

ARTICLES

In Defense of Academic Freedom

Conor Cruise O'Brien

The University of Ghana, 1962-1965

The defense of academic freedom has been a vital, recurring theme throughout my career, not only in Europe and the United States, but also on the continent of Africa. In the spring of 1962 I was completing an account of my experiences as Secretary General Dag Hammarskjöld's personal representative in Katanga at the height of the Congo crisis the previous year—later published as *To Katanga and Back*—when I unexpectedly received a telegram from the office of Kwame Nkrumah, the president of Ghana. Unknown to me at the time, my opposition to British and American neocolonialism in the mineral-rich province of Katanga had caught the attention of Nkrumah, who now wished me to take up the position of vice chancellor at the University of Ghana. This new academic institution had recently replaced the old University College of the Gold Coast, the soundest and most advanced university in tropical Africa. Nkrumah was himself chancellor. Within the British and British-inspired academic system, this office is supposed to be a purely dignified and decorative one, with the vice chancellor being responsible for the day-to-day management of the university, that is, its academic and administrative head.

Despite this traditional demarcation of responsibilities, I was not at first disposed to accept Nkrumah's offer. I knew that he had attained power in genuinely free elections, but I sensed that he was at least potentially a dictator and that his respect for academic freedom would be at best a doubtful quantity. Sensing my reluctance, Nkrumah invited my wife, Máire, and me to Accra to assess conditions on the ground at the university. After this exploratory journey I decided to take up the new post, but only for an initial term of three years.

During the first two years of my tenure (1962-63), relations between the University of Ghana and Kwame Nkrumah remained untroubled—at least outwardly. Quite early on Nkrumah had asked me to draft a speech for him on university matters, which he delivered on 24 February 1963. I included a critically important paragraph in the speech, that ran:

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We know that the objectives of a university cannot be achieved without scrupulous respect for academic freedom, for without academic freedom there can be no university. Teachers must be free to teach their subjects without any other concern than to convey to their students the truth as faithfully as they know it. Scholars must be free to pursue the truth and to publish the results of their researches without fear, for true scholarship fears nothing We know that without respect for academic freedom, in this sense, there can be no higher education worthy of the name and, therefore, no intellectual progress, no flowering of the nation's mind. The genius of the people is stultified. We therefore cherish, and shall continue to cherish, academic freedom at our universities.

I was glad of the opportunity of getting the president committed—as far as recorded words could commit him—to cherishing academic freedom. I had a hunch that at some point in the future, when the university might come under pressure from Nkrumah's government, I might need to quote that passage. And, after the university did fall under quite heavy pressure from that quarter, I reached for that speech and did quote that passage. With tongue firmly in cheek, in an address to the university on 14 March 1964, I quoted what I called "the spirit of those noble words of our chancellor" and expressed the hope "that that spirit would prevail in all the practical relations between the university and the authorities." It did not exactly "prevail," but neither was it altogether extinguished. All that, however, was still to come.

On 2 January 1964, a soldier made an attempt on Nkrumah's life in Kulungugu, Northern Ghana, and killed one of his security officers. Following this incident, a state of emergency was declared. This crackdown coincided with preparations for a referendum proposing certain controversial changes to the constitution of Ghana, including a provision making Kwame Nkrumah president for life. The state of emergency, combined with the mobilization of opinion required for the plebescite, led to considerable excitement in the country and to the adoption in the government-controlled press of increasingly militant and, at times, vituperative language. The press attacked various persons and institutions whom it suspected of disloyalty, and the latter category included the University of Ghana.

It may seem strange that an attempt on the president's life should lead to attacks on the university, which, of course, had nothing whatsoever to do with the attempt. But the attempt did make it possible for those who wished to undermine the independence of the university to go on the offensive. The people concerned, mostly in the Ideological Institute at Winneba, together with a few people in the university itself, also had their own agenda: a purge at the university would create a vacuum which some of their own number could expect to fill.

Another threat to the university emerged after the trial of the soldier who had tried to assassinate Nkrumah. The suspect was found guilty, but political interest during the trial centered more on who had been "behind" the attempt on the president's life. While almost certainly no one else had been

involved, the leftists in Nkrumah's entourage succeeded in convincing him that there had been a deep-laid plot involving the CIA and the more conservative members of Nkrumah's government, including, perhaps, the most powerful member of that government after Nkrumah himself: Tawia Adamafio (previously, Tom Adams).

