Artes Liberales Lectures

No. 2

Ira Katznelson

LIBERAL ARTS AND RISKS FOR FREEDOM

In the **Artes Liberales Lectures** series we publish texts by eminent scholars who have visited the Collegium Artes Liberales and have given important lectures there.

In this series thus far was published:

- Donald W. Harward, *Liberal Education and We*, Wydział „Artes Liberales", Warszawa 2018.

The **Artes Liberales Lectures** series is a continuation of the **OBTA Lectures** series in which two books were published:

- Thomas Molnar, *Unity of Knowledge*, OBTA, Warszawa 2004.
- Roman Szporluk, *Zachodni wymiar kształtowania się współczesnej Ukrainy*, OBTA, DiG, Warszawa 2004.

Ira Katznelson

LIBERAL ARTS AND RISKS FOR FREEDOM

Wydział „Artes Liberales"
Warszawa 2018

Series Editor
Jerzy Axer

Text Adjustment
Elżbieta Olechowska

Composition & Typesetting
Michał Kucharski

ISBN 978-83-63636-75-3

Wydział „Artes Liberales", Uniwersytet Warszawski
ul. Nowy Świat 69, Warszawa
www.al.uw.edu.pl

This book was published with the financial support of the "*Artes Liberales* Institute" Foundation (www.ial.org.pl).

Printed in Poland in 150 copies.
Paper: Olin Regular Natural White (120 & 250 gsm). Fonts: Adobe Garamod Pro & Museo Sans Cond.

Liberal Arts and Risks for Freedom*

It is wonderful to attend an event that in considering risks of freedom is dedicated to understand liberal arts education as a form of democratic reason. I am honored to have been asked to participate by Jerzy Axer. I warmly thank him and the Kolegium Artes Liberales that he leads, as well as Anna Axer, and add my appreciation to Dean Lisa Hollibaugh and other colleagues at, Columbia University, my home institution, for their collaborative involvement. It is especially a pleasure to be able to help recognize passionate and intelligent leadership on behalf of deep values of learning, and help mark the tenth anniversary of this significant institution.

Its 2008 founding statement was oriented to build two overlapping communities, the intellectual and the civic. The intellectual is characterized, against current trends in my country and in Poland, by "teaching methods [that] enable and encourage mutual interaction

* Lecture given at the Collegium Artes Liberales on Jun. 15, 2018 during the international conference "The Risk of Freedom: Liberal Arts at the Autonomous University: Polish Context. American Context" (more about this conference, see p. 20).

between professors and students...in small groups marked by active participation." Also pushing back against often dominant trends, the civic mission the statement identified was that of educating "young leaders for Poland who will employ in their activity the force of argument, and not the argument of force." Together, these ambitions aim "to promote civic attitudes and behavior in the academic setting, in the University's immediate urban environment, in the wider region, and in the country as a whole." These are significant goals. The title of today's conference signifies that they cannot be accomplished without taking personal and institutional "risks of freedom," especially, I might add, at times such as ours when the dimensions of risk are difficult to identify and measure, with the result being unpredictability and deep uncertainty, uncertainty that can generate both fear and potential possibility. Such a moment was the Polish 1980s.

I slept last night at the Hotel Victoria, the very hotel I stayed in during my first Warsaw visit thirty years ago, in 1987. Notwithstanding the profound social movements that then were mobilizing Polish civil society, the Church, and students and faculty at this and other universities, the dramatic transformations that lay just some two years away still were thought to be utopian. It was then, at the Victoria, that I first met Adam Michnik. Together with Janos Kis and Georgy Bence in Budapest and Jan Urban in Prague, Adam had begun to chair the Polish Branch of a network of seminars on democracy and democratic theory that, together with colleagues at the New School for Social Research in New York, I was privileged to help organize. Each of the Democracy Seminars read texts in parallel, starting with Hannah Arendt's *Origins of Totalitarianism*. By way of a courier system that exchanged discussion notes,

we overcame distance and other constraints to create a common conversation. From time to time, those of us who were American members would visit the region both to participate in person and help connect the branches. It hardly needs saying how much we keenly admired the tangible risks taken by our embattled Hungarian, Polish, and especially Czech collaborators for intellectual freedom. Notwithstanding active surveillance, censorship, and recurring threats, they practiced the liberal arts of free reading, free thinking, and free debate about the human condition.

