Knowledge, Power, and Academic Freedom: Reflections on the Challenges of Academic Freedom
by Joan Wallach Scott, New York, Columbia University Press, 2019, 192 pp., $28.00/£22.00 (cloth)

James Alexander

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Scheidel ends with some considerations of the alternatives. Is there any possibility of gradual reform leading to more equality? He argues persuasively that most of the examples that we would call to mind come from the postwar period and were firmly rooted in the destruction and violence of the war. Economic development per se does not seem to change relative inequality, although one could argue that everyone does better, but only the rich tend to do much better.

I end with two thoughts. First, it seems to me that Scheidel’s point about “relatively” peaceful times bringing ineluctably with them increases in inequality hides the violence which is used to bring about this inequality. No doubt there is a real difference between the Second World War and the postwar era. It is a time of “relative” peace. But there is still a great deal of violence. I do not just mean all the “little” wars and skirmishes that we ignore, but also things like the massive incarceration of blacks in America. It made me wonder if increases in inequality do not involve the same amount of violence as increases in equality and are just distributed more widely over space and time.

Secondly, Scheidel seems forced to conclude that nothing can be done. In the end inequality always triumphs unless something more horrible intervenes. He does predict that the era of the “Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse” has somehow come to an end. “The four traditional levelers are gone for now and are unlikely to return any time soon. This casts serious doubt on the feasibility of future leveling” (442). It is clear that Scheidel is open to some of the suggestions made by Thomas Piketty for things like a wealth tax, but that he is skeptical whether they will ever be instituted on the scale necessary to actually compress inequality. For me, however, this inability to imagine destruction on a massive scale is a singular failure of imagination. It leaves one with a strange feeling, as if Scheidel is arguing that our choice is between utter destruction that will no longer occur or accepting that civilization is inherently a system of inequalities. Both alternatives seem false. On the one hand, climate change alone is enough to make one think of cataclysmic events. Unfortunately, the Four Horsemen are not gone. On the other hand, perhaps the very sweep of the book leaves Schweidel blind to the possibility of improvements on a smaller scale and for a shorter time. I find myself forced to agree that there is a kind of natural movement towards inequality, but it is a movement that can and ought to be resisted.

Jeremiah Alberg
International Christian University, Japan
jalberg@gmail.com
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Knowledge, Power, and Academic Freedom: Reflections on the Challenges of Academic Freedom, by Joan Wallach Scott, New York, Columbia University Press, 2019, 192 pp., $28.00/£22.00 (cloth)

This book is part of that American phenomenon whereby senior or emeritus scholars turn away from their speciality to write something about the institutions they have lived in all their lives, the universities. Some, like Allan Bloom, write in a conservative manner, defending liberal education, while some, like Martha Nussbaum, write in a progressive manner, also defending liberal education. Here we have Joan Wallach Scott also defending liberal education, but
writing in a radical manner. To some extent this book is of a familiar type—the hypothesis is always that something is going wrong and that perhaps something can be done about it—but, in another sense, it is very up-to-date, because it is also a reaction to the sort of thing Jonathan Haidt and Jordan Peterson have reacted to: the notorious cry-wolf or strawman sort of victimhood claimed by sensitive students on the contemporary campus. Scott is opposed to this, but she does not want to do what Haidt and Peterson want to do, which is to dramatise how excluded conservatives are in the university. On the contrary, she wants to dramatise how threatened radical critique—of the sort of which she approves—is in the university.

There is an argument in this book but it is not stated clearly enough. So let me put it as clearly as I can, since it is quite an interesting one. The argument, which she finds stated by legal scholars like Adam Sitze and Robert Post, is that academic freedom is not to be confused with freedom of speech. According to Sitze, “unfettered exchanges of opinions” are not the same thing as the “voluntarily assumed forms of unfreedom” found in the academy (5), while, according to Post, academic freedom is “not determined by the First Amendment principle of the freedom of speech, but by the metric of professional competence” (114). These are recent arguments, taken from an article in the Massachusetts Review from 2017 and the book The Free Speech Controversy from 2018. Academic freedom, though Scott does not put it like this, is not a form of negative liberty but a form of positive liberty. One is free if one contributes to one’s community rightly: and this, as Sitze says, involves “forms of unfreedom.” Sitze goes so far as to call it not “academic freedom” but “academic unfreedom” in order to contrast it with “unacademic freedom.” Scott does not do this, perhaps because that would put a question mark next to the “academic freedom” she clearly wants to have a positive image.