Tawia Adamafio and several other suspects were subsequently put on trial, but they were acquitted due to a lack of evidence. The president then removed the chief justice, Sir Arku Korsah, for having acquitted them, and ordered a new trial. I was in Europe on a recruitment drive for the university when this news broke and I publicly appealed to the president to reinstate the chief justice. Some people at the university, including some who later defended academic freedom when it came under direct attack, thought this was a mistake on my part. My contention, however, was that this decision affected the university directly through its law school. If the law students saw that a chief justice could be removed for complying with the law as he understood it, they would be likely to reach the conclusion that the way to success in the legal profession was through servile compliance with the dictates of arbitrary power, which was the reverse of what we were supposed to be teaching them. At the same time I knew that there was something in what my academic critics were saying. I had handed the university's critics close to the president a weapon that could be used against the university. And it was.

The next hurdle to clear in this disturbed and disturbing time was the referendum, in which the presumed victory of "Yes" would make the president unremovable in law. Propaganda for "Yes" in the Ghanaian press was intense and shrill. Propaganda for "No" was, of course, prohibited. Predictably, the referendum passed, with 95 percent of the vote.

Instead of abating at this juncture, the press campaign against the university continued to increase in violence. And then it suddenly turned into something worse than just a press campaign. On 30 January 1964, I received a visit from two high-ranking members of the security forces. They informed me that they had reliable evidence that three senior members of the university, whom they named, were engaged in subversive activities prejudicial to the security of the state and would therefore have to be deported. The persons named included the professor of law, WB Harvey, the senior lecturer in law, RB Seidman (both American citizens), and a person referred to as "Mr Chester," who later turned out to be Professor LH Schuster, a newly appointed member of the School of Administration. I informed the security officers that I could appreciate the fact that people employed by the university did not enjoy any license to engage in treasonable activities, and if reliable and adequate evidence was forthcoming that any of them had been engaged in such activities, then I would agree that the people concerned must face the consequences of their acts. The security officers stated that they had such evidence, but that they could not reveal it to me. I said that I could take no action on the basis of

evidence which I was told was available to others, but which was not made available to me. I could, therefore, take no steps for the dismissal of the persons concerned or for any other sanction against them.

I also urged that no action should be taken by the security forces until I had had an opportunity of seeing the president about the matter, as I believed there was grave danger of a miscarriage of justice. I suspected that at least two of those affected, Professor Harvey and Mr Seidman, might be the objects of malicious denunciation; at this point one of the security officers made a gesture which I interpreted as meaning that I was on the right track.

The press began to devote more space to attacking the university as a "center of subversion," and one journal asserted the doctrine that it would be better to have a university with no professors at all than one that harbored subversives. The students returned to the campus at the end of a recess on 3 and 4 February, and it soon became clear that there was considerable unrest among them as a result of the detentions, the deportation orders—which had now been issued and were about to take effect—and the press attacks. Reports reached the president that a big student demonstration against the government would be held on 8 February, the day on which the deportations were due to take effect. It was clear that there was some danger of matters getting out of hand, with the university becoming a political storm center. The government's most likely reaction, in my opinion, would have been to close down the university, deprive it of the degree of autonomy that it enjoyed, and reopen it on a new footing. With the support of the academic body I therefore decided, while continuing my representations on behalf of the members affected by the deportation orders, to do everything possible to prevent any kind of student demonstration or reaction to outside provocation.

I addressed the students to this effect at 8:00 a.m. on the morning of 8 February, the day when the deportations took effect. I warned the students that in my opinion some of the attacks by extremists in the press and elsewhere were intended to goad the students into some gesture that would be the pretext for remolding the university and entirely changing its character. I therefore urged that all students who wished to uphold the existing character of the university and academic freedom at the university should in this excited time exert rigid self-control, even in the teeth of severe provocation. I had no sooner finished this address than word reached me that a mass demonstration was on its way to the university. The vanguard arrived between 9:30 and 10:00 a.m. There were between 2,000 and 3,000 demonstrators of all ages and both sexes, including a number of schoolchildren. They were led by Nathaniel Welbeck, organizing secretary of the Convention People's Party, who had with him other prominent members of the party. Most of the demonstrators were orderly and good-humored, but a fringe of activists broke some doors and windows of the halls and committed two minor assaults. The object of the demonstration, as was later confirmed to me on good authority, was to over-

awe the students and prevent, or blunt the effect of, the student demonstration which was anticipated for that day, but which never took place as the students, without exception, obeyed the injunctions of the university authorities. If the student demonstration, which had been seriously discussed, had taken place together with the party's demonstration, or if the students had responded to provocation, there would have been an obvious risk of serious violence.

