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# What Universities Owe to the Liberal Project

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**W**e live in an era fraught with challenge. From a global pandemic to rising authoritarianism and a European war, the world is as fundamentally unsettled as it has been in nearly a century. Domestically, Americans face rising levels of polarization and a media and political party system that are increasingly giving attention and power to illiberal movements, both right and left. We are in the throes of difficult policy discussions about race, immigration, housing, and policing, all of which represent challenges and tensions within the liberal order.

Times such as these are both perilous and rich with opportunity, calling us to think more deeply about the world, to confront hard problems, and to be genuinely open to new solutions. How can we learn from what has gone wrong and improve the world for future generations? How can we keep the norms and institutions of a free and tolerant people strong in the face of fresh threats? How can we continue to move the world toward the good society in which all individuals are free to pursue their own self-interest rightly understood, realize their potential, and mutually prosper? And how can we achieve the pluralistic ideal: the rich, intimate sphere of an “us”—family, friends, and our various communities—without resorting to power and without the anxious fear of a “them.”

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We are called, in other words, to address questions at the heart of the liberal project.

Universities have a unique and essential role to play in this effort. As Johns Hopkins University president Ronald Daniels (2021, x) observes, universities, like a free press and independent judiciary, are “not merely bystander institutions” in a liberal democratic society, “but deeply implicated in, and essential for, its success.” In a moment of rising illiberalism and authoritarianism around the world and here at home, universities “cannot be agnostic about, or indifferent to, the vibrancy of liberal democracy” (9). We agree and offer this essay in that same spirit.

Our argument is straightforward. If universities are to have a future as cornerstone institutions of a free society, they must assert their role as caretakers of the liberal project. Our point is not that it would be *nice* if universities were to play this role. Our point, rather, is an existential one. The future of higher education and the future of the liberal order are inextricably bound to one another. As goes one, so goes the other. Asserting higher education’s caretaker role requires that we name and reclaim the modern university’s roots within the liberal tradition. It requires that we stop treating the university campus as a battleground in the culture war. And it requires that the university be a site in which liberal concerns and principles are at the table when addressing critical challenges defining the course of the twenty-first century.

## **Naming and Reclaiming the Liberal Roots of the Modern Academy**

Enlightenment-era liberalism launched, imperfectly and inconsistently, a radical notion: that individuals, by default, deserve respect. This default respect translated—again, haltingly and inconsistently—into liberal democratic freedom. The political liberal ideal constrains government and populist impulses that would otherwise choke the liberties of individuals and minorities who do not hold the reins of power or conform to popular opinion. Liberalism, however, was more than a political apparatus that constrained power. As it evolved, liberalism also became a mindset, a cultural ethos that privileged openness, curiosity, ingenuity, and intellectual humility.

Economic historian Joel Mokyr describes the emergence of this ethos in his account of the Republic of Letters, an international community of scholars, scientists, philosophers, engineers, and literary figures. Beginning in the late seventeenth century and continuing through the eighteenth century, this self-organized society knit itself together by exchanging letters, pamphlets, and published papers. Operating outside the reach of state and religious authority, the Republic of Letters advanced an ethos of curiosity, especially a curiosity about the natural world, and an eagerness to put that knowledge to productive use. Such an attitude clashed with the sentiments of the premodern world, in which state and religious authorities conspired to resist intellectual innovation. Mokyr writes, “One common denominator that most citizens of the Republic of Letters (otherwise a diverse and fractious lot) shared was that they

recognized their enemies, the opponents of new ideas and pluralism” (2018, 166). It was this ethos, Mokyr argues, that led to Europe’s astonishing boom in innovation and progress in the latter part of the eighteenth century.

Further, it was this liberal attitude of intellectual openness and curiosity that fueled the growth of intellectual salons, particularly in France, which in turn advanced Enlightenment ideas. And it was this ethos, paired with a healthy skepticism of authority, especially authority that flexes its power to shut down rather than open up debate and discovery, that eventually developed and advanced the concept of academic freedom. In the early nineteenth century, Prussian philosopher and linguist Wilhelm von Humboldt helped to establish the University of Berlin. Academic freedom featured prominently in the “Humboldtian model” of education and the university he helped to establish. Education, as opposed to indoctrination, Humboldt argued, requires that people exercise their powers of critical reason freely, rather than simply learn by rote a prescribed doctrine. Benefiting from this strong commitment to academic freedom, the university established itself as one of the leading institutions in the world advancing scientific research.<sup>1</sup>