Scott’s major claim is that the false equation of academic freedom and freedom of speech, though it does not take the form of a political argument, is being used politically by some figures on the right in order to close down gender programmes, suppress the social sciences, and prevent criticism of government. This is correct, and she offers evidence for the claim. But the problem is that her own politics are of the taken-so-much-for-granted-that-they-do-not-strike-itsonent-as-controversial sort. Her politics are controversial. She is a speak-truth-to-powerist. She thinks that the right is bad, the left better, progress good, anything else reaction, Trump—mentioned—bad, presumably Clinton, or Sanders, or Warren, or someone else—not mentioned—good. Now, I agree with the Sitze-Post claim that academic freedom, though it should probably have a more appropriate name, is best understood as involving something very different from freedom of speech; and I also agree with Scott’s claim that academic freedom should not be curtailed by political arguments which depend on the freedom of speech. So, opinions should not be equally admitted, students should not be considered always right, the teacher should remain in some sort of position of respect or hierarchy. We have to accept certain presuppositions of our academic engagements. But when Scott adds to this an additional claim that the problem is neoliberalism and that the particular sort of academic freedom she wants to defend is the academic freedom of some sort of socialist or left-liberal or, in American, simply liberal doctrine—which we might call anti-neoliberalism—then we are in different territory. For the argument is political, and if in politics nothing is above the battle then why should Scott’s sort of politics be above the battle?

The rest of the arguments are Scott’s own, and they are a bit of a jumble since they are not so much argued as asserted with quotation and mention of relevant stories. She sees academic freedom as concerning the autonomy of faculties, as being important for the common good, as having dogmatism as its enemy, as protecting radicals. The most interesting point she makes is the suggestion that critics of an academic orthodoxy must seek legitimation in terms of the codes of the very orthodoxy they oppose. This is a correct assessment of the fact that in
the academy we have what are called disciplines for a reason. I think that perhaps she overdoes the view that universities are radical or critical. But there are reasons for that.

Scott never considers the fact that universities have had different social functions over time, or that it is only in the last century or so that universities have been supposed by some to have the function of being critical of the state (as opposed to being consecratory of it, as Humboldt desired), or that the expansion of the universities meant that standards would decline because, as Kingsley Amis put it, “more will mean worse.” Scott has an ideal of the university as large, public, well-endowed, unaffected by political pressure, and yet wholly political in ways that she considers acceptable: a sort of beneficent ivory tower of the politically engaged. She especially dislikes the fact that “structures of inequality” have been replaced by “personal injuries,” that we worry more about “individual security” than “institutional inequalities,” that there has been a “substitution of the politics of individual entitlement for the politics of collective equality and social justice” (85, 88, 92). That is a clear position. It enables her to object to the safe space, trigger-warning, no-platforming phenomenon, but she does not appear to realise that this phenomenon is not simply a consequence of 1980s neoliberal politics but is also a consequence of her own 1960s politics of speaking truth to power, protesting, or, as we now say, calling things out. The modern campus types—there is no clear name for them yet (their enemies call them social justice warriors)—seem to combine a 1960s sense of entitlement with a 1980s sense of entitlement: they are entitled to enjoy freedom as individuals but also to enjoy suffering and respect as members of a collective minority and are often caught up in trying to close down the politics of individuals they consider harmful or damaging. They are the liberals who do no evil, but hear all evil.

There are some good lines in the book. Scott reflects well on the tyranny of the minority which inspires “student vigilantism and administrative risk aversion” (91). No one who is sensible will doubt her own good sense about this. But the book is really only likely to appeal to those who already agree with, say, Wendy Brown and Judith Butler. The book does not stitch together its own arguments, which remain assertoric, and it seems a bit one-sided in its avoidance of the perhaps, to her, excessively masculine noise of those of the “intellectual dark web,” who are fighters in a common cause, though they would disagree with her institutional leftist politics because they see those as part of the problem. The question for Scott is whether she really thinks that liberal education, pursuing the truth wherever it leads, has any necessary relation to her own political preferences of criticising institutions rather than cossetting individuals. Her politics is still a politics of resentment even if it is a bit more dignified than the new politics of resentment.