Welbeck and his senior followers then occupied Commonwealth Hall, the center of the university administration. Their popular supporters remained at large in the university grounds. The students remained in their rooms, refusing to be provoked, just as I had asked them. In Commonwealth Hall, Alex Kwapong, a Cambridge-educated classics professor, dean of the arts faculty and my successor as vice chancellor, and I engaged in dialogue with the leaders of the demonstration. Welbeck demanded that the students should be convened so that he and his colleagues could address them. I pointed out that we would be happy to offer him facilities to address any students who might want to hear him in the ordinary way and on an ordinary day, but I could not convene the students to hear him under such circumstances and in the presence of a quite unnecessary mass demonstration. I had advised the students to remain in their rooms for the preservation of the peace, and that advice stood.

Welbeck then turned to Alex Kwapong and said, "This kind of stuff is all very well for him, he's a foreigner here. But how about *you*? You are a Ghanaian. Is it not your duty to serve Ghana?"

Alex answered with great calm and deliberation. "Yes," he said, "it is my duty to serve Ghana, just as it is yours. But we seem to have different ideas as to how Ghana can best be served. Some of us try to serve Ghana by teaching young Ghanaians and preparing them for a better and more productive future. Others seem to think they can serve Ghana best by leading gangs of ruffians round the countryside."

The delegation—if that's what it was—erupted at this point, demanding that Alex withdraw the word "ruffians." Alex affected to be surprised and puzzled at their reactions.

"What's wrong with 'ruffians?'" he asked. "It's a well-established word in the English language. You'll find it in Shakespeare."

For some reason the reference to Shakespeare seemed to unnerve the delegation. Perhaps it served as a reminder of their relative cultural deprivation. At any rate, they all—led by Welbeck—left Commonwealth Hall and made their way back to Accra to report the failure of their mission.

The attempt at indirect or "spontaneous" intimidation had failed, mainly through Alex Kwapong's cool nerve and air of effortless authority. But a much more formidable assault was now underway. This took the form of a direct personal intervention by the president himself. Not long after the plebiscite, I received a document in a format I had never seen before. The document was headed "Presidential Command" in large letters of bright purple ink. I imag-

ine the stationery had been ordered for use after the plebiscite to exemplify and enforce the president's now limitless authority.

The command ordered me to appoint certain named people to academic posts that had become vacant as a result of the recent deportations. The most conspicuous person on the list was Ekow Daniels, formerly third man in the hierarchy of the law school and now the most senior surviving member following the deportation of the two above him on the list.

I prepared a reply, ignoring the new political context implied by the use and salience of "presidential command." I said that I had no authority to go beyond what was contained in the University of Ghana Act and the university statutes established under that Act. Under these instruments there were certain prescribed means of filling university vacancies. Only appointment boards, set up under prescribed procedures, had the authority to fill university posts. I did not have the authority to fill such posts myself or to vary the prescribed system. I would comply with the statutory procedures and advise the chancellor, in due course, of the outcome in each case.

I then notified the academic board of the presidential command and of my draft reply. The board upheld the reply by a considerable majority. All the Ghanaian members present—except for Ekow Daniels—approved it. So did about half the expatriates. The other half abstained, mostly on the ground that Ghanaian politics was no business of theirs. There were no votes against. We had feared—and more than half expected—that the university's negative response to the "presidential command" would be followed by punitive executive action: perhaps my deportation and the arrest of Alex Kwabong. But neither of these things happened. I heard from a witness in Flagstaff House that the president had said with reference to me: "That bastard wants me to fire him, and that's why I'm not going to do it."

