



# ACADEMIC FREEDOM and FREE SPEECH on CAMPUS

AN INTERVIEW WITH JOAN W. SCOTT BY BILL MOYERS

*Joan W. Scott, an expert on academic freedom, spoke with journalist and commentator Bill Moyers about the chill that has descended on college and university campuses in the wake of the 2016 presidential election.*

**T**he following is a condensed and edited version of “Academic Freedom in the Age of Trump,” an interview originally published in October 2017 on [BillMoyers.com](http://BillMoyers.com). Read the full interview at <http://billmoyers.com/story/academic-freedom-age-trump/>.

**Bill Moyers:** Professor Scott, connect these dots for us. What’s the pattern?

**Joan W. Scott:** The pattern is an attack on the university as a place where critical thinking occurs, where free thought is encouraged. This is not new; it’s been going on for a number of years. It can be seen in the defunding of state universities. It can be seen in attacks on free speech at the university, particularly on the supposed tenured “radicals” who are teaching in universities. The Trump election brought it the fore and made it possible for a number of different groups whose aim is to stop the teaching of critical thinking to launch direct attacks.

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**JOAN W. SCOTT** is professor emerita in the School of Social Science at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, New Jersey. She is a long-standing member and former chair of the AAUP’s Committee A on Academic Freedom and Tenure. Her most recent book is *Sex and Secularism* (2017).

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**Moyers:** You've said there's a kind of bloodlust at work. What do you mean by that?

**Scott:** Richard Hofstadter, in his famous book written in the McCarthy period, *Anti-intellectualism in American Life*, talks about the deep hatred that some Americans had for what they consider to be elitist intellectual activity. I think that's what's happening now—the vicious unleashing of attacks on professors and students, the clear decision by the Right to make free speech their campaign and to demonstrate that universities and particularly students are dangerous leftists who would deny to others the right of free speech. The Right as the victim of the intolerant Left. It is a concerted plan to depict the university itself as a place of dogmatic ideological thinking—an institution somehow out of step with the way most Americans think. What I mean by bloodlust is a kind of vicious vindictive description of the universities and their faculties.

For example, Betsy DeVos warned students that they don't have to be indoctrinated by professors at their universities. But the reason you go to university is to be taught, is to learn how to think more clearly, to call into question the ideas that you came with and think about whether or not they are the ideas you will always want to hold. A university education at its best is a time of confusion and questioning, a time to learn how to think clearly about the values and principles that guide one's life. Of course, it's also a time to acquire the skills needed for jobs in the "real world," but the part about becoming an adult with ideals and integrity is important.

**Moyers:** Richard Hofstadter referred in particular to what he called "the national disrespect for mind" that he said characterized the country in the 1950s. Is that true of what's happening today or is this more

a deliberate political strategy to try to put the opposition off balance? Do they disrespect the mind or are they in need of a political tool to weaponize the culture wars?

**Scott:** I think it's both. I think there is a disrespect for the mind that Trump, for example, exemplifies. His is a kind of strategic thinking that's more about shrewdness than about intellect. His attack on "elites" is meant to rally his base to rebel against the powers that be—in Washington especially. I don't think he cares much about higher education per se; he just wants to demonstrate that learning isn't necessary for business or government. He wants to elevate mediocrity to a heroic virtue. But I also think there's a concerted effort on the part of groups like the Bradley Foundation and the Koch brothers, of people like Betsy DeVos, to call into question the very function of public education in general and of the university in particular.

**Moyers:** Back in the 1950s, when Senator Joseph McCarthy railed against universities, artists, writers, and journalists, his followers howled along with him in trying to persecute their perceived enemies. As you listen to what's happening today, do you ever hear McCarthy's voice resonating in your head?

**Scott:** I do. In some ways it's even worse today. The internet has made possible a frightening practice of threats and intimidation—threats of unspeakable violence and death. McCarthy was scary, but not like that. There's been a lot of talk about Left student groups violating the free speech of the Right. And certainly there are examples of students shouting down speakers whose political views they don't want to hear, views they think don't belong on a university campus. I don't support that kind of behavior. But what's not been covered to the same extent is the attack by the



Right on people with whom they disagree. A large number of university teachers have been targeted for speeches that they've made; they've been harassed and threatened.



