

Should I go to that conference in Hungary?

Boycotts betray free enquiry, but Viktor Orbán's moves against the Central European University at least make them worth debating, says Eric Heinze



In the marketplace of ideas – unlike those of uranium or sarin – I rarely endorse boycotts.

To be sure, [John Stuart Mill](#) was naive to expect that the free play of ideas would lead us ever closer to truth and reason: for all their free speech, more than half of [Americans](#) believe that the Devil exists. But if we're aiming to promote critical thought, shutting down speech is not the answer.

Given my belief in free speech, it will come as no surprise that I often attend conferences about it. An event in Hungary planned for later this spring, however, has caught me off guard.

It was planned a year ago at a university linked to the Fidesz Party led by Viktor Orbán, the prime minister. Despite the Fidesz government's steady destruction of academic freedom and independent media in Hungary, I had been perfectly willing to attend. Our conference was to run only in small, closed sessions – not for political reasons but merely to allow participants to discuss their research informally – and would therefore have little broader impact.

But then the Hungarian Parliament [rammed through a bill](#) to drive the US-accredited [Central European University](#) out of the country. That's when I started to waver.

Free Speech Debate

Thirteen languages. Ten principles. One conversation.
<http://freespeechdebate.com>

Our host university isn't officially run by the state, but rather by the Catholic Church. In the West, of course, many universities started life as religious establishments. Their core academic missions mostly became secular and pluralist long ago. But no such assumption can be made in Eastern Europe, where the dominant churches – notably Catholic (Hungary, Poland, Croatia) and Orthodox (Russia, Romania, Serbia) – have frequently supported anti-liberal parties.

In most Western universities, you'll search high and low to find academics speaking out in favour of the government of the day. At the university to which we've been beckoned, by contrast, I'm struggling to find lecturers who speak out *against* Fidesz. One of the conference participants – I ussiapeat, this is a conference about free speech – has for many years served on the Hungarian government body overseeing the media crackdown. Surely democracy means nothing if not the possibility of holding such state agents to account. Does that principle vanish when they remove their state uniforms to don the robes of academia? Or would directly criticising such individuals smack too much of comfortable Westerners wagging fingers at a colleague who ought to be treated as an equal member of the group?

Simple lines between good and evil are hard to draw in Eastern Europe. Under communism, it was by no means a small handful of demons who collaborated with authorities. Informers included ordinary people as well as figures of high cultural standing – artists, film-makers and certainly academics.

Nor was there a single communist ideology. The official line, of course, was that Marxism-Leninism supplied the ultimate worldview, having “surpassed” liberal democracy. But there was also a – superficially – more conciliatory narrative holding that liberal democracy was perfectly valid for the West, while communism was equally valid elsewhere. That approach became the only utterable worldview at the United Nations, where, even today, you'd better check your company before suggesting that democracy may be the best political system.

During the Cold War, this live-and-let-live philosophy also became de rigueur in Western academia. After all, doesn't an age-old liberal tradition exhort tolerance of difference, openness to diversity and mutual respect? Of course, Western intellectuals were perfectly welcome to criticise communism, but only if they hastened to pile on the obligatory “the West is just as bad” apologetics.

The official state communism died with the fall of the Berlin Wall, but that pseudo-pluralism did not. When Vladimir Putin praises “sovereign democracy” and [Orbán cheerleads for “illiberal democracy”](#), they by no means seek to impose those ideas on the rest of us. They're more than happy for us to keep our values as long as we let them keep theirs.

Soviet bloc social scientists used to sweat bullets when befriending Western colleagues. Today, they are heartily encouraged to study in the West. They forge links with Western scholars and heap admiration on Western intellectuals – while the grip tightens on the democrats at home. Question

Free Speech Debate

Thirteen languages. Ten principles. One conversation.
<http://freespeechdebate.com>

scholars who support a repressive regime and they'll gleefully recite their Western publications and links with Western colleagues.

So we face a dilemma. Academic cooperation with authoritarian countries betrays the victims of anti-democratic regimes, but boycotts betray free enquiry, which is supposed to be open to everyone.

I still believe that the conference on free speech should not be boycotted. What has shocked me, however, is the participants' aversion to open and frank discussion about the ethical questions raised by their decision to attend. They write to me: "With people like Donald Trump in the White House, who are we to pass judgement?" So the compulsory Cold War mantra of "the West is just as bad" never really died.

The notion that Western intolerance – bearing the faces of Trump, Marine Le Pen, Nigel Farage and others – should shut down our support for democrats elsewhere seems chilling. It plays into the hands of autocrats who crave nothing more than for us to mind our own business.

By all means, let's fly off to conferences in repressive states, our bright-eyed optimism in tow. But let's not treat a scholarly jaunt in Orbán's Hungary like a weekend in Amsterdam. Let's not become so tolerant that we end up viewing candid questions about the ethics of such events as intolerant.

Or, as the saying goes, let's not be so open-minded that our brains fall out.

Eric Heinze is professor of law and humanities at [Queen Mary University of London](#). His most recent book, [Hate Speech and Democratic Citizenship](#), is published by Oxford University Press.

This article was originally published on the 27th April 2017 by [Times Higher Education](#).

Published on: May 4, 2017