I don't doubt that the president did say something of the kind, but I don't think this adequately accounts for the university's immunity after our defiance of the "presidential command." I think the president, knowing of his own unpopularity, now steadily growing in Ghana, was afraid of the consequences to himself of really drastic action against the university. If he could have gotten us to give in to threats, well and good. But since we had not given in, the actual implementation of the implied threats against the top level of the university hierarchy might be hazardous. Although the left-wing Nkrumahists liked to go on about the elitist character of the university, ordinary Ghanaians tended to be proud of the place and not worried about elitism. More important, the officer corps of the army—now the only people who could actually put Nkrumah out, and eventually did so—were proud of the university and intensely suspicious of its left-wing enemies, who had their own little projects for "reforming" the army also. So Nkrumah had adequate reasons for not proceeding against the highest levels of the university and perhaps thereby precipitating his own overthrow.

When my colleagues at the university and I took stock of the situation, we could see that some serious damage had already been done to the university. Our law school, in a flourishing condition throughout my first year, had been reduced to irrelevance by Nkrumah's personal and arbitrary domination of the Ghanaian legal system. The medical school, of which we had had high hopes, had to be indefinitely postponed following the withdrawal of American support once the president had started shouting about imaginary CIA plots.

On the other hand, other parts of the university—primarily the Faculties of Arts and Sciences—were in better shape than ever after the storm that the professors and students had weathered together in harmony. Everybody knew that we had defied the president's assertion of arbitrary power, and that he had then backed away. The Ghanaian press—run by the left wing of the Convention People's Party—continued to rail against the university, but we could now afford to laugh at the Ghanaian Press, which was indeed laughable enough.

By the summer of 1965 my three-year contract with the university was about to expire. I had no intention of applying for a renewal, and the renewal would certainly not have been accorded even if I had asked for it. Nevertheless, I was satisfied that academic freedom had been safeguarded. One year earlier, at the height of the controversy, I had addressed the university on 14 March 1964. I shall simply quote here what I regard as the core passage in my speech. Having referred, without going into details, to the university's troubles, I went on:

The values to which we adhere have nothing in common with colonialism or with any other system of oppression, nor have they anything in common with neo-colonialism or any other system of deceit. They are of their nature hostile to such systems as colonialism and neo-colonialism and they have served to bring about the downfall of the first system and the exposure of the second. Respect for truth; intellectual courage in the pursuit of truth; moral courage in the telling of truth: these are the qualities of a real, of a living, university. Since the days of Socrates in Greece and Mencius in China these values have been asserted, and have been attacked. None of us, alas, is Socrates or Mencius—and philosophy seems to have fallen on evil days—but no member of an academy can forget, without being unfaithful to his calling, how Socrates lived and how he died. A teacher may, in the eyes of the world, be a rather battered and insignificant sort of person, but he knows if he is a good teacher—as he so often, almost inexplicably, is—that he carries responsibilities, and must try to live up to examples, which are on the highest plane of human achievement. This is not, as is sometimes suggested, curiously enough, by both colonialists and some of their adversaries, a question of "introducing European values into Africa." These are not European values; they are universal values. Mencius taught in China very much in the same spirit as Socrates taught in Greece. They were almost contemporaries. The geographical and cultural gap between them was the widest possible, yet it is clear that they would have understood one another.

In Europe, and in America, these values have had at least as many enemies as defenders, as the names of Dr Goebbels and Senator McCarthy remind us. This ancient continent of Africa, which gave the world one of its first and richest civilizations, has the right to share in and contribute to the universal intellectual heritage which we associate with the names of Socrates and Mencius. The university has the duty, not only to transmit intact that heritage, but to provide intellectual conditions in which a modern African genius can make his own fresh and unpredictable contribution to the development of the human mind. We are here to provide, in Yeats's phrase, "not what they would, But the right twigs for an eagle's nest."

New York University: The Failure of Open Admissions

In the autumn of 1965 I was appointed Albert Schweitzer Professor of the Humanities at New York University. The teaching environment at NYU was relatively stable, but beginning to be troubled both by the repercussions of the deteriorating Vietnam War and by increasing racial tensions due to increasing unwillingness by young blacks to accept the status of second-rate citizens.

Sometimes these two themes interacted, and occasionally in a rather bizarre manner. At one point the student representative body demanded that on a given day all classes should be devoted to a discussion of the Vietnam War. I was at first disposed to resist this. I pointed out that the struggle in Vietnam, and writing about that struggle, would be an integral part of my course in "Literature and Society," and I wanted to reach it in my own time and deal with it in my own way. The students pointed out that they wanted to highlight the growing concern about the seemingly endless war and that the best way of highlighting it seemed to be to have as many classes as possible devoted to it on a given day. I could see the force of this, and being in sympathy with the growing opposition to the war, agreed to devote my class on the chosen day to the Vietnam War.