Take the case of Princeton's Keeanga-Yamahatta Taylor. She gave a commencement speech at Hampshire College in which she called Trump a racist and a white supremacist. Fox News carried it, and she received hateful emails, among them death threats; she's African American, so there were threats to lynch her too. She canceled all of her speaking engagements because the threats were so violent. They make McCarthy look tame in comparison. McCarthy's were violent threats at a more abstract level. These are specific threats: "I have a gun pointed at your head." So there's something now about the unleashing of violent hateful speech that is more prevalent than it was even in the days of Joseph McCarthy.

**Moyers:** Ariel Dorfman has an essay in the *New York Review of Books*. He says, "Never has an occupant of the White House exhibited such a toxic mix of ignorance and mendacity, such lack of intellectual curiosity and disregard for rigorous analysis." He describes what's happening as "an assault on national discourse, scientific knowledge, and objective truth." Where is this taking us?

**Scott:** Oh God, where is this taking us? I hope not down the road of the kind of fascist thinking that was going on in Italy and Germany in the '20s and '30s, but it certainly feels we could move in that direction, toward an extremely dangerous authoritarian populism. Because the thing about education—and why I'm so passionate about the position and status of the university—is that it's supposed to teach citizens how to think better, how to think critically, how to tell truth from falsehood, how to make a judgment about when they're being lied to and duped and when they're not, how to evaluate scientific teaching. Losing that training of citizens is an extremely dangerous road to go down because it does open people to the kind of toxic influences that Dorfman describes.

**Moyers:** In your lectures and essays you use a term that we don't hear very often today. You say the pursuit of knowledge is not an elitist activity but a practice vital to democracy and to the promotion of the common good. What do you mean by the common good and how does academic freedom contribute to it?



**Scott:** What I mean by the common good is that we understand we're all part of something bigger than ourselves, that we live in societies together and must help take

care of one another because you never know when you're going to need to be taken care of by others. And it's not enough to say that your family or your church is going to take care of you. Societies are collective entities—we're meant to be connected to one another; the function of government is to administer that connection. We've increasingly lost that sense of community, of the notion that there is something we contribute to and benefit from that is called the common good.

**Moyers:** You've said that there is an important distinction between the First Amendment right of free speech that we all enjoy in some circumstances and the principle of academic freedom that refers to teachers and the knowledge they produce and convey. What exactly is that distinction?

**Scott:** Well, free speech is what we all have and is guaranteed by the First Amendment of the US Constitution. Academic freedom refers to what happens in the university, particularly in the classroom, and to the importance of the teacher having the right to teach and share what he or she has learned, having proven her competence to teach, having gone through a series of tests and certifications including research and writing to demonstrate her abilities and knowledge. I don't think students have academic freedom in that sense, but they do have the right of free speech; they can express themselves, but their ideas are not subject to the tests of the judgment of their peers or to scientific affirmation as teachers' are. A biology teacher does not have to accept a student's essay that insists creationism rather than evolution is the explanation of how we got to be where we are. That student is not being denied his right of free speech when he's given a low grade for not having learned the biology. So the university is the place where the pursuit of truth is taught, the rules for learning how to pursue it are explained, and students begin to understand how to evaluate the seriousness of truth. Those are incredibly important lessons, and only the teachers' academic freedom can protect them because there will always be people who disagree with or disapprove of the ideas they are trying to convey. There are students whose religious upbringing is going to make them feel really uncomfortable in a class where certain kinds of secular ideas are being

presented. There are students whose ideas about history or sexuality are going to be similarly challenged. That doesn't mean that they shouldn't be exposed to new ideas; that's why they're at school. That's why they come to school and to the university: to be taught how to think well and critically about material that they're being presented with. But it's the teacher who is certified to teach them how to do that.

**Moyers:** You write that free speech makes no distinction about quality; academic freedom does.

**Scott:** Yes, and there's actually a wonderful quote from Stanley Fish, who is sometimes very polemical and with whom I don't always agree. He writes, "Freedom of speech is not an academic value. Accuracy of speech is an academic value; completeness of speech is an academic value; relevance of speech is an academic value. Each of these is directly related to the goal of academic inquiry: getting a matter of fact right." Freedom of speech is not about that. Freedom of speech is about expressing your opinion, however bad or good, however right or wrong, and being able to defend it and argue it and be argued with about it in public forums. But that's not what academic freedom is about. That's not what the classroom is about. I would have a hard time banning even Richard Spencer from speaking on a university campus, however hateful and dangerous I find his ideas.

**Moyers:** Should a professor be able to teach that human activity does not contribute to global warming?

**Scott:** I think it's questionable. I'm with the climate scientists; I find it very hard to think that that would be a credible scientific position. How much human activity has contributed, okay, what other sorts of influences there have been, okay, but somebody getting up and saying that there is no proof whatsoever of human influence on climate change—I would have a hard time accepting the seriousness of a professor who taught that.

