WHO IS AFRAID OF ACADEMIC FREEDOM?

JULIEN DELHEZ
Georg-August-Universität Göttingen
delhez.julien@gmail.com

Title: „Who is Afraid of Academic Freedom”

Abstract: In recent years, there has been concern over the curtailment of freedom of speech in US and English-speaking universities. This review essay compares two books dealing with academic freedom and censorship. James R. Flynn’s A Book Too Risky to Publish argues that the central mission of the university is to promote the pursuit of truth and the liberation of the human mind, and that today’s US universities fail almost entirely in this regard. Burton Porter’s Forbidden Knowledge deals with various cases in which knowledge was deemed too dangerous, and was suppressed for political or ideological reasons. The review essay also attempts to see how both books’ insights may be combined in order to reach general conclusions about the origin and the nature of academic censorship.

Keywords: academic freedom; censorship; free speech; universities; viewpoint diversity;

Introduction

In the last couple of years, several books have voiced warnings about the state of academic freedom in United States and in the rest of the Anglo-Saxon world (e.g. Lukianoff, 2014; Lukianoff & Haidt, 2018). The authors of these books do not necessarily agree on the gravity of the situation, nor do they agree on the causes of the problem or on the solutions to it. What is clear, however, is that a curtailment of academic freedom would have profound consequences — not only on students and academics, but on society in general. Indeed, the freedom of researchers plays a crucial role in allowing new ideas to develop. Given the importance of academic freedom and, more generally, freedom of speech for academics of all nations, this theme may be of interest to the readers of the present journal.

In this essay, I review two books dealing with academic freedom and, more generally, the freedom to seek knowledge: James R. Flynn’s A Book Too Risky to Publish (Flynn, 2020) and Burton Porter’s Forbidden Knowledge (Porter, 2020). Both authors are experienced academics (they were born in the 1930s) and have written numerous books on various philosophical issues. There are some differences between the two books I examine: Flynn is more specific in its scope, insofar as he deals with academic freedom and free speech in Anglo-Saxon universities from the American Civil War to the present. Porter deals with the censorship of knowledge in general, including in non-academic spheres (e.g. government secrets).
Ironically, Flynn’s book, originally titled *In Defense of Free Speech: The University as Censor*, was itself penalized by the current academic climate: the book was pulled by the original publisher out of fear of legal and reputational costs. It was subsequently published by Academica Press, which also released Porter’s *Forbidden Knowledge*. While the withdrawal of Flynn’s book has received some media coverage (see e.g. Flynn, 2019), the book itself hasn’t received much attention, with only two book reviews for a general audience (Bakshian Jr, 2020; Forde, 2020), despite Flynn being an eminent scholar. Porter’s book has received even less attention: to the best of my knowledge, no review of it has been published so far. I intend to rectify this. Besides, by comparing both books, I intend to explore how their respective insights can be combined in order to reach a better understanding of the following problem: who is afraid of academic freedom?

**Why Free Speech and Critical Skills Matter**

Flynn’s book is deeply personal: the author largely builds on his experience as a university professor, including his contribution to some of the most sensitive topics in academe. Flynn expresses his will to repay the debt to the university, which has been his home for more than 60 years (see Flynn, 2020, p. 4), and his indignation at those who “profane it with their ignorance and intolerance” (Flynn, 2020, p. 299).

All defenders of academic freedom need to explain why they think this freedom is important. Flynn (2020, p. 8–9) briefly presents John Stuart Mill’s argument about free speech as a requirement for attaining truth: since no one has a monopoly on truth, one can often learn much from one’s opponents. Even viewpoints that are mostly wrong generally contain some grain of truth, and the exchange of ideas may lead interesting points to be raised. In addition, truth unopposed loses much of its vitality: adhesion to a view shared by all is maintained by conformity rather than deep understanding. Thirdly, those who refuse to hear the other side, and the evidence provided by the other side, can at best hope for right opinion rather than knowledge. Finally, censorship of a viewpoint “is to claim a prescriptive infallibility, as if you were an omnipotent god-emperor decreeing that something never be heard or weighed by others for the remainder of human history” (Flynn, 2020, p. 9).

Flynn goes beyond Mill’s argument and points out that the holders of right opinions are deprived of both knowledge and personal autonomy, as they “just happen to be lucky in terms of whoever has programmed them” (Flynn, 2020, p. 11). Their incapacity to confront different viewpoints explains why the speech of others is so disturbing to them: “Any dissident threatens to expose *that faith alone is not enough*” (Flynn, 2020, p. 11, emphasis in the original). Flynn contends that the pursuit of truth is one of the six great goods (with happiness, justice, beauty, human autonomy, and tolerance) and that the university has a special role in promoting it, “with the added role of graduating students who have full autonomy and can seek truth throughout their lives” (Flynn, 2020, p. 13).