That, however, did not end the matter. Two days before the class was due to take place the student representatives came to me with a completely different demand. Instead of devoting my class to the Vietnam War, I was now asked to devote it to the topic of "open admissions," the current demand of radical black students for admission without academic qualifications. I refused. I had agreed to the first demand, because a good case had been made for it, and I would do what I had agreed to do. But I did not agree that students should determine what they would be taught, nor was I in favor of the admission of unqualified students to the university. So, no. And the students accepted the no.

Educationally, the "open admissions" demand made no sense at all, in my opinion. It actually exploited the students who were supposed to benefit from it and then let them down in a big way. The universities which had begun to practice open admissions—of which Berkeley was the most notable example—

had the unlovable habit of admitting quite large numbers of totally unqualified students and then turning them out before the final year, just as unqualified as when they first came in. The reason for this was that Berkeley could not confer degrees on unqualified students without undermining the credibility of their own degrees. So let them in as undergraduates, in a big show of pseudo-liberalism, and then turn them out on the streets before their final year.

So educationally, “open admissions” were a snare and a delusion. But politically, they served a definite purpose and represented a transit of power within the civil rights movement. In the heroic heyday of that movement in the 1950s and early 1960s, much of the leadership had been supplied by white liberals, mostly Jewish, and the most conspicuous martyrs of the movement were Jewish. But by the mid 1960s—around the time of our arrival in New York—there was a growing demand that the black movement should be led by blacks exclusively. Indeed, the demand was that the leadership should be in the hands of black *males* exclusively.

In the heroic period of the movement black females had played an important role. Rosa Parks had virtually started the movement by refusing to accept segregation in Alabama, and other black women were also to the fore. But by the middle and late 1960s, leading black male leaders like Stokely Carmichael were firmly consigning black females to a role supportive of the black male leadership.

The emerging black leadership of what had once been a cross-racial movement—and still retained some of the trappings of its origins—was quick to see the potential of “open admissions” for the advancement and consolidation of their own power. The whites who had played a leading part in civil rights were mostly people who were educationally qualified. The blacks who wished to replace them were no less intelligent—and sometimes more so—but they had had no opportunity to acquire an adequate education. “Open admissions” was a slogan with mass appeal. But it was educationally unsound. A sound strategy for black education would have begun with primary schools, ensuring that they would be adequately funded, equipped, and supplied with competent teachers. Those teachers, in the nature of the case, would mostly be white during the period of development. As soon as the reform of the primary system was well under way, a similar reform at the secondary level could begin. Only when this educational substructure was well and truly laid would there be any meaning in talking about higher education for blacks. And once the substantive change was secured there would be an adequate number of young blacks qualified for admission through the normal channels.

The intelligent young men who were taking over the political leadership of the black community from the mid 1960s on could see all this perfectly well. They knew as well as anyone else that “open admissions” was a nonsense, educationally speaking. But the very fact that it was a nonsense, educationally speaking, was what made sense of them, politically speaking. They had consid-

erable mass appeal, seeming to open a painless path to higher education for poor black children. So to mobilize black support for this demand was easy. Probably more important for the new black leadership was the fact that "open admissions" tended to isolate and divide white people within the old civil rights movement. Being educated themselves, these people could see the yawning fallacies behind the seductive appeal of the slogan. But the choices before them in dealing with the call for open admissions were essentially choices between different modes of political suicide: they could oppose it honestly and forfeit almost all support within the black community; or they could come out for it against their better judgment, thus subordinating themselves slavishly to the new black leadership. Either way the new black leadership emerged as the winner—which it duly did.

During this period, in the more modish universities—of which Berkeley was one, and New York University was not—a loose, but effective, alliance emerged between "black studies" people and "women's studies" people. "Studies" was something of a misnomer in both cases. What was going on, under that label, was propaganda and indoctrination. And the alliance between black studies and women's studies was a very curious one. The former was run by black men, exclusively. The latter was run by white women, exclusively. So the loose alliance was one between black men and white women. Throughout the sixties and seventies black women were left entirely out of the picture, primarily at the insistence of the black men, but with the collusion of the white women. It was not until around 1980 that black women began to play a significant role in an education process which had long been seriously skewed in this area.

