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Educational Notes No. 39  
ISBN 9781856376167  
ISSN 0953-7775

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### Nicholas Kollerstrom and UCL

The universities of the free world have often employed some pretty unsavoury people. Even the most reputable academic departments occasionally play host to Holocaust deniers, apologists for Joseph Stalin or semi-fascist theoreticians who believe that Africans are genetically inferior to Europeans. The issue of how these intellectual mavericks should be treated excites a great deal of controversy. Should universities dismiss them from their posts as part of a righteous war against offensive beliefs, or should they be allowed to remain *in situ* in the name of free speech? Mild-mannered dons have been known to come to blows when questions like this are floated in the common room.

A recent case in a British university throws all the relevant issues into vivid relief. In April 2008 a sixty-one-year-old astronomer named Nicholas Kollerstrom was dismissed from an unpaid research fellowship in the Department of Science and Technology Studies at University College London (UCL). His offence was to have published an online article claiming that the Holocaust never took place.<sup>1</sup> In a brief and pompous announcement on its website, UCL said that it had terminated Dr Kollerstrom's employment because his views are "diametrically opposed to [our] aims, objectives and ethos...such that we wish to have absolutely no association with them or their originator."<sup>2</sup> This was disapproval with a capital "D".

UCL's desire to be rid of Dr Kollerstrom is certainly understandable. His article on the Holocaust is an execrable piece of drivel, repeating most of the hoary old clichés which Holocaust deniers have persistently passed off as evidence of independent thought. Moreover, Dr Kollerstrom's intellectual lapses aren't simply confined to fantasising about Hitler's innocence. The man is a sort of walking compendium of what Damian Thompson scornfully calls "counterknowledge".<sup>3</sup> Quite apart from publishing credulous texts on astrology and crop circles (a relatively minor crime), he also believes that the terrorist attacks of 9/11 and 7/7 were "inside jobs". Defending him is not an easy task. Yet the fact remains that UCL's decision to fire him is deeply unjust, not simply because it shows scant regard for the idea of personal liberty (though it certainly does that) but also because it has damaging implications for academic culture as a whole. Let me count the ways.<sup>4</sup>

### Universities and Free Speech

Many of the people who support UCL's decision invoke a purely negative conception of individual liberty. They

argue that Dr Kollerstrom's dismissal does not involve a violation of his right to free expression, since all societies necessarily impose what might be called *contextual* limitations on freedom of speech. No individual has the right to say exactly what he likes in whatever circumstances he likes, or so the argument goes. Free societies should avoid imposing unreasonable restrictions on the expression of opinion, but there is no obligation on any institution or organisation to provide an outlet for opinions with which it disagrees. As long as the individual has a legal right to speak his mind, he cannot expect anyone else to provide him with a megaphone.

Dr Kollerstrom's critics tend to link this point about the contextual limits on free speech to a concern about his academic competence. Their argument is that UCL's overriding obligation is to maintain high academic standards. Since Dr Kollerstrom's article on the Holocaust was clearly the product of academic fraud, deliberately ignoring the vast amount of well-documented evidence that might have disproved its thesis, it follows that UCL could only protect its reputation by immediately dissociating itself from its author. The case for the prosecution was put with characteristic force by the writer Oliver Kamm, who argued on his blog that:

*The issue is not one of personal liberty or academic freedom. It's about the purpose of the academy. Holocaust denial is a demonstrably false claim about history. It can be promoted consistently only by ignoring or doctoring the evidence. Indeed, the two most prominent Holocaust deniers in the West, my reader David Irving and Robert Faurisson, have been found in courts of law (in the UK and France, respectively) to have engaged in fakery. By taking the stand that it has, UCL has properly insisted that its academics adhere not to a particular view but to a method, that of critical inquiry.<sup>5</sup>*

Arguments like these are used whenever a university plays host to a controversial scholar or speaker (and sometimes even to a controversial *student*),<sup>6</sup> so it is important to be clear where their weakness lies. The big problem with Dr Kollerstrom's critics is that they state their case in far too inflexible a form. It is perfectly true that the majority of institutions should be free of any obligation to publicise beliefs they dislike. It would clearly be absurd to expect the Libertarian Alliance to publish articles by card-carrying fascists or the BNP to open its press to spokesmen for the Muslim Council of Britain. Yet the emphasis

on the right to exclude opinions should not be taken too far. Most free societies have recognised that certain institutions, notably schools, universities and other places of learning, have a duty to conduct themselves along more pluralistic lines. The justification for this is a straightforwardly democratic one. Some people have an easier time getting their opinions heard than others. The columns of our leading newspapers are generally more accessible to the *savants* of the centre-right than to writers of the radical right or the left. The Conservative, Labour and Liberal parties can afford to produce as many party political broadcasts as they wish (subject to some fairly relaxed statutory limitations), whereas the Communist, Green and Libertarian parties enjoy no such privilege. If the right to free speech is to be made meaningful, it is therefore necessary (or at least desirable) for universities and related institutions to provide an outlet for as wide a range of opinions as possible. The community of scholars should never be mistaken for a confraternity of political soulmates.