Across the Atlantic, post-Revolutionary leaders clearly understood higher education’s role in supporting the success of the fledgling experiment that was America. In their founding and leadership roles within institutions of higher learning, Thomas Jefferson (University of Virginia), Benjamin Rush (Dickinson College), and William Smith (University of Pennsylvania and Washington College), for example, drew direct connections between the need to cultivate the habits of independent thought and the habits of a self-governing citizenry. They were self-conscious of the fact that American higher education would serve as a bulwark against tyranny, because only an educated citizenry would have the wherewithal to safeguard its own liberty. As Rush famously observed, “Freedom can exist only in the society of knowledge. Without learning, men are incapable of knowing their rights, and where learning is confined to a few people, liberty can be neither equal nor universal” (Rush 1798, 1).

Nineteenth-century liberal thought would highlight the connections between intellectual freedom and cultural norms of toleration and forbearance. John Stuart Mill and Alexis de Tocqueville, for example, were particularly sensitive to the soft tyranny that public opinion could impose upon independent thought. Both advocated for norms of toleration for dissenting views and public reason as the means of adjudicating conflicting claims. The liberal sensibility that favored reason, the open contest of ideas, and intellectual humility informed not only the democratic ideal. They became the constitutional rules and norms that governed institutions of higher learning.

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1. In a bitter turn of fate, in 1933, the academic freedom the university had enjoyed ended abruptly when the Nazi regime emptied the library stacks and removed Jewish scholars and others it deemed political enemies of the regime. In 1946, the university reestablished itself in East Berlin, but encountered similar problems under Soviet authorities. Some students who protested Soviet military control of the university were arrested for espionage and sentenced to decades of forced labor. Others were sent to the Soviet Union and executed.

It may be observed that a contradiction exists between the liberal roots of the modern academy and the fact that it provided a hospitable home in which intellectual movements contrary to the liberal order would thrive. Marxist thought through the twentieth century, for example, stands out as having significant influence in the social sciences and humanities. We would argue that such tensions do not represent a contradiction. Asserting the university's role as a caretaker of the liberal tradition does not mean shutting out serious critiques of or alternatives to the liberal order. It is a distinct feature of liberalism that it defends and ensures space for its own critics. That said, although any individual scholar or intellectual movement has the freedom to explore alternatives to the liberal tradition, the university itself has a stake in upholding its own liberal commitments. When it fails to do that, it ceases to be a university in any meaningful sense.

### **The Damage Done by “Culture War” Reasoning**

There is no precise date when the American college campus became the frontline of the culture wars, but fall 2015 is a good approximation. It was the semester that students at the University of Missouri had erected an encampment on Mizzou's Carnahan Quad to protest a series of racially charged incidents on and near campus. In a shockingly misguided effort to protect student protesters from unwanted attention, an assistant professor in the Department of Journalism confronted a student photojournalist and told him, “No, you need to get out.” The young journalist asserted his right to be in the public setting. The professor then pushed his camera aside and famously shouted, “Who wants to help me get this reporter out of here? I need some muscle over here” (Schmitt 2015). Other members of the Mizzou staff joined the professor in interfering with the student's attempts to document the protest.

In the moment, the most notable aspect of the encounter was that a professor of journalism would call for physical force against a journalist exercising his First Amendment rights. A few years on, however, it became clear that this moment marked something bigger. Behavior like this became the red meat that conservative media were eager to serve up. A new front of the culture war had been established, this time on the college campus. The impact was swift and striking. A 2017 Pew Research Center Survey found that the percentage of Republican respondents who thought that higher education was having a negative effect on the direction of the country increased 21 percent in less than two years following the 2015 events in places like Mizzou (Fingerhut 2017). Trust has not recovered since; in 2021, it was still the case that only 34 percent of Republicans agreed that universities have a positive effect on the country (Van Green 2021).

Since then, this metaphor—the university as the frontline in a war—has become so commonplace that we don't even think to scrutinize it. But once we do, it is hard to miss how misplaced this metaphor is. Far from a violent encounter in which we seek to destroy our opponent, in which only one victor (at best) emerges, scholarly inquiry,

exchange, and debate is the opposite of war—it is an inherently peaceful enterprise that creates value, reveals solutions, and, if done well, leaves everyone better off.