The loose alliance between the two "studies" had also automatically cast white males in the role of the root of all evil, responsible for all oppression both of blacks and women. But black women knew differently. They knew that many black men were sexist and many white women were racist. The eventual arrival of black women on the scene brought a new and welcome note of realism and intellectual honesty into the debate over race and gender, as affecting education. But that benign change, which was itself coarsened by ideological simplification over time, was still a long way off in the 1960s.

South Africa: Violating the Academic Boycott

The theme of the defense of academic freedom as central to the full development of human intellectual development had been of prime importance to me during my years in Ghana and New York. After that—in Dublin and in London during the 1970s—the theme remained important to me, but was overshadowed by other, more immediate preoccupations. Then suddenly the theme of academic freedom again became of prime importance in the 1980s, because of developments with which I became involved in South Africa.

It all began, without at first any thematic resonance, with an invitation that I received to give a course of lectures at the University of Cape Town (UCT) in

South Africa. The invitation came from Professor David Welsh, then chairman of the Political Science Department and with whom I had become friendly during earlier visits to South Africa. David wanted me to give a five-week series of lectures at UCT under his department's auspices.

I was at first in doubt as to whether to accept. I had complete confidence in David himself, and, indeed, a lot of confidence in the university. But I wasn't sure how much freedom the university enjoyed in a South Africa still dominated by apartheid laws and practices, even though I knew that some of the practices had become a bit relaxed under international pressure. For example, my adopted son, Patrick, who is of Irish and Ghanaian parentage, would have been classified as "colored" if he had been living in South Africa during the apartheid period. So I wrote back to David saying that I could accept his invitation only if he could give me certain assurances that Patrick would not be exposed to any discrimination on racial grounds while on the university campus. I realized that when he was off-campus Patrick would be on his own. I just wanted to make sure that no institution, whose invitation I might accept, would discriminate against my son in any way.

Professor Welsh immediately assured me that while on the university campus black and colored students, as well as black and colored visitors, were *not* subjected to racial discrimination—at the hands of the university authorities, the hands of the government, or of anyone else. Thus completely satisfied by David's assurances, I formally accepted his invitation to lecture at UCT.

At the stage of my acceptance of Professor Welsh's invitation it did not seem to me that academic freedom was an issue with regard to South Africa. In fact, it seemed that the university was defending its freedom, under the pressures of apartheid, with a remarkable degree of success. But then, quite suddenly, in late 1986, when I was due to start lecturing in Cape Town, it became clear that academic freedom was indeed under serious and, in part, successful pressure. Ironically, the pressure was coming from neither the University of Cape Town nor even the South African government, but from members of the African National Congress (ANC), with the connivance of academics in British universities.

Several years earlier the ANC had called for an international boycott of the South African universities—regardless of their own internal practices—for as long as the government of South Africa failed to repeal its apartheid laws. But up to this time the international boycott had not been rigorously enforced and foreign scholars coming to South African universities to teach had, in general, not been interfered with.

But then quite suddenly, on the eve of our visit, there was a flagrant international breach of the principles of academic freedom. In early September 1986 an International Congress of Archaeologists was due to be held at Southampton in Britain. In the ordinary course of planning invitations were sent to four leading South African archaeologists. South African archaeology is highly es-

teemed by archaeologists in other countries, and South African archaeologists had been invited to all previous international conferences on the subject. But in this case the ANC appears to have invoked the international boycott it had proclaimed and appealed to its sympathizers in British academia for support. The British archaeological community—the hosts for the conference—actually disinvited the archaeologists who had received and accepted invitations. There was no pretense that the archaeologists in questions were themselves racists or partisans of apartheid. They were just disinvited at the insistence of the ANC and because of the institutions of the country in which they lived.

Because of the principles involved, and because of the distinction of the victimized scholars, the international archaeological community reacted sharply to the British decision (to which many British archaeologist were also opposed). Eventually, professional and international disapproval of the British decision forced a change of venue for the new conference to continental Europe, and the South African archaeologists, having been previously invited and then disinvited, were now reinvited to the new venue.

