

## Book Review / Compte rendu

**Fish, S. (2014). *Versions of Academic Freedom: From Professionalism to Revolution*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press. Pages: 192. Price: 24.00 CDN (cloth). ISBN 978-0-22-606431-4**

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In *Versions of Academic Freedom*, Stanley Fish wishes to inaugurate the field of *academic freedom studies*. The American scholar's contributions are twofold: he proposes a taxonomy of academic freedom conceptions, and he argues for a specific understanding of academic freedom. Following his thesis, academic freedom should be restricted to the freedom required for "academic activities," narrowly understood. He defends this by discussing a string of scholars, American legal precedents, and recent cases, including Denis Rancourt's practice of squatting and the Israeli boycott.

This contribution is timely. The last few years have seen a host of questions arise around the precise boundaries of academic freedom. The Canadian Association of University Teachers and the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada have argued over whether academic freedom includes institutional autonomy. Heterodox economics professors at the University of Manitoba have claimed that their academic freedom was attacked when orthodox economics professors showed a lack of respect for their field of study. Subordination and the inviolability of tenure in universities have been questioned. The case of the dismissal and then reinstatement (as professor) of the University of Saskatchewan's Dean of the School of Public Health is a prime example.

In this context, Fish's particularity and relevance to the Canadian debate is twofold. First, he adopts a professional perspective on the norm of academic freedom. He understands academic freedom as part of the project of university professors to protect their autonomy from outside interference. In this context, legal protections of academic freedom become professional tools to preserve and extend areas of autonomy. His reflection is therefore mostly detached from the specificity of the American legal system. Second, although he argues for a specific understanding of academic freedom, he acknowledges the simultaneous existence of a plurality of dimensions within the concept. Such a wide variety of understandings of the professional project testifies to the diversity of the Canadian higher education system.

In order to define a set of typical notions of academic freedom, the literary and legal scholar explores several debates. As result of this exploration, the book presents five conceptions—or schools—which he envisages as lining up on a sliding scale. By doing that, he limits understandings of protection to the core activities of the professor’s work (teaching and research). At one end lie notions of academic freedom that emphasize the *academic* importance of that freedom. The other end puts the emphasis on *freedom*—that is, the political activities that should be protected under academic freedom.

Fish starts the presentation of his five schools of academic freedom by outlining his own thesis: academic freedom is just a job. He argues that academic freedom should solely provide the protection required by the task, no more, no less. There ought to be a match between what a professor *should* do to fulfill his or her function, and what a professor *can* do, that is, the resources available to accomplish this function.

Naturally, the next step of his argument defines the exact functions of a professor. First, he asserts that the core function should be defined by what distinguishes this from other occupations. For example, being partisan is part of the core function of the politician; therefore, it cannot be part of the core function of the academic, since it does not distinguish him or her from the politician. Second, he argues that competence earned through practice and socialization in the professional field enables professionals to identify the core functions of the profession. According to this, every topic should be *academicized*. In short, academic freedom should protect only what is necessary for professors to successfully approach topics with an analytical lens.

In the next four sections, Fish addresses various claims to academic *exceptionalism*. While each does so to a different degree, all suggest that academic freedom entitles professors to extensive and exclusive rights. In presenting the “It’s for the common good” school, Fish takes a run at collegiality and at extended provisions of free speech for academics. His argument against according such privileges to academics is that there are no necessary links between collegiality, good teaching, and good scholarship, or between academic work and flourishing democracies. Academics do not have a specific mission outside of their scholarly activities. Therefore, the function of the academic workforce does not require either collegiality or extended provisions of free speech for academics.

The last three claims—“academic exceptionalism or uncommon being,” “academic freedom as critique,” and “academic freedom as revolution”—are interested in protecting political activities under the guise of academic freedom. Regarding these, Fish argues that exceptional rights can be granted either in virtue of the exceptional nature of the professors or because of the idiosyncratic nature of universities. Fish argues for the latter. Professors are integrated into a community of practice that ensures their academic freedom. Consequently, their academic freedom is bounded by the activities deemed appropriate by the community. This argument goes against a defense of extended free-speech rights that would allow professors, as part of their professorship, to engage and criticize the administration more easily or to take up an active role in political matters. Finally, academic freedom as critique and academic freedom as revolution both rest on the assertion that academic freedom derives from the exceptional character of the professor, his or her special role in democratic societies, and the advancement of liberty. He dismisses both.

As a central argument of his book, Fish attempts to draw a very clear boundary between political and academic activities. According to him, professors are professionals

and should stick to what they know best: academic work. I remain unconvinced that this hermetic distinction exists in reality. Indeed, I am not certain whether this book should be read as a political or as an academic contribution. The book itself might illustrate that the frontier between academic and political activities is blurrier than Fish sees it to be.

Given the already-widespread debate around academic freedom, one might remain interested in Fish's intent to inaugurate *academic freedom studies*. Fish's call for this new line of inquiry is not to be dismissed. Yet I believe a first important contribution towards his goal should move away from the normative literature that focuses on what activities the legal framework ought to protect, or philosophical arguments on the extent of the protection that academic freedom should provide. We should study the discourses on academic freedom. We should explore sociological perspectives on academic freedom. The bottom line is: if we want to initiate *academic freedom studies*, then we must engage using the scientific rigour expected when addressing any other academic topic. ♣