In 1991, the new situation made it possible for the four seminars to meet together for the first time. That gathering in Slovakia, in Stupava outside Bratislava, took on the spirit of a liberated party, a moment when the boundary separating the instrumental and the expressive was breached, and the separation of politics and poetry, as it were, was transcended. At that moment, with the old system surprisingly defeated, all seemed possible. Such moments do not last even in established liberal democracies, let alone in young and fragile ones where the pursuit of conditions for open knowledge are far from guaranteed.

I dedicate my brief remarks to those Democracy Seminars because their spirit and substance are needed more than ever.

The pursuit of open inquiry under duress in the 1980s and the celebration of uninhibited inquiry in the early 1990s signified the truth of what the sociologist Robert K. Merton had written at the height of the Second World War, in 1942, when the outcome of that titanic struggle was very much in doubt. There are important affinities, he argued, between how communities pursuing systematic knowledge engage with their tasks of learning, research, and

teaching and the most important characteristics of democratic societies.** Each depends on open systems and institutional arrangements within which to pursue curiosity, on norms of transparency and reciprocity that invoke confidence and trust, and on the idea that human understanding and research findings are provisional, much like public policies arrived at as collective choices within liberal constitutional democracies. Democratic reason is always open to better ideas and is subject to deliberation and debate in light of evidence and argument.

Writing at a moment of huge upheaval, Professor Merton commented how "contagions of anti-intellectualism threaten to become epidemic." Unfortunately, in my country and perhaps yours, we are living at a moment marked by threats to the integrity of social knowledge and the pursuit of the liberal arts, even as opportunities exist to extend and deepen liberal education.

In these circumstances I have returned recently to a small number of texts by my undergraduate teacher at Columbia, the American historian Richard Hofstadter: his Pulitzer Prize winning book *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life*; his volume called *Academic Freedom in the Age of the College*; and his commencement address at Columbia University during the tumultuous Spring of 1968, "a moment" he designated as a time "of...terrible trial."

Describing the university as "the center of our culture and our hope," Hofstadter underscored how the liberal university is committed "to the idea that somewhere in society there must be an organization in which anything can be studied or questioned – not

** "A Note on Science and Democracy," *Journal of Legal and Political Sociology*, 1, (1/2) 1942, p.115.

merely safe and established things but difficult and inflammatory things, the most troublesome questions of politics and war, of sex and morals, of property and national loyalty." And like Merton, he identified similarities between the conditions of scholarship and democratic life. Scholarship, he said, "rests upon the willingness of people to consider they may be mistaken," just as "modern democracy rests on the willingness of governments to accept the existence of a loyal opposition, organized to reverse some of their policies and to replace them in office." But there is a necessary tension, nonetheless between the two spheres, as free universities best "minister to society's needs" by "becoming an intellectual and spiritual balance wheel," a "demanding idea, an idea of tremendous sophistication."

For this reason, but not this reason alone, the university and its commitment to liberal reason is fragile, suspended, he wrote, "between its position in the external world, with all its corruption and evils and cruelties, and the splendid world of our imagination." This position often requires strategic judgment of a high order by university leaders and faculties. Yet however much they – we – are thoughtful and restrained, the conditions of our work cannot be achieved without a political and social suspension of disbelief; that is, without a genuine and deep zone of intellectual freedom.

In the early 19th century America, Hofstadter showed in his *Academic Freedom* volume, intellectual liberty that had been associated with the spread of Enlightenment in the American colonies gave way to a tidal wave of intensifying religious piety during The Great Awakening, a Protestant revivalism marked by fierce denominationalism. The mid-20th century, his *Anti-Intellectualism* book argued, likewise proved to be a time of great stress because of a growing disrespect for mind, a time, in America, of "fear," a

time of "national distaste for intellectuals," a distrust based on the observation that many scholars create political and social mischief, as indeed we should! If Hofstadter were still with us, I believe he would see the present moment as a time deserving of heightened anxiety and concern.

The generation of Hofstadter's grandparents, the decade and a half that opened the twentieth century, the time before the First World War, still was marked by the belief that systematic social knowledge based on dispassionate inquiry could tame the demons of unreason. Intellectual and political leaders shared this expectation simply and openly. As the spirit of science spread from biology and physical phenomena to the social sciences and the humanities, narratives of human progress seemed persuasive. It looked as if warfare had become more the exception than the rule. Global economic integration was proceeding. Imperialism then in high flower rhetorically promised a more equal future. Overall, liberal values seemed to grow stronger.