While the debate over the decision to disinvite the scholars was at its height, I wrote a piece about the matter for the London *Times* in support of the protest against the disinvitation and against the “academic boycott” in particular. In the course of the article I indicated that I was about to go to South Africa to teach, thereby breaking the “academic boycott,” which I believed to be altogether wrong and a breach of the basic principle of the international solidarity of scholars and teachers. This announcement turned out to be quite imprudent, but I cannot say that I regret the imprudence.

When Patrick and I traveled to South Africa it seemed at first that my imprudence would not be resented. For the first three weeks my course on “siege societies”—involving a comparison between South Africa, Israel, and Northern Ireland—was attended by about 100 students, most of whom were white, middle class English speakers who were, as David Welsh told me, probably mostly of a generally liberal outlook. My early classes passed off without incident. But then, in the fourth week, organized trouble began. This was shortly after I had made a public statement accepting the economic boycott, but attacking the academic boycott. Of the latter I said:

its impact on the apartheid regime would be nil, but the inroads it was making on academic freedom and freedom of expression were very serious indeed. These values would be vital to a non-racial South Africa and to other free societies. What was being conducted in South Africa under the banner of an academic boycott seemed to be a sort of creeping form of the Cultural Revolution, which had wrecked the universities of China and which the China of today repudiated with abhorrence.

Posters appeared on campus denouncing my presence and my breach of the academic boycott. I was then invited to debate the issue with a group of

students. Rather naively I was pleased with the idea of the debate. But when I showed up for the debate the man who had invited me—a student called Bolger, of Irish origin and, I believe, of Sinn Féin sympathies—announced that there would be no debate. Instead, the students would question me. I realized that I had fallen into a trap. But I said that I had been invited to make a statement and, unless allowed to do so, I would leave. I was prepared to answer questions after I had made my statement. This was agreed to. My statement was heard in silence. The “questions” began. Most of the questions were in fact hostile statements. Sample: “Why did you break the academic boycott? Was it to sneer at the sufferings of the African people?” I coped with this sort of stuff for about half an hour, then got up to leave. I had some difficulty leaving as a group of the most hostile “students,” including, I think, some outsiders, formed a ring around me and baited me with further “questions.” But after about twenty minutes of this they seemed to tire of the sport and let me go.

That was only the beginning of a concerted, and soon successful, effort to drive me from the campus. Shortly after the fiasco of the debate on 7 October I gave a public lecture on the topic of Israel at the university. Most of the audience were members of Cape Town’s large Jewish community. But a large black crowd—some of them students and some not—gathered outside the hall, chanting slogans. The vice chancellor, Dr Stewart Saunders, was in the audience and appealed for calm. I finished my lecture and withdrew, together with my audience. As we were leaving the demonstrators surged in through another door. Stewards tried to hold them back, and some of them were assaulted by students wielding tongs.

After that the disruption of my regular lectures began, again with the organized eruption of large crowds of young blacks and assaults on the stewards. It later emerged that there was a governmental *agent provocateur* element in these disturbances intended to discourage the anti-apartheid liberalism of the UCT campus. David Welsh has written about this element in his own account of the episode, which appears in *Ideas Matter* (Poolbeg Press, 1998), a Festschrift dedicated to me:

Another contribution to wrecking the lecture series came from an altogether different quarter: the notorious Security Police. For years before the Security Police had infiltrated student organizations, spied on lectures and listened in on their classes. They also employed *agents provocateur* to incite students to engage in illegal activities (not difficult in South Africa’s circumstances) or to inflame conflict situations (which occurred often), so that the ever-vigilant Security Police could burnish its reputation as essential custodians of the racial order. One Danie Cronje, who took a prominent part in the demonstrations against Conor (including wading into the Campus Control officials with a studded belt), later confessed to his role as a police informer and agent provocateur.

After the disruption of a second lecture I had a call from the vice chancellor. Stewart Saunders told me that if I chose to continue with my course I was

free to do so. It was his duty to warn me, however, that in the view of the university authorities there was a risk of very serious disturbances if I did so. People might be seriously injured, even killed. It was up to me. After reflecting on that, I told the vice chancellor that I would cancel my remaining lectures on campus. I notified my students that I would give one concluding lecture off-campus, would summarize what I would have had to say in the rest of the course, and would provide them with a reading list. The final lecture was well attended. My own students were horrified by the demonstrations and grieved at their success.

