation in the United States is helping to clarify the picture. Inasmuch as the example of Columbia sensitized us to the practical, philosophical, political and ethical complexities at work in any university's relationship with the state, the example of Harvard has made crystal clear that when war has been declared on the very values, principles and practices of the university there can be neither accommodation nor appeasement. Although institutions might be tempted by the latter in order to survive, the benefit of appeasement, as the leadership of Harvard has clearly seen, is a chimera: what survives the subversion of academic freedom and the elimination of institutional autonomy is not a university. There is no option but to resist.

The “Global Forum on Higher Education 2025: Renewal of the Democratic and Civic Mission”—was hosted by Charles University in Prague in partnership with The Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports of the Czech Republic. This invitational meeting was hosted by the Global Cooperation for the Democratic Mission of Higher Education—which includes the Council of Europe, the International Consortium, the International Association of Universities (IAU) and the Organization of American States (OAS). The meeting was also sponsored by Campus Compact, The Netter Center for Community Engagement, the American Council on Education and the Magna Charta Observatory.

The overall focus of the 2025 Global Forum on Higher Education is on the threats to democracy—which includes attacks on higher education’s democratic and civic work and mission—and higher education’s role in combatting those threats.