THE SILENCING OF ACADEMIC FREEDOM AND RESEARCH

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In an age supposedly embracing progress, free speech and open discourse, universities and academics increasingly find their research and publications stifled by perceived ethical norms and political correctness. These perceived ethical norms and political correctness are often advanced and policed by rigid and dogmatic spokesmen of well-organized lobbies and ethnic communities. This is certainly the case in a smearing campaign directed at University of Utah Press and Professor Hakan Yavuz, one of universitys accomplished and award-winning scholars.

In an op-ed published at the Daily Utah Chronicle, Noah Wright more or less advocates for the university administration to interfere with the teaching and publication activity of its academic staff and sack those do not follow the required line, arguing that the University of Utah must rewrite this coursework and reevaluate relationships with staff like Dr. Hakan Yavuz. Wright concludes that the university needs to repair its relationship with the Armenian community. At no point in this op-ed, Wright points to any academic shortcomings or factual errors in Yavuzs work or the works published under the Turkish Series at the University of Utah Press. Rather, the entire argument seems to be that Wright knows the whole truth and those who do not agree with him must be heretics and terrible human beings.

This climate creates a poisonous atmosphere where scholarly inquiry and disconcerting discoveries trigger organized and often disproportionate campaigns designed to silence academics rather than engage with their work. Such campaigns severely jeopardize the exercise of free speech and the fundamental principle of academic freedom, creating an environment hostile to genuine intellectual progress. To uncritically accept campaigns demanding de-platforming and censorship based on alleged offensiveness not only betrays the essence of academia but represents a striking regression into the very dogmatism that the universities historically strove to escape. The absurdity of such demands and the dangers of their triumph become evident when viewed through the lens of history. One vividly recalls the persecution of Galileo Galilei. Had the super-sensitive protest campaigns of today been active in the 17th century, Galileo, like numerous scholars today, would likely have faced targeted suppression based on accusations of causing offense and mocking established beliefs, with terrifyingly similar justifications offered for his silencing.

Galileo Galilei remains an enduring symbol of the clash between scientific inquiry and

entrenched ideological authority. His meticulously measured astronomical observations made through the newly invented telescope established compelling empirical evidence for the theory that the Earth revolved around the sun. This finding directly contradicted the Earth-centric view endorsed and enforced by the Catholic Church, which placed Earth at the center of the universe. Galileo's work and findings were vehemently rejected not primarily on scientific grounds but on the same basis that they were offensive, destabilizing, and heretical. Facing pressures and threats, including trial by the Inquisition, Galileo was forced to take his words back and spent the remainder of his life under house arrest. The notion employed against him was the same as those advocated by Wright against Yavuz: his discoveries were unacceptable because they disrupted the deeply cherished cosmological beliefs of a community. The Church authorities argued in the same manner, though coded in the language of religion and heresy, that Galileo had disappointed and betrayed the Catholic community and mocked its belief system. He was silenced not for flawed science, but for causing offense to the prevailing ideology.

Fast-forward almost four centuries, Wrights advocates for Professor Yavuz, the 21st century version of the same practice. However, the mechanisms of intimidation and suppression have evolved, changing from the Inquisition and threats of torture to politically motivated press campaigns, petitions, demands for de-platforming, and intense pressures on universities that often result in preemptive cancellation. The terminology has shifted from accusations of heresy to charges of insensitivity, betraying a community, or alleged offence-based harm. Yet, the pattern of demanding censoring and suppressing of views based on alleged offense to deeply held beliefs, without academic engagement, is remarkably similar. While the contexts and ideologies differ, the underlying mechanism and intolerance of free speech remains the same. An argument, a course, an article, a dissertation, a book, or even a research question considered offensive becomes subject to organized campaigns aimed not at challenging it through reasoned debate, but at ensuring it is never heard, published, or discussed. Its proponents face accusations akin to those levelled against Galileo: that they have betrayed and disappointed the community seeking safety from offensive ideas about their historical grievance.

A historian or a political scientist analyzing contentious events in a distant region might face claims that their work offends modern diaspora groups by presenting uncomfortable facts. This constant policing against causing offence creates a poisonous academic environment where scholars have to bypass landmines and self-censor their ideas even before completing their research, fearing damages to their reputation and professions that might be caused by campaigns such as those Noah Wright wants to initiate.

This environment produces a category of untouchable ideas and weaponizes the identity-based grievances to override research, evidence or reasoned argument. Increasingly, personal experience (although, no doubt, valuable for adding perspective) is presented not just as a viewpoint to consider in a difficult historical equation, but as the unquestionable truth that inherently disqualifies any contradictory research or analysis. The accusation that this scholar's work damages my community becomes an effective veto against the discussion of ideas, irrespective of their empirical strength or potential contribution to the field. This precisely mirrors the experience of Galileo, whose model

was deemed inherently invalid because it offended the sensibilities of the faithful, regardless of its scientific accuracy.

The consequences of this poisonous climate are already manifest and profoundly damaging as academic self-censorship, distortion of scholarship, moral and intellectual cowardice, disappearance of rigorous debate have unfortunately become standard norms of western universities which used to enjoy the credentials of sustaining the moral high ground of academic freedom.

Funding, publication opportunities, and job security become implicitly tied to adhering to approved narratives, confirming prevailing ideological frameworks, effectively creating echo-chambers.

Drawing the Galileo parallel and using him in today's political terms allows us to see the hubris inherent in the thinking and advocacy of the likes of Noah Wright. To argue publicly that Galileo disappointed and betrayed the Catholic community and offended its sensibilities would have be considered downright madness yet Wright can unabashedly argue the same against Professor Yavuz. This shows how far academic freedom and free speech regressed in the last decades.

Universities are founded and continue to exist with the explicit goal to pursue truth not through an appeal to censorship and cancelling but through unhindered inquiry and rigorous debate. It is high-time that the universities live up to their foundational principles and protect academic freedom and provide an environment for free inquiry and expression of academic positions. Failure to do so would not only place academia to a mere institution of conformity, abandoning its role as society's intellectual driver. The lessons from the silencing of Galileo are as relevant today as they were four centuries ago: protecting belief systems from challenge at the expense of free inquiry will only stifle progress.

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