I see the arguments on both sides as part of the dialectic of liberalism and hence, by implication, of liberal education. Liberalism emerged out of generosity. The older or classical liberalism was aristocratic. It was a generosity of the elite towards those outside the elite. Then, in the age of democracy, liberalism was extended by proxy to all of society so that it was not only the virtue of those willing to defend liberalism but also the desert of those who happened to live in a liberal society. The ideal was that everyone in a modern democracy would become liberal. This is not to say that liberalism was uncontested. But it is to say that Scott is wholly wrong to assume that liberalism and democracy are the same thing. She says “illiberal democracy” is an oxymoron (104), as if mentioning Viktor Orban in the same sentence makes it true. But it is not only dubious figures like Carl Schmitt who have said that democracy and liberalism were entirely different things. Far more politically acceptable, even leftish, figures like Raymond Geuss and John Dunn have also asserted that liberalism and democracy are very different. Where we are now is that two different bands of liberals are in conflict. On the one hand we have those who imitate the old elite liberalism of generosity, and on the other those who depend on the cry of the proxy liberalism of receipt and desert: the former
line up behind the defenders of academic function, and the latter line up behind the campus radicals. Scott has to decide which side she is on: she agrees with the former on education but her politics is closer to that of the campus radicals—for the very reason that, despite what she says, she does not believe in pursuing the truth wherever it leads but does believe in pursuing the truth as long it leads to her own political opinions.

James Alexander
Bilkent University, Turkey
jalexand@bilkent.edu.tr
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The Theology of Liberalism: Political Philosophy and the Justice of God, by Eric Nelson, Cambridge, MA, The Belknap Press, 2019, 224 pp., $29.95/£23.95 (cloth)

Eric Nelson has confidently revealed to us God’s justice. God is not an oppressive tyrant but a king subject to the laws of justice. The celestial realm is monarchical, not republican or ruled by a diverse committee of gods and goddesses. Divinity, for Nelson, implies unity or oneness, not the pluralism that obtains on earth. One might question the compatibility of monothelism with human plurality. Can monotheistic faiths consider competing monotheistic faiths to be equally deserving of respect as their own and can they tolerate polytheistic and atheist beliefs? However, the central issue for Nelson is his conviction that God has endowed humans with free will, with the capacity to sin or not to sin, to fall into corruption or stand upright, to merit reward and punishment according to one’s choices. Nelson’s is not the wimpy form of liberalism—“there but for the Grace of God, go I.” The fortunate deserve the product of their virtuous life choices; the unfortunate merit the lot befalling their poor choices.

Socrates and Plato thought that knowledge was virtue: to know what is good is to do it. We shall bypass what Plato thought were the prerequisites of knowledge of the good to consider Aristotle’s view that although all humans aim at an apparent good, they are often waylaid by akrasia (moral impotence, commonly translated as weakness of will, although Greeks did not have a word answering to the Latin voluntas or the English will). People sometimes betray their better judgment when carried away by passion or immediate advantage.

Saint Augustine, the most influential of Christian thinkers, thought all people to be afflicted with akrasia, as he was himself. Christians are moral cripples who need the saving grace of Jesus to walk upright. Pelagius, a theologian contemporaneous with Augustine, argued that humans were endowed with freedom of the will, and could choose to live according to God’s will. Augustine responded that if humans could live according to the Ten Commandments, then Christ died in vain. Humans are not autonomous agents; choice is limited to willingness to accept the saving grace that Jesus provides or fall into sin and death.

Nelson examined John Rawls’s undergraduate thesis, A Brief Inquiry into the Meaning of Sin and Faith, written when Rawls was a Christian, to reveal what Nelson considers Augustinian characteristics of Rawls’s thought after he abandoned his Christian faith. Rawls, in A Brief Inquiry, rejected the idea that humans can merit election and earn God’s favor. Pelagius, for Rawls, rendered the Crucifixion pointless and associated the pride of believing one can earn salvation by one’s good deeds to be Judaic in character (52). Nelson holds that the early modern theorists that laid the philosophic foundations for liberalism—Milton, Locke, Rousseau and Kant—were Pelagians, which “undergirds both their contractarian politics and their