Subsequently, the university authorities set up a Commission of Enquiry into the events that had led to the premature cancellation of my lectures. Again, as David Welsh has written about the episode:

Thus was born the (du Plessis) *Commission of Enquiry into the Events which occurred on the campus of the University of Cape Town on 7 and 8 October 1986*. Its members were Dr DJ du Plessis (an academic surgeon and a former vice-chancellor of the University of Witwatersrand), Advocate Arthur Chaskelson, SC (a leading public interest barrister who had defended many accused in political trials) and Advocate Ismail Mahomed, SC (also a prominent defense counsel in many political trials). It is worth mentioning that Chaskelson is now President of the Constitutional Court and Mahomed is Chief Justice of South Africa. Clearly, the latter two members were chosen to ensure that the Commission enjoyed credibility in more radical circles. Even so, [the National Union of South African Students], the [Student Representative Council], and the [Azanian Students' Organization] declined to be officially represented at the Commission's hearings on the grounds that they had not been consulted about the appointment and terms of reference of the Commission.

The Commission completed its labors on December 18, 1986 in the middle of the university's long summer vacation. Its report was submitted to the University Council, which met in special session on January 13, 1987. Despite serious criticisms of the report's lack of objectivity, notably by Dr Frank Bradlow, the Council resolved to accept the "main thrust of the recommendations made by the commission" and to reaffirm its commitment to upholding the freedom of the university and "the right of any academic, subject to the normal rights of the heads of departments, faculties and Senate, to invite any person to take part in an academic program"

The key phrase in all of this was the "main thrust of the recommendations." It enabled the Council to evade passing judgment on some of the Commission's principal findings, which it knew to be incorrect—and several members believed to be seriously biased. If it was a ploy, which I suspected, I was determined not to let it succeed.

The vice-chancellor declined to give me access to the report until January 20, 1987. When I read it I was appalled. I immediately did two things: resign as head of department and issue a press statement. My press release described the report as "one-sided, flawed and shoddy. In major respects its reading of the evidence is faulty, while crucial pieces are ignored. I resent in particular the Commission's unfairness to Dr O'Brien, whose alleged personality characteristics and motivations are subjected to an analysis to which Dr O'Brien has had no opportunity to

reply. The Commission evinces little recognition of his stature as a scholar and it accepts too easily specious evidence which claims that he came to UCT for ulterior, non-academic reasons. Dr O'Brien is a friend of mine, and I take full responsibility for inviting him—yet I was not asked a single question by the Commission about his personality or about the reasons for my inviting him or his accepting. It is perhaps indicative of the Commission's approach [I should have said "provincialism"] that they even spell his name incorrectly [throughout the report he is called "Connor".]

It was not until April 21, 1987 that some measure of justice could be done. This was at an extremely rancorous University Senate meeting. A relatively uncontroversial motion, proposed by one of the deputy vice-chancellors, John Reid, acknowledged that the invitation had been extended "for academic reasons only." The fireworks began when I, seconded by my colleague, Robert Schrire, proposed that the Senate reject those findings of the Commission's report which concerned Conor personally and express to him its apology for any damage that was done to his reputation.

I made a fiery speech, extracts from which I now quote: "I would have hoped for a motion that rejected this report outright: it is a shoddy effort, unworthy of association with UCT, and incapable of being used as a basis for reconciliation The report is a classic case of blaming the victim I had invited him, and I could have told the Commission exactly why I had done so I certainly had in mind no thought other than giving our students the opportunity to hear one of the great minds of our time. Yet I was not asked about this. It is hardly necessary to add that the Commission ignores completely the [highly favorable] reaction of Dr O'Brien's class to his course and to the debacle whereby it was terminated [which they deplored]. It is not good enough for the UCT Council to take refuge in the statement that it accepts the "main thrust" of the recommendations. That, frankly, is an evasion which has brought UCT into disrepute. If the Council, for reasons that I find inexplicable, finds it impossible to bring itself to make a formal apology, then it behooves the Senate to do so. I, too, wish to heal wounds, but of one thing I am certain: you cannot heal wounds by ignoring the real injustice done to individuals."

After lengthy and acrimonious debate a slightly amended version of the motion was accepted by 59 votes to 9, with 22 abstentions. I was delighted to hear from a colleague that after the meeting a senior official of UCT was overheard to say that mine "was the most disgraceful speech he has ever heard in Senate." I could not have wished for a better accolade!