We all know what came next. Rather than reason taming unreason, reason harnessed unreason. Some of the greatest minds in philosophy, literature, and social studies capitulated to despotism and depredation. Words unknown before the First World War – including total war, genocide, and totalitarianism – and, in the Second World War, instruments of destruction yet unimagined – including carpet bombing, death camps, and atomic weapons – made the independent university and the liberal arts more insistently necessary as features of liberal and democratic reason. So, too, did patterns of mobilization that could not have been anticipated, including illiberal dictatorships claiming to be better democracies than liberal regimes, dictatorships marked by

ideological zealotry characterized by unremitting friend-enemy distinctions both secular and religious. At my university, the core course called Contemporary Civilization was born in response to the slaughterhouse of the First World War and the core course in Literary Humanities took shape as the powers of the Third Reich peaked in the late1930s.

During the past century, all humankind has experienced a vastly widened continuum of possibilities, ranging from exhilarated liberation based on enlightened knowledge and great intellectual achievement to pervasive and permanent peril and the understanding that all the reason in the world cannot erase or guarantee the control of unreason. As a result, our achievements are constituted by and are suffused with persistent danger and perpetual fear.

As the spectrum widened, with unprecedented possibility at one end and unprecedented destruction at the other, the widened spectrum of human possibilities and prospects came to constitute our central challenge, our human condition. It demands the replenishment of committed reason and a renewed commitment to the liberal arts that is not too simple or innocent. If we are to secure and advance the best values of our Enlightened patrimony – including pluralism, toleration, consent, and an equality of rights – rigorous reason and liberal knowledge are required more than ever. But not without self-consciousness about their boundaries and borderlands, a self-awareness that the founders of the modern research university before the First World War would not have thought necessary, especially attention to the vexing zone where reason and unreason entwine.

Nearly four decades ago, Frederik Barth, the Norwegian anthropologist, argued in *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries* that the content of group life is not fixed or given, but is shaped by the location, character, and permeability of borders, understood as sites of connection and exchange, opportunity and danger; that is, by social processes that pivot on the meeting points of identification and differentiation between groups. His studies of ethnicity and culture insisted that cultural differences are fashioned at the margins, at points of contact, rather than being inherent. By looking at boundaries and the borderlands they designate, Barth argued, we better can understand how distinctive human and organizational cultures form and how their members make choices.

In finding a place for sustained liberal reason, higher education lives at the edge of partially overlapping yet distinctive locations; borders that distinguish the university and the college from organized religion, from economic markets, and, indeed, from direct participation in democratic politics. But higher liberal learning does affect the public sphere, less by engaging in the give and take of partisan politics, spiritual preaching, or commercial exchange than by altering conditions of speech and understanding, and by fidelity to the role reason can play in human affairs.

A dark century and current somber times challenge us not to rest content with the assumptions of the past. Once again, we face a variety of indecent alternatives, putting in doubt our capacity to produce liberal social knowledge of depth and protective capacity. The liberal arts cannot, in such circumstances, be indifferent to the predatory qualities of modern states, the challenges of might in a world of violence, the full range of disproportion and inequity generated by market competition, the propensity to close civil

society and exclude persons by non- rational criteria, and, most broadly, the inherent powers not just of reason but of emotion. It is impossible to imagine how organized social knowledge can promote a decent liberal society without grappling with these ever-present features of modern times.

Recently, I have turned to a favorite text, Alessandro Manzoni's 1829, *The Column of Infamy*. A close friend of Verdi best known for his poetry and fiction, Manzoni probed the brutal and judicially-sanctioned torture and murder of two quite innocent individuals who were thought, in an atmosphere of panic, to have been responsible for the outbreak of the Plague in Milan in 1630. "By the terms of the hellish sentence passed on them," Manzoni reported, "Piazza and Mora were to be taken in a cart to the place of execution, being torn with red-hot pincers on the way; their right hands cut off in front of Mora's shop; their bones broken on the wheel; and while they were still alive, their bodies twisted into the wheel and lifted from the ground; and after six hours, their throats to be cut, their corpses burned, and the ashes thrown into the river."