Flynn (2020, p. 31–54) brilliantly explains how he benefited from viewpoint
diversity on the sensitive issue of group differences in IQ: Arthur Jensen, Richard Lynn, and Charles Murray allowed him to refine his views and become much more knowledgeable: “If I had not read these “discredited” scholars, I would still have a half-educated mind dominated by passions about race, gender, and class and not much else” (Flynn, 2020, p. 50).

The author also provides results of studies assessing the students’ critical skills — including his own surveys, based on a tool he designed: Flynn’s Index of Social Criticism (FISC). It aims at assessing the mastery of concepts that are keys to making sense of the world, e.g. “percentage” or the “naturalistic fallacy” (for other key concepts, see Flynn, 2020, pp. 261–266). The results of these studies show that the universities completely fail to develop the students’ critical skills. While Flynn admits that such skills require much time and hard training, he points out that education should have been able to provide them at least to the nation’s intellectual elite (Flynn, 2020, p. 276). To remedy this, Flynn (2020, p. 270) writes, “[t]he critical skills that mark the whole person must be taught as such.” In absence of satisfactory change, the students will remain “about as equipped to transcend their time and place as a medieval peasant was equipped to transcend the role of serf” (Flynn, 2020, p. 3).

Two Eras of Censorship
Perhaps one of the most valuable aspects of Flynn’s book — especially for young or middle-aged readers — is its fascinating overview of academic freedom and censorship in the late nineteenth and early-mid twentieth century. Today, opponents to the freedom of researchers such as Lynn and Murray usually come from the political left. But Flynn, who was born in 1934, is old enough to remember an era when most censors belonged to the right.

Indeed, before 1914, academics could lose their employment for expressing their views on the economy, for protesting child labour, or for denouncing racism within the Democratic Party. After the US entered World War I, “universities fired about 120 academics because they were considered unsympathetic to the war effort” (Flynn, 2020, p. 66). From the 1920s to the 1950s, Communists and Socialists were under intense scrutiny and pressure. Although Flynn himself is not and has never been a Marxist, he was fired twice in the early 1960s: first for being a chairman of the Congress of Racial Equality in the South, and then for being a Democratic Socialist in the North. All in all, Flynn’s account is very worthwhile — especially for conservative readers, who should remember that no one is immune to the temptation of silencing one’s opponents.

Flynn also details the transition from an era of (mostly) conservative oppression to a time of (mostly) left-wing censorship. He points out that it did not take much time for the censored to become the censors, as Thomas Bouchard Jr. learnt when his lectures about behavioural genetics were disrupted in the 1970s (see Flynn, 2020, p. 85–86). Flynn contrasts the radicalism of the revolutionaries in the 1960s with the relative apathy of today’s students. Interestingly, he writes that the vague beliefs about equality held by the latter are “the perfect morality for the
politically quiescent. To “promote” equality, you do not have to do anything, just be pleasant, never give offense and, if you have a predilection for control, police others” (Flynn, 2020, p. 87).

The book also deals with various aspects of censorship on today’s American campuses, including speech codes, cancellation of allegedly controversial speakers, physical threats, and legal challenges to tenured and untenured faculty. These phenomena are well known and need not be summarized here. The author also documents the dynamics that lead academics within certain disciplines — Black Studies, Women Studies, anthropology, education, philosophy, sociology, psychology — to exclude perspectives they disagree with, thereby creating a monoculture that hampers the students’ ability to think by themselves.

Who Is Afraid of Scientific Freedom?

Of all lessons one can draw from Flynn’s book, three seem especially vital to me. Firstly, there is a clear connection between censorship and lack of independent thought: the author makes a convincing case that those who silence others often do so because they are unable to reply with arguments and are overwhelmed by their own feelings and ego.

Secondly, the censors generally wish to preserve the political, social and ideological status quo. In many cases, this leads them to protect the indefensible, be it child labour, segregation, or the censorship of research on human intelligence — and in many cases, one is tempted to add, they defend it with censorship because it is indefensible: “deep commitment to the indefensible cannot abide free debate or scientific inquiry. To have to defend is to bring to consciousness the alarming realization that one has no defense” (Flynn, 2020, p. 87).

