

Tel Aviv · Munich · Academic Symposia

# Academic Freedom

Interdisciplinary Conference  
of Tel Aviv University and Munich University,  
Venice, October 1998

edited by  
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## **Some Introductory Notes to the Conference on Academic Freedom**

The conference on Academic Freedom is a joint venture born out of the deep friendship between TAU and Ludwig Maximilian University, and between us – the rectors of both universities – Prof. Andreas Heldrich, Rector of LMU, who has been serving on the TAU Board of Governors for many years, and Prof. Nili Cohen, Rector of TAU.

In 1997 during a visit that Prof Cohen made at LMU after giving a lecture at the Faculty of Law in Munich and during a nice party, we thought that it would be a good idea to have a conference in beautiful Venice, on the premises of Venice International University, on the subject of “academic freedom”.

Venice International University consists of a consortium of several universities: Ca Foscari, Venice Faculty of Architecture, Ludwig Maximilians University, Barcelona Autonomia University, Duke University and – following this conference – Tel Aviv University. Venice International University strives to develop international academic ties and to serve as an academic bridge for people and nations. Its basis is a unifying concept of academic interest, and we thought that a proper theme for our joint conference might be the subject of “academic freedom”.

Academic freedom is a unifying subject. It is common to any academic institution. It is crucial to any discipline. It has different perspectives and it can be illuminated from many angles.

An academic committee at TAU consisting of Prof. Nadler, Prof. Leibowitz and chaired by the Vice Rector, Prof. Shimon Yankielowicz, was in charge of the academic contents of the Israeli part and we are grateful for their work.

The subject is not new but it has recently gained special attention due to two intellectual streams: postmodernism and multiculturalism which in our context are translated to the term p.c. or political correctness.

Academic freedom is an offspring of the idea of freedom of expression. This is a value cherished in democratic states. Actually, it lies at the heart of democracy. But long before, academic freedom was at the heart of academia, which is based on the relentless pursuit of truth and knowledge. This can be done only where there is a free exchange of ideas and views.

In the course of history there were notorious attempts to suppress the free flow of ideas and views by those who thought the ideas unacceptable and injurious. Let me name but a few who were suppressed: Socrates, Galileo, Spinoza, and Darwin, whose theory about the origin of species was considered heresy.

If we follow Isaiah Berlin in his famous essay "Two Concepts of Liberty", which is also mentioned in the paper of Prof. Shlomo Biderman, we can distinguish between negative freedom – i.e., freedom from external interference – and positive freedom – the freedom to act for a predefined purpose.<sup>1</sup>

The negative freedom in the context of academic freedom is the freedom of self-governance without any external pressure or interference. It is very important to stress this aspect in view of the fact that universities in Israel – as in Europe – are funded by the government. At Tel Aviv University, about 70% of the budget is funded by the government, the rest mainly by tuition and – to

1 Menand, *The Limits of Academic Freedom*, in: Menand (Ed.), *The Future of Academic Freedom*, Chicago (University of Chicago Press) 1996, pp. 5 et seq.

a lesser extent – by donations. But that also applies to private universities where the money comes from donations.

In 1896, an economist by the name of Edward Ross, who had just come to Stanford, expressed some ideas attacking the Republican Party and advocating some social ideas. Mrs. Jane Lothrop Stanford, the widow of Mr. Stanford by whose wealth the University was established, sought his resignation. There was no tenure in those days and no one could say just how far an outspoken scholar could go. Prof. Ross indeed decided to resign, depicting himself not only as the victim of Mrs. Stanford and big money, but also of a university president who lacked the courage to defend free speech.<sup>1</sup> Mrs. Stanford and Prof. Ross are no longer amongst us. But the issue which was raised by them has remained: To what extent are we really free from the money that finances us, either public or private? What is the influence exerted by industry and grant-financing bodies on us?

Academic freedom is freedom “from”, but also freedom “to”: to admit students only on merits, to hire and fire, to decide to open new departments or to close existing ones. The freedom “to” can be accomplished only in a tolerant and open atmosphere at the university. But this is a freedom governed by specific rules: e.g. hiring is measured by academic achievements. Hence, academic freedom is coupled also with academic duty, which is the neglected part of academic freedom: duty imposed on administrators, as well as on scholars and students.<sup>2</sup>

1 Haskell, *supra* note 1, at 48-50

2 Shils, *The Academic Ethic*, Chicago (University of Chicago Press) 1997, pp. 13 et seq.

Postmodern theories prevalent in the soft sciences deny the existence of an absolute truth to which we scientists must aspire. Hence, what would be the objective criteria by which we can evaluate someone's academic achievements? Multicultural theories attribute the same intellectual force to distinct cultures and denounce views which conceive e.g. Western culture as superior as politically incorrect.

How is academic freedom compatible with these theories? Does the principle of equality outweigh the principle of freedom? Do we allow freedom to ourselves? What is our duty to ourselves and to the community: has the theory of detachment, of the Ivory Tower, collapsed? What is the price we pay for it? Can academia be indeed detached from politics?

Some of these themes and some others were being discussed during this conference and we do hope that they should contribute to the understanding of academic freedom and of universities.

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Rector  
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# **Science as a (Transitory?) Phase in Human Evolution**

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## **Introduction**

The term “academic freedom” is, of course, an attribute of the Academic world. It is frequently applied more specifically to the institution of the University, as the most important component of the Academy. The topic of our meeting therefore touches upon the nature of the university and it is very much concerned with the role that universities are playing, or should play, in human society.

My aim in my talk is to demonstrate that there is indeed a decisive role that universities are playing at present time in human life, and that this role will become even more crucial in the years to come and in the more distant future. I will argue that the phenomenon of the university in Western civilization, particularly as the most important carrier and developer of Science, is a fundamental factor in Human evolution, in a truly Darwinian sense. In particular I’ll claim that towards the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium, the role of the university as a driving force in human evolution is on one hand very much in danger, and on the other is becoming even more fundamental and indispensable for the future of Mankind.

A second introductory remark is that what I have to say to you today is very much in the nature of a hypothesis. I will put forward in front of you a certain general outlook on the evolution