How Manzoni made sense of these developments goes to the heart of what we call liberal arts, which are efforts at critical and self-conscious interpretation aimed at understanding who we are, how we exist, and how we might live in the worlds we inhabit. As knowledge-based approaches to estimate and comprehend the human condition, the liberal arts deploy a wide range of methods, from hermeneutics to science.

Though this orientation dates to the ancients, it took new form and gained new content under the auspices of the Enlightenment, the mode of thought that suffuses liberal modernity. Reading

Manzoni's interpretation of deep cruelty is a reminder that our Enlightenment no longer can be simple or innocent or unduly optimistic. He began his study this way:

> *The judges who, at Milan in 1630, condemned to a horrible death certain persons accused of spreading the plague by methods no less stupid than disgusting, thought they were doing something so worthy of record that, in the very sentence of condemnation, along with a clause ordering the destruction of their victim's houses, they decreed that in the space where these houses had stood a pillar be erected, to be called the 'Column of Infamy', and on this pillar an inscription written where all posterity might read of the crime which they had prevented and the punishment they had imposed.*

"And they were right," Manzoni added. "That judgement of theirs was indeed memorable." But how memorable? Not only for the sheer drama and pain of forced false confessions under torture but for chastening lessons that were less about then and them, but now and us.

An earlier consideration of the case in 1777 by Pietro Verri, written at a peak moment of the Enlightenment, had distinguished a more primitive pre-Enlightenment 1630 from a more enlightened present. Verri argued that the actors, including the judges, had been controlled by premodern unreason. He had ascribed "evils," Manzoni wrote, "to the ignorance prevalent in those times and to a barbarous legal system, and so [had] come to think of them as necessitated and inevitable." By extension, Pietro Verri believed that the introduction of modern reason would render impossible a recourse to torture or extorted confessions, or the mass hysteria that had accompanied the arrests, trial, and punishment in early 17th century Milan.

We know better, and so did Manzoni. His *Storia della colonna infame* insisted that any contrast between enlightened modernity and pre-modern times past can too easily be overdone. What he called the power of "anger made pitiless by prolonged fear" is not simply a matter of ignorant times past. To be sure, science later taught that the theory of contagion deployed in this case by the public and by elites alike was simply wrong. Learning is possible. But cruelty, Manzoni cautioned, cannot be relegated to history by the imagined triumph of reason. Proponents of Enlightenment, he counseled, must shed their self-congratulations.

So must we. Though it dates from the 18th century, Columbia College as a liberal arts institution embedded in the larger university initially was refashioned in the late 19th and early 20th centuries based on assumptions about past and present, about the premodern and the modern, about superstition and reason, much like those that had guided Pietro Verri's account of 17th century Milan. But we have learned with great pain and at high cost that our Enlightenment, our liberalism, our modernity – our liberal arts – are too innocent, too vulnerable unless they internalize the type of realistic interpretation offered, by Alessandro Manzoni.

From that vantage, any celebration of the liberal arts, must pose a profound challenge to our self-understanding. In our reading, writing, and teaching, what, in the spirit of Manzoni, should we now seek to accomplish? With the difference wrought by realism and experience, and with a passion for liberal learning, I trust this is a question to which our colloquy today on risks of freedom will turn with fortitude. Surely it is just this spirit that must animate any consideration of America's and Poland's complex, complicated, pasts, each a combination of reason and unreason.

In the spirit of the liberal arts, I close with appreciation that today's conference signals an expansion of the mission statement of 2008 that identified a geographic scope of civic attitudes and behavior from the intensely local to the level of Poland as a whole. It also signified how the faculty of Artes Liberales has aspired to "make use of the experience of other countries, including leading U.S. universities and liberal arts colleges," regarding curricula and methods of teaching. But whereas the collegiate and the civic impulses overlapped in the central statement of purpose, their spatial scope was kept distinctive, the civic dimension being more constrained in geography.

A central challenge lies here. How would the craft of the liberal arts be extended if the original statement of intent were amended to read: "to promote civic attitudes and behavior in the academic setting, in the University's immediate urban environment, in the wider region, in the country as a whole, in East and Central Europe, the full European Union, and on a more global scale"? What would it mean to say that the liberal arts, here and elsewhere, is a world project? Not an imperial one, but a project geared to elaborate intellectual and civic responsibility.