**Moyers:** What's the difference between a climate denier and a Holocaust denier?

**Scott:** I think not much these days. I think not much at all because the climate denier tries to prove, as the Holocaust denier does, that the facts that demonstrate that there was a Holocaust and that there is climate change are wrong and don't exist—against all evidence that they do exist.

**Moyers:** Should a professor be able to teach creationism in the biology curriculum if half the students believe it?

**Scott:** No. Absolutely not.

**Moyers:** Why?

**Scott:** Because, again, we're talking about what counts as science. If the students don't want to learn about evolution, they shouldn't be in the course. A biology course that teaches creationism is not a science course, it's a religion course. So the students demanding that creationism be given credence in that course are out of line and are denying the academic freedom of the professor. They are calling into question the scientific basis of the material that's being presented. And students are not in a position to do that.

**Moyers:** So you're saying that both sides of that argument don't carry equal weight in the training of future scientists, right?

**Scott:** Yes, exactly.

**Moyers:** Do you think that the strategy on the right is to provoke situations that can be used to demonstrate that it's the Left that is shutting down freedom of speech today?

**Scott:** I do, yes. I think that's what people like Milo Yiannopoulos, the conservative provocateur, are all about. He comes to a campus, he insults people, he engages in the worst forms of racist and sexist speech. And the point is to provoke leftist reaction to him that can then be used to discredit the Left. And my sense is that what the Left needs to do is find strategies that will defuse the situation rather than play into the hands of provocateurs.

**Moyers:** After the outbursts that greeted Yiannopoulos at the University of California at Berkeley, a city councilwoman there said, "I don't appreciate that these are racists coming to UC Berkeley to spew hate." Would you argue that racists should be silenced?

**Scott:** I don't think we can argue that. I think what we need to do is expose them for what they are and fight back. I think we need to let them speak. They have free speech rights. At the same time, we have to argue that other groups must not be shut down, either—say, students standing up for Palestinian rights. They have the right to speak just as often and just as much as

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racists like Yiannopoulos or Richard Spencer. There has to be equal treatment of these groups even though the right-wing groups are, because of their publicity stunts, gathering all of the attention while quietly left-wing groups such as the Palestinian students are being shut down.

**Moyers:** You've warned about the moralism that's appeared in some college courses. And I know you have expressed some concern about so-called trigger warnings.

**Scott:** I think trigger warnings assume that students are fragile and need to be protected from difficult ideas. I don't think students need to be protected from difficult ideas. And I think the problem of trigger warnings is that they have been used to police what's taught in classes, to avoid subjects such as rape, violence, race—these need to be discussed.

**Moyers:** What about minority students who have experienced considerable hostility growing up in an inhospitable culture, who have been silenced or marginalized by that hostility, and want colleges to be safe spaces against the hostile culture?

**Scott:** I don't think colleges are safe spaces. It's one thing to have a fraternity house or a community center where students can go and talk about their shared experiences. But it's another thing to have safe spaces in the sense that the university's providing them with protection from what they have to experience and find ways of protesting and resisting.

**Moyers:** There's a politically conservative outfit named the National Association of Scholars that wants to "evaluate the academic elite." They would eliminate peer review and replace it with review by "experts" who are "of genuinely independent minds." They

don't want you scholars assessing each other's work, they want someone on their side doing that. How does this play into the Right's attack on the academy and Trump's crusade against knowledge?

**Scott:** I think the National Association of Scholars is the inside group that's looking to transform the academy in conjunction with the outside group. I don't think they are coordinating with one another, but the effect is the same. Bringing in so-called neutral outside experts to judge the quality of academic work seems to be impossible because it's precisely within disciplines that the judgment and evaluation and regulation of academic work happen. If you're not in the discipline, you have no way of knowing what the standards are, what the history of changing modes of interpretation have been, whether the work is following acceptable patterns of proof and evidence. It just doesn't make any sense at all. Who are these neutral outside experts? What is the standard of neutrality that they're offering?

**Moyers:** Sum up the state of academic freedom as we approach the end of Trump's first full year in power.

**Scott:** It's under grave threat. And it's under grave threat from many different directions. And it's up to those of us in the academy who care about the universities and who love the teaching that we do, to somehow keep open that space of critical thinking and the pursuit of knowledge and the search for truth—to keep that space open and protected from the forces that would destroy it. ■

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