If one accepts that universities should be as ideologically diverse as possible, it follows that their more controversial (or bigoted) employees should be treated with a certain tenderness. Administrators should proceed on the assumption that scholars have the right to say whatever they like, and that nothing short of a significant violation of professional standards should merit disciplinary action. This is not to say that no one should ever be sacked, only that universities should err at all times on the side of free speech. The fact that they no longer do so (or do so only intermittently) raises an awkward question about their legal status: Should universities be *compelled* to promote free speech? As unthinkable as it might seem to certain libertarians, there are times when the law can enhance the quality of public discourse rather than undermine it. The statutory obligation on British broadcasters to cover politics impartially has generally worked well, and many people now believe that a legal commitment to “pluralism” should be introduced to supplement it.<sup>7</sup> A clause in the next Education Act to protect the rights of academic dissenters could arguably do a lot of good.

### The Issue of Fraudulence

It goes without saying that no amount of enlightened chat about pluralism should protect the exponent of academic fraud. If an academic wilfully distorts or invents evidence in order to support his case, there can, in principle, be no realistic objection to his being fired, demoted or in some other way severely reprimanded. However, the issue is rarely as simple as it seems. Identifying fraud can sometimes be difficult. In the case of Dr Kollerstrom, whose article on the Holocaust undeniably reeks of shoddy scholarship, it cannot be said often enough that his work on non-scientific themes *had nothing to do with his employment at UCL*. His research fellowship was awarded for his work in the history of astronomy, an area in which his scholarly output is apparently unimpeachable. Anything he wrote on the Holocaust, crop circles or 9/11 was produced in his own time. What this means, as Brendan

O’Neill pointed out in a fine piece on the *Index on Censorship* website, is that Dr Kollerstrom has effectively been sacked for expressing his “private beliefs and habits”.<sup>8</sup> To support UCL’s decision is implicitly to back the idea that employers have a right to supervise their workers’ private lives.<sup>9</sup>

More generally, the hunt for academic fraudulence often gives rise to difficult and sometimes insuperable problems of definition. Those who call for people like Dr Kollerstrom to be sacked seem to regard the scholarly “cheat” as a sort of out-and-out rogue, persistently and deliberately distorting the truth for political ends. There is no doubt that unmitigated frauds exist (and that many of them have been drawn to Holocaust denial), but in truth they are rarely to be found in universities. The great majority of university teachers have demonstrated at least a basic command of academic research methods. The factual basis of what they write is likely to be reasonably sound, even when their interpretation of data arouses controversy. Scholars who offend against the academic proprieties usually only do so in comparatively minor ways, so that their writings are compromised at the level of the individual sentence or paragraph but rarely *in toto*. Moreover, their scholarly lapses are often the product not of dishonesty but of over-enthusiasm, naiveté or excessive faith in personal intuition. When a university accuses a man of fraudulence, it often ignores the fact that the bulk of his scholarship is sound and that his sins were unintentional. It is not clear that a robust academic culture can exist on this basis.

### The War on Pluralism

There is one other reason why the sacking of Dr Kollerstrom was so regrettable. It has gone a long way towards reinforcing some of the most destructive academic trends of recent times. As we saw earlier, Western universities have done much in the modern age to foster the idea of intellectual tolerance. Recognising that ideological consensus is always impermanent, they have seen it as their role to encourage open debate and to “keep large areas of past culture, if not alive, at least available.”<sup>10</sup> However, the commitment to pluralism has come under enormous strain over the last thirty or forty years. Universities throughout the Western world have become hotbeds of political controversy, playing host to scholars of both the left and the right whose commitment to free speech has sometimes been negligible. Many observers trace the origins of the problem to the advent of the so-called *soixante huitards*, who entered the academy after the stirring events of the 1960s and openly pursued a “long march through the institutions” in the name of Marxism, feminism and other radical ideologies. Dismissing the established universities as little more than “ideological apparatuses of the capitalist state”,<sup>11</sup> they sought to transform their respective disciplines into instruments of political agitation. This eventually provoked a violent backlash from scholars of the right, who have fought a vigorous rearguard action in defence of such things as “tradition”,

“disinterested aesthetic values” and “hierarchy”. The battle between the two groups has rarely been pretty.