Our concern, however, is not merely that warfare is a particularly bad metaphor. Our concern is that it does real damage. The campus-culture-war framing has rendered the peaceful exchange of ideas much more like the adversarial behavior we might expect in combat. Intellectual rivals are no longer colleagues we seek to understand or persuade; they have become enemies we seek to crush. Friends who issue challenges in our direction are not thought partners. Instead, we deem them traitors and seek to expel them from the ranks of learned society. Worst of all, the culture-war framing has led to both sides arming up, willing to use illiberal means to seize power and exercise control. We've seen cases in which university faculty and administrators endorse students who shout down controversial speakers. And as of this writing, twenty-eight states have proposed legislation that would impose what PEN America describes as an “educational gag order” on topics related to race, racism, and gender on public university campuses (Friedman and Tager 2022).

Our point is not to identify which side in the war is worse. Our point is to challenge the war frame altogether, because it feeds a vicious cycle in which illiberalism at one ideological extreme justifies illiberal tactics on the other, causing both sides to abandon the core principles that underlie the ideal of the open university. Instead of an ideological war, we ought to be finding fellow liberals, whatever their political stripe, who still believe in those core principles, and working with them to identify solutions to hard challenges facing the liberal order, both on campus and in the broader world.

It may be objected that there are precious few liberals left to be found on campus. This is, of course, an empirical question, which deserves further exploration. That said, based on recent private opinion survey research conducted by Todd Rose and his colleagues at the Harvard University–based think tank Populace, we have reason to believe there are far more liberal scholars on campus than we might otherwise suspect, in part because liberal values are more widely shared among Americans than it may sometimes seem. Their research found that most Americans place a high priority on basic liberal-democratic principles like individual rights and equal treatment for all. Indeed, they found that “Americans’ commitment to individual rights isn’t simply deep-rooted; it significantly outweighs any other rival priority [in the survey results]” (Populace 2021, 15). They found cross-partisan agreement on key policy issues such as healthcare and criminal justice reform. On healthcare, for example, they found that Americans of all ideological, class, and ethnic backgrounds agree that ensuring people “receive high quality health care” is a top national priority. Similarly, Americans of all backgrounds expressed a strong desire for a criminal justice system that “operates without bias.” But this research also finds that these same Americans believe that most of their fellow citizens do not hold similar commitments. Americans suffer, in other words, from a collective illusion. Though there is a great deal of common ground to be found with our fellow citizens, we don’t recognize it. As Rose

(2022) notes, the culprit behind these collective illusions is the fact that we are prone to believe, mistakenly, that the loudest voices at the ideological extremes represent the majority opinion, when in fact they do not.

It may well be that something similar is going on within higher education. Ask any professor who openly challenges a campus culture that violates the principle of academic freedom or other core values of the academy, and they will likely tell you about the many notes of quiet agreement and support they receive from colleagues reluctant to speak up on their own. These colleagues send their note of support because they are surprised and grateful to find someone who shares their commitments. They fail to speak out because they believe that their views are out of step with the majority.

We expect that readers of this symposium will have no quarrel with the following line of thinking. If liberal scholars are to advance novel thinking about vexing challenges, the first order of business is to shore up the robust traditions of open discourse and rational argument that have informed the liberal project, and higher education in particular, hitherto. For universities to have a future as caretakers of the liberal tradition, they must make the liberal case for open inquiry, civility, forbearance, mutual respect, and their other core values. Further, if we are to effectively confront the challenges that the current age presents, the principle of academic freedom is essential. Protecting the rights of scholars to think, write, and speak freely is an essential precondition for addressing those problems.

What may be less obvious are the ways that we—advocates of the open university ideal—are enabling the problem by framing it in terms of the so-called culture war. Even asking the question “which side is worse?” feeds the problem, because it excuses the side we deem to be less egregiously illiberal, feeding the cycle of illiberal tactics that spins away from core principles that define the open university. By hyperfocusing on the enemy who gets it so wrong, we fail to see and acknowledge the liberal scholars who are still out there, leaving each to believe that they are the only reasonable person left (and that they should therefore keep their mouths shut and their heads down). Only by naming and claiming our liberal roots and the liberal principles that animate the open university will the liberal community resurface and see itself *as a community* with a common set of commitments, despite the many issues about which members of that liberal community will disagree.

In calling for this liberal community to see and reassert itself, we are not asking to assemble a new army. Liberal scholars—left-of-center liberal, classical liberal, and small-government conservative scholars—are not combatants in a culture war. They are the caretakers of the tradition that makes the open university possible.