Thirdly and finally, it appears that the censors, being unable to eliminate all their targets, often focus on their weakest opponents (see Flynn, 2020, p. 57), and trust that the termination of one or two dissidents will suffice to dissuade many others. This is important to keep in mind when one conducts research on a sensitive topic. For scientists in this situation, it may not be sufficient to write with great care or to read widely in order to be able to make a strong case. In the long term, the ideal solution is to become invulnerable to censorship, e.g. by obtaining tenure in the case of an American University, or by securing funding from non-academic sources.

We can now turn to the cases of censorship documented by Burton Porter. Do his findings concur with Flynn’s?

Varieties of Forbidden Knowledge

Porter’s book deals with various aspects of “forbidden knowledge” in a very broad sense. The book contains neither references nor bibliography. This is very unusual for an academic book, and one may wonder, at least in a first time, what kind of philosophical work can be produced in such conditions. Yet, Porter is surprisingly successful in his endeavour: he builds on examples and historical events that are familiar enough to readers not to require any reference (e.g. Galileo Galilei,
nuclear weapons), and his statements are often thought-provoking and interesting.

Some of the topics Porter mentions relate to state security (e.g. confidential documents, see his chapter 7), to concerns about specific imminent serious harm (e.g. nuclear bombs, see his chapter 2), or to individuals shifting away from knowledge without being forced to do so (e.g. self-deception, see his chapter 8). These situations are different from the censorship that academics generally suffer from. But Porter also tackles many cases of censorship coming from ideologues who act with passion. While it is impossible to detail here all examples provided by Porter, I would like to discuss three cases which seem to corroborate Flynn’s observations.

Galileo’s trial is an excellent instance of the conflict between observational science and institutional authority. Galileo’s observations led him to prefer a heliocentric model over a geocentric one; his views were based on evidence and were always open to correction. By contrast, “churchmen would not look through his telescope” (Porter, 2020, p. 17). Instead, they sought to settle the matter by force — if necessary, by imprisonment, torture, and execution. As Flynn (2020, p. 11) observed: “dogmatists are always on the verge of launching persecution.”

The two remaining issues illustrate how easily censorship can switch side. In his chapter 4, Porter discusses the possible causes homosexuality and writes: “the politically correct opinion today is that homosexuality is not acquired but innate” (Porter, 2020, p. 94). In fact, this follows an era where the same claims were anathema: a Dutch Professor of Neurobiology, Dick Swaab, described the extremely hostile reaction to a 1989 study of him suggesting that homosexuality had a biological basis: he received insults and even death threats from gay groups (see Swaab, 2014, p. 77–83).

Porter’s chapter 6 is dedicated to climate change. The author documents the numerous efforts of the Bush administration to conceal evidence about climate change from the public (Porter, 2020, p. 118–122). At the same time, he clearly points out the dogmatism of what he calls the “be natural” movement: it devalues civilization and fails to realize that nature, which is often violent or even merciless, “may not be a model for human conduct” (Porter, 2020, p. 125).

A key insight of the author is his distinction between act utilitarianism, which assesses acts based on their impact on human welfare, and rule utilitarianism, which asks which principles are useful for society. This may be applied to some highly controversial research areas: while specific findings about, say, group differences in intelligence may be harmful, “society is generally better off if it operates on the principle that the truth should out. Besides, the harm could be mitigated, and it seems best to base our politics on facts rather than on what we would like to be true” (Porter, 2020, p. 82).

Porter’s book contains a few mistakes: on p. 9, he claims that the universe started 4.5 billion years ago; that is the age of our planet, not the age of the universe. On p. 99, Porter invokes the so-called “Mozart Effect” even though it has been utterly discredited by subsequent analyses (see Haier, 2017, pp. 139–143). These mistakes do not prevent Forbidden Knowledge from being a welcome con-
tribution to current debates on academic freedom.

**Discussion**

By producing these two books, Flynn and Porter have performed a valuable service to academics all over the world. Many researchers will be inspired by Flynn’s personal experiences, whether it is with the FBI in the 1950s, with Arthur Jensen in the 1980s, or with left-wing censors in the late 2010s. His work also casts lights on some of the darkest events in the history of US universities. Today’s students must remember them and do their best to ensure that the future will not look like the past.

Porter has produced a stimulating work which documents how suppressing knowledge causes harm in a wide variety of domains. Flynn’s insights can be fruitfully applied to many of the examples Porter provides. It is worth pointing out that Porter also deals with very sensitive issues, which means that the book’s publication was by no means guaranteed. The release of these two works by Academica Press therefore constitutes, in and of itself, a victory over dogmatism and censorship.

**Bibliography**


