

## **The Augean Stables of Academe: How to Remove the Authoritarian Bias in Universities**

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### *The “Free World” and “Communist” Countries*

The “free world” was the political rhetoric used during the Cold War in contrast to the “communist” countries. However, the “free world” was manifestly never free: the state considerably interfered with people in their persons and their property. And the “communist” countries were manifestly never communist in the Marxist sense: there was no common ownership of the means of production with the absence of social classes, money, and the state. It would have been more accurate to call them the “authoritarian world” and the “totalitarian world”. Today the “free world” is sometimes still used, but Western countries remain authoritarian in terms of taxation and restrictive legislation. The, by implication, “unfree world” is largely only somewhat more authoritarian. Why does this continuing authoritarianism exist in the West?

### *State-Dominated Academia*

One significant proximate cause is academia. The states in Western countries use *aggressive* coercion (they do not merely *defend* people and their property) to more or less monopolise the university-and-degree systems and also, to varying degrees, to fund them. There may be ‘competing’ universities, but they are mostly within the state’s monopolised system (including the half dozen or so private UK universities; although their independence of tax-funding is a step in the right direction). There may be income from ‘voluntary’ payments to that monopolised system, but taxation remains a very substantial source of income (varying with the university and the country). The result is that most professional intellectuals have privileged status and income thanks to the state. In fact, very many of them do not really pay taxes at all. For it is a book-keeping pretence to pay them and ‘tax’ them when their income comes from taxation: if their jobs were to disappear, then the state would have more money. Such academics are, in effect, pursuing their personal hobbies or political hobbyhorses at the expense of all those people without (net) privileges and tax-subsidies.

### *State-Biased Academics*

It would be naïve to think that academics are disinterested scholars who cannot be influenced by the source of their privileges and income. Inevitably, this system creates a powerful pro-state bias in academia and its intellectual output: it both attracts intellectuals more likely to be sympathetic to the state and then reinforces that outlook by its endemic culture. And that is precisely why it exists, of course: it is a version of imperial China’s strategy of employing all the potentially-dissident intellectuals in its bureaucracy. So it is not an invalid *ad hominem* criticism to point out that a tacit system of pro-state monopolisation and bribery exists. Asking most academics what they think of the state is akin to asking Roman Catholic priests what they think of the Church of Rome. Even self-described ‘libertarian’ academics often give the appearance of having gone native. They may advocate more liberty here or there, but they will rarely make a fuss about ‘nationalised’ (politicised) academia itself (perhaps they want to avoid conflict with their colleagues or superiors and to achieve promotion or at least security). Doubtless, most academics honestly believe that the state is, overall, maintaining educational standards and providing an essential service that the free market would not (or it would do so more inefficiently, at least). Thus, they are honestly mistaken. One cannot keep up standards by using aggressive coercion both to abolish real competition and also to subsidise most of the ensuing (near-)monopoly. And if the free market would not provide higher education, then why is it necessary to make it illegal—or, at least, very difficult—for it to try?

### *The Libertarian Solution*

What is the solution to the Augean stables of academe? Adapting Heracles' approach, it is to divert the rivers of freedom and liberty to flow through them. Simply repeal any legislation that restricts who can set up a university or award degrees, and end all tax-funding. The free market, philanthropy, and charity will do the rest. It is unlikely that the best universities will perish; although they may have to make some changes to survive and thrive. One consequence is likely to be a significant reduction in average student fees, which would be a vote-winner: students and their parents far outnumber socially-parasitic academics. Some people may accept that this analysis is about right for the arts and social sciences, as these are largely consumer goods, but worry about the STEM subjects: Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics. However, insofar as these are perceived as genuinely useful or desirable, departments and students will undoubtedly find funding from a plethora of competing sources. Instead of politically motivated allocation and direction, there will be economic efficiency (which includes funding for science and the arts as ends in themselves, but on a voluntary basis).

### *Gradual Change*

Won't this simply change the bias from being towards the state to being towards entirely voluntary institutions? Yes, and so it should: a bad bias changes to a good bias. But the cultural change will not happen overnight (even the founder and Master of the private New College of the Humanities, A. C. Grayling, was confused enough to say, "Now I am a bastard capitalist. It is really upsetting. ... Education is a public good and we should be spending more on it and it shouldn't be necessary to do this"<sup>1</sup>). In other words, there will eventually be a change from an authoritarian outlook to a libertarian one. Such a change is eminently desirable. In time, we might even live up to the label "free world".

(2018; revised 2022.)

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<sup>1</sup> Vasagar, Jeevan and Booth, Robert. "A. C. Grayling's private university accused of copying syllabuses", *The Guardian*, 7 June 2011.