## Putting Liberal Principles to Work

The recent epidemic of violations of academic norms, by both college administrators and state legislators is of grave concern to all of us who know that liberal society requires open and thriving discourse. Good work is being done on this front

by organizations like the Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression (FIRE, formerly the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education), Scholars at Risk, PEN America, the Academic Freedom Alliance, and Heterodox Academy.<sup>2</sup>

As important as it is, however, this work is slow. It only begins to address the suite of challenges currently facing liberal democratic societies. We must therefore look beyond the problems that vex higher education and consider the caretaker responsibilities that universities have with respect to the broader liberal democratic order. We need, in other words, for universities to fulfill the role they were designed to have in liberal society, even though they must take on these challenges at a moment when academe is vexed by both internal and external illiberal forces.

The liberal intellectual tradition provides essential principles and lessons (demonstrated by reason and by practice) that can help us find answers to the questions with which we began this essay. We have good reason to believe, for example, that free peoples create more wealth, prosperity and well-being than oppressed peoples, that open debate creates more progress in knowledge than enforced dogma or diktat, and that when all individuals are treated as dignified equals within the context of a fair governmental order, a peaceful and just society tends to emerge. As compelling as these principles and lessons are, however, they are not algorithms. They do not tell us how exactly to combat a global pandemic or bring peace to Europe. They cannot simply dictate our housing or immigration policies. They only provide us with guardrails to keep us on the road and signposts to know our path.

We must, in other words, put liberal ideas to work to find solutions to hard challenges. The point here is not to impose a certain set of conclusions. As noted earlier, to do so would be in conflict with the underlying liberal ethos of the open university. Putting liberal ideas to work means, at a minimum, ensuring that liberal principles such as academic freedom serve as the “constitutional order” in the exchange of ideas. Beyond that, scholars working within the liberal tradition have an opportunity, especially in this moment of rising illiberalism, to cast new light on the liberal project.

In the aftermath of the Cold War, when market-oriented liberal democracies were the presumed victor in the so-called battle of ideas, basic research about the liberal order seemed less pressing. A deeper exploration of what systematic outcomes we might expect from illiberal versus liberal democracies, for example, would have seemed beside the point. No country that had made the journey from the former to the latter was seriously proposing to make the journey back in the other direction. But here we are, in 2022, with public commentators, scholars, and world leaders openly championing the virtues of “illiberal democracy.” Back then, the notion that we would have to remind people that uncontested power, no matter its source, no matter the circumstances, is something to be treated with skepticism, would have

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2. With humility, we would add our own Institute for Humane Studies (IHS) to the list of organizations doing important work in this arena.

seemed unnecessary. But in a world where the economic agendas of the far left and the far right are differentiated only by the people who would hold power, liberal arguments are clearly needed, even though (and especially because) a capacious group of liberal scholars will find much to debate even as they reassert the basic virtues of the liberal order.

Reigniting scholarly interest in the liberal project is not about offering or settling on a list of preordained conclusions. It's about reminding ourselves and our fellow liberals that basic liberal principles—the inherent dignity of every person, individual liberty, equality before the law, intellectual openness, limits to government authority—do require continued exploration and fresh application.

## Conclusion

Liberalism has not faced such headwinds in nearly one hundred years, and the history of the twentieth century teaches us very clearly what happens to the university, indeed what happens to free thought as such, when liberalism fails and authoritarianism takes the reins. Colleges and universities need not, due to misplaced scholarly indifference, remain regime neutral. Liberal regimes foster the life of the mind and allow it to prosper. Illiberal and unfree regimes stifle the mind and smother emergent ideas. The university and the scholars who read and write within its walls cannot expect those walls to keep the outside world out. Rather, the university should, and in times such as ours must, work with the rest of civil society to fortify the common ground of the liberal project.

Thus, the university must recognize and accept its role in staging the deliberative conversation. To support liberalism in a challenging hour, higher education must live up to its highest calling, which is to serve as a key institution within the liberal democratic order and become the pattern for the other liberal institutions to follow, by modeling seriousness, empiricism, healthy skepticism, and intellectual humility. Scholars must do this work *together*, across disciplinary and ideological lines, for the purpose of discovering how we may all continue to live together prosperously in peace.

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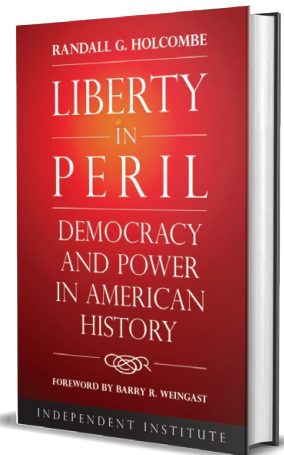
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