The problem has never been one of scholarship. Both the *soixante-huitard* left and the traditionalist right have produced work of the highest quality. The real difficulty is the quasi-totalitarian spirit in which some (though by no means all) leading academics have conducted themselves. Too many people, some of them extremely influential, now take the view that scholars from the opposite end of the political spectrum should either be drummed out of the profession or never employed in the first place. To this end they leave promising candidates off shortlists on purely political grounds, start whispering campaigns against colleagues and collaborate with campus activists to have “unacceptable” speakers banned. Significantly enough, one of their deadliest weapons is the accusation of academic fraud. For men like Henry A. Turner and Norman Finkelstein, the former a member of the sullen right and the latter an ornament of the apoplectic left, it is no longer enough to express measured disagreement with work one finds objectionable.<sup>12</sup> Instead its author must be dismissed as a charlatan and loudly upbraided for plagiarism, tendentiousness and wilful distortion of sources. Very fine scholars have had their careers destroyed or held in check as a consequence.

When UCL took the decision to dismiss Dr Kollerstrom, it showed that the most illiberal attitudes had finally penetrated to the highest reaches of the academy. The college authorities were not responding to a mass campaign but to an e-mail from a member of the public. Faced with a coarse and bovine opinion which cut against the grain, their immediate response was to demonise the rather ineffectual fantasist who had tried to disseminate it. In taking this action they conferred an air of official legitimacy on all the sordid little techniques, most of them perfected over forty years, by which individual scholars have sought to exclude their opponents from academic life. Once upon a time the most politically conscious students might have marched in Dr Kollerstrom’s defence. This time around their silence has been deafening. Having spent so much time in a system in which curiosity is invariably trumped by conformity, they seem to have accepted the view that certain opinions are simply too horrible to be aired in civilised company. This is a measure of just how effective the war on pluralism has been. The spectacle of students, teachers and administrators uniting in opposition to free speech is a travesty of everything a university should stand for. It will take a long time before matters can be put right.

### Notes

- (1) See Nicholas Kollerstrom, “The Auschwitz ‘Gas Chamber’ Illusion”, Website of *The Committee for Open Debate on the Holocaust*, 2008, <http://www.codoh.com/newvoices/nrillusion.html>.
- (2) Website of University College London, <http://www.ucl.ac.uk/news/news-articles/0804/08042202>, April 22 2008.

[www.ucl.ac.uk/news/news-articles/0804/08042202](http://www.ucl.ac.uk/news/news-articles/0804/08042202), April 22 2008.

(3) See Damian Thompson, *Counterknowledge* (London: Atlantic Books, 2008).

(4) Lest it be thought that I have a hidden agenda, I had better say the following: The author of this article is a libertarian socialist. He has no doubt that the Holocaust occurred and he regards it as one of history’s gravest crimes. He abhors fascism in all its forms and is reasonably sympathetic to the state of Israel.

(5) Oliver Kamm, “Points from the Blogs”, *Oliver Kamm* (website), May 4 2008, <http://oliverkamm.typepad.com/blog/page/4/>

(6) Readers of a certain age will remember the deeply illiberal campaign in the 1980s to prevent Patrick Harrington, a member of the National Front, from studying at North London Polytechnic.

(7) See, for instance, James Curran and Jean Seaton, *Power without Responsibility: The Press and Broadcasting in Britain*, fifth edition (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 362.

(8) Brendan O’Neill, Contribution to “The Kollerstrom Question”, *Index on Censorship* (website), 2008, <http://www.indexoncensorship.org/?p=359>.

(9) A more enlightened example has been set by Northwestern University in the USA, where the Holocaust denier Arthur Butz has been employed for more than thirty years. Recognising that Professor Butz’s expertise in electrical engineering (the subject he is employed to teach) is sound, Northwestern granted him tenure and turned a blind eye to such poisonous extracurricular outpourings as *The Hoax of the Twentieth Century: The Case Against the Presumed Extermination of European Jewry* (1976). If this sort of arrangement can exist in the USA, where sensitivity to anti-Semitism runs understandably high, it can surely be emulated in Britain.

(10) Raymond Williams, *The Long Revolution* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984 [1961]), p. 68.

(11) The phrase is that of the great Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser. See Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses” in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (London: Monthly Review Press, 1971).

(12) For Henry A. Turner’s outrageous attempt to destroy the career of the gifted Marxist historian David Abraham, see Jon Wiener, “Footnotes to History: the David Abraham Case” in *Professors, Politics and Pop* (London: Verso, 1991). For Norman Finkelstein’s groundless attempt to level charges of plagiarism against the Harvard academic Alan Dershowitz, see Alan Dershowitz, *The Case for Peace: How the Arab-Israeli Conflict can be Resolved* (New York: Wiley, 2006).