By enlarging the scale of geography, our learning might better intersect with the most vexing questions of our age. Mobilizing knowledge across the humanities, the biological and natural sciences, and the social sciences, the liberal arts would be galvanized to explore, as examples, current anxieties of democracy, pursue dilemmas of identity, ask what makes a city decent, probe the implications of technological transformation, and consider the future of work.

And thus I end by reporting that Columbia University recently has announced a new undertaking called Columbia World Projects that will include a Columbia College student component as well as a global cohort of Obama Fellows, supported by the former American president's young foundation. Much as Artes Liberales has sought to innovate institutionally within the framework of the University of Warsaw, so will the Columbia initiative. The "highly decentralized structure of universities," Columbia's president, Lee Bollinger, recently observed, "leaves largely unresolved a profound issue: How do we connect the enormously valuable intellectual work of the university to have the greatest possible impact on the problems of our time? What are the mechanisms, the structures, by which academic knowledge is woven into the life of the broader society and the world?"

This is not simply an organizational or technical question, but the kind of puzzle that only can be addressed with, and within, sensibilities cultivated by the liberal arts – liberal arts taking risks for freedom. Such I believe, was the spirit and orientation of the Democracy Seminars of the late 1980s. Such, I have come to understand, is the spirit, orientation, indeed the passion, of Kolegium Artes Liberales. May it continue to thrive and inspire!

Ira Katznelson is Ruggles Professor of Political Science and History at Columbia University, and, in 2017–2018, served as Pitt Professor of American History and Institutions at Cambridge University. His *Fear Itself: The New Deal and the Origins of Our Time* was awarded the Bancroft Prize in History, and the Woodrow Wilson Foundation Award in Political Science. Other books include *Liberal Beginnings: Making a Republic for the Moderns* (with Andreas Kalyvas), *Desolation and Enlightenment: Political Knowledge after Total War, Totalitarianism, and the Holocaust*, and *Liberalism's Crooked Circle: Letters to Adam Michnik*. Professor Katznelson, who is a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, has served as president of the Social Science Research Council (2012–2017), the American Political Science Association (2005–2006), and the Social Science History Association (1997–1998).

The Risk of Freedom: Liberal Arts at the Autonomous University: Polish Context. American Context

The international conference "The Risk of Freedom: Liberal Arts at the Autonomous University: Polish Context. American Context" took place on June 15, 2018 at the Collegium Artes Liberales of the University of Warsaw.

The conference was attended by: Professor Marcin Pałys, Rector of the University of Warsaw; Professor Jolanta Choińska-Mika, Vice-Rector for Student Affairs and Quality; Professor Robert A. Sucharski, Dean of the Faculty of "Artes Liberales"; Professor Jerzy Axer, Director of Collegium Artes Liberales.

The conference was also attended by representatives from the Columbia University in the City of New York: Doctor Lisa Hollibaugh, Dean of Academic Planning and Administration, and Professor Ira Katznelson, Ruggles Professor of Political Science and History. Professor Ira Katznelson had the opening lecture.

Collegium Artes Liberales of the University of Warsaw has entered into an agreement with Columbia College of Columbia University in the City of New York which represents the beginning of an exciting intellectual and institutional partnership. The Collegium Artes Liberales and Columbia College share a deep commitment to a liberal arts foundation in higher education. The members of the two institutions enjoy robust dialogue about innovative ways of shaping a liberal arts curriculum and about effective ways of teaching the liberal arts to Bachelor's students in our respective programs, planning future collaboration. The dean of academic affairs of Columbia College, Doctor Lisa Hollibaugh, serves as a member of the council of the Collegium Artes Liberales.

The conference was attended by over a hundred faculty, staff and students of the Faculty of "Artes Liberales", as well as representatives of the institutions cooperating with the Faculty, including: Ashley Kidd (The Endeavor

Foundation, New York), Professor Taras Finikov (International Fund for Education Policy Research, Kiev), Professor Gábor Klaniczay (Central European University, Budapest), Doctor Sonya Nevin (University of Roehampton, London), Professor Irina Savelieva (National Research University Higher School of Economics, Moscow), Professor Jörg Schulte (University of Cologne).