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BOOK REVIEWS

Who's afraid of academic freedom?, edited by Akeel Bilgrami and Jonathan R. Cole. New York - Chichester: Columbia University Press, 2015, pp. 428.

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The book edited by Akeel Bilgrami and Jonathan R. Cole offers a collection of seventeen essays written by distinguished scholars, aimed at shedding light on the concept of academic freedom, examining it from different disciplinary perspectives, in order to reflect on the concept's historical development, on its current philosophical and legal definitions and on its empirical manifestations. Overall, the essays provide the reader with a many-sided, informative and challenging overview of the main alternative definitions of the concept. They explain the terms of some recent American and international debates which have revealed the irreducible tensions between alternative understandings of the meaning and implications of academic freedom. Moreover, the variety of the positions presented shows that there is no agreement on the scope, purpose and instruments for the protection of academic freedom. This conclusion is supported by the evidence presented in the last contribution (pp. 343-389), which presents the results of a sociological survey of Columbia University full-time faculty members from different disciplines. The survey's

main finding is that scholars' understandings of academic freedom are different; when confronted with hypothetical situations of academic freedom's infringement or abuse, their reactions diverge considerably.

In his contribution, David Bromwich proposes a libertarian definition of academic freedom as 'a category of political freedom' and sees it as a specification of citizenship rights (p. 27); while Michelle Moody-Adams sees it as 'a robust right of self-regulation' for individuals, groups and institutions of the academic world, understood as a bastion of free thought (p. 101). Rather than a fully-fledged concept or norm, Joan W. Scott sees academic freedom as 'a complicated idea with limited application' (p. 56) and traces its origins back to the Progressive era of US history, when the model of the research university prevailed on the obsolete model of universities as institutions entrusted with a (narrower) education-providing mission – a process which is briefly analysed in Robert J. Zimmer's contribution (pp. 246). Throughout the book, there are frequent attempts at highlighting the legacy of the 1915 *Declaration of Principles on Academic Freedom and Academic Tenure* issued by the American Association of University Professors on current conceptions of academic freedom.

Another thread which innervates the rich texture of this collection of essays is the contextualization of academic freedom within the democratic state *vis à vis* other liberal freedoms, such as democratic equality, neutrality and inclusion (pp. 106-114). According to Robert Post, even a cursory overview of recent cases shows that the US lacks a coherent constitutional doctrine of academic freedom, despite the Supreme Court's proclamations in favour of considering it under the light of the First Amendment as a protection of the pluralism produced within the so-called 'marketplace of ideas' (pp. 123-141).

Several analytical essays – especially Bilgrami's and Moody Adams' – focus on the distinction between internal and external challenges to academic freedom and aim to distinguish the concept of academic freedom from correlative or contradictory concepts such as academic responsibility and academic abuse. In a stinging and sharp essay, Jon Elster identifies the deadly threats to academic freedom interpreted as 'the spirit of free inquiry' in the practices of hard and soft obscurantism that he sees ubiquitous within the current academic environment, particularly in the social sciences. On the one hand, soft obscurantism manifests itself through *bullshitology*, i.e. the tendency of scholars to indulge in building biased theories through the search for flashy literary devices rather than through the sound logic of their argumentation – and hard obscurantism – that is, the methodological obsession of those scholars who adopt deterministic quantitative models for researching social phenomena.

Some essays focus on the current threats to academic freedom caused by the tension between power and knowledge, whose dramatic manifestations have included cases of censorship of academic researches or discriminatory policies targeting scholars or Universities undertaken by (non-democratic as well as democratic) governments. If Scott's analysis shows that clashes between governments and academia are recurrent in history, the diverging positions of Stanley Fish and Judith Butler on the political convenience of actions of academic boycott toward Israeli Universities and on their implications for the enjoyment of academic freedom by Israeli, Palestinians and US scholars prove that today the power/knowledge divide is a topical and divisive issue. Both John Mearsheimer and Noam Chomsky – looking at the actions of lobbies and mass media, respectively – address the issue of the infiltrations of power throughout the rifts produced by academic divisions. The authors encourage the quest for effective forms of resistance, in order to elaborate

meaningful and context-specific re-articulations of the concept of academic freedom.

This collection of essays fills a gap in the literature on an understudied and yet very relevant concept. It investigates the historical roots of academic freedom and it attempts at grasping its current real meaning as well as practical implications for scholars and for academic institutions. Though it lacks an effort at comparing the US scholars' understandings of academic freedom with those of scholars from different academic environments, *Who's afraid of academic freedom?* is a helpful starting point for envisaging future avenues of research.

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