

ACADEMIC FREEDOM:

THE “DANGER” OF CRITICAL THINKING

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The increasing influence in academic life of organized and funded initiatives by external groups (e.g., lobby groups, accrediting organizations, media, private foundations, corporations and donors) and intervention by non-academic, non-expert entities (e.g. trustees, alumni, state legislatures, parents) that undermines professional autonomy;

Something's wrong when campaigns are launched against academics and their right to freedom of thought and expression. Something's at stake when a hew and cry is raised about educators' political persuasions. When we hear of this kind of academic harassment in places like Syria, Iraq or North Korea we Americans shake our heads self-righteously. Look at that tyrannical regime, pity the fools who stay and endure it. We know we have our freedoms when we see those who don't. We laugh to scorn the notion that a state of war can be invoked to justify abduction of civil liberties.

Then, in 2003, we Americans found ourselves at war (the War against Terror or the War for Democracy in Iraq, take your pick) and among the first casualties was academic freedom. For the duration, a state-defined notion of patriotism prevails. It entails subjection to the will of the leader that is often cloaked in “support of the troops” language, defense of Israel right or wrong and speaking and acting in specific ways. If we resist these conditions of patriotic behavior, we are labeled “unpatriotic” and become fair game for the zealots.

One such zealot is David Horowitz, an ex-liberal turned-neo-con think tanker. In 2003, he founded SAF, or Students for Academic Freedom, that now has 150 chapters in the U.S. The SAF website is a mine of information about those stigmatized as bad professors. It projects Horowitz's tireless campaigning to muzzle "liberal" ideas, to adopt quotas for conservative academics¹ and to lobby for his Academic Bill of Rights (ABOR). This bill empowers students to condemn speech that offends them, allows them to opt out of any part of a course they consider "personally offensive" and authorizes their monitoring and reporting of such offense (Younge 2006). Using progressive language from the American Association of University Professors' (AAUP) 1940 statement on academic freedom, ABOR calls for an end to what they call ideological orthodoxy on the left, in other words equal opportunity for neo-conservative ideologues.² Horowitz also edits FrontPageMag.com (that publishes articles on the unacceptable speech and writings of academics), and he directs the Horowitz Freedom Center that recently founded the Terrorism Awareness program.³

¹ Horowitz complains "You can't get hired if you're a conservative in American universities" in Gary Younge, "Silence in Class: University Professors denounced for anti-Americanism; Schoolteachers suspended for their politics; students encouraged to report on their tutors. Are US campuses in the grip of a witch-hunt of progressives, or is academic life just too liberal?" *The Guardian* April 4, 2006

² ABOR passed the Pennsylvania House of Representatives in July 2005 and a committee was formed to investigate how faculty are hired and promoted and students are treated and evaluated.

³ The Horowitz Freedom Center website announces: "Our Academic Freedom campaign has reached into every nook and cranny in the university culture and has alerted a new generation of conservative students to their right not to be indoctrinated and harassed by faculty leftists.... As a direct result of the (Pennsylvania) Hearings two of the three major state universities – Temple and Penn State – adopted student-specific academic freedom rights... the Center is actively taking these reforms to other states." (see

In 2006, he formally launched an academic witch hunt with the publication of *The Professors. America's 101 most Dangerous Academics*. The sensational dust jacket warns “Coming to a campus near you: terrorists, racists, and communists – you know them as The Professors.” These dangerous professors include ex-terrorists, murderers, sexual deviants, anti-Semites, and al-Qaeda supporters. At a time when the US government is in the business of tracking down terrorists and, yes, ex-terrorists in order to prosecute its War on Terror, it is not a laughing matter to stand accused in a book that promises to expose proponents of terror in the classroom. Yet, far from finding a rogues’ gallery, the reader will encounter the names of influential scholars like Noam Chomsky, Ali Mazrui, Paul Gilroy and Allison Jaggar. Their “dangerous” profiles are collages of comments made *outside the class*, sometimes reported to the Horowitz Freedom Center by students in its pay. The product is a distortion of their ideas with words and phrases cut and pasted from various different articles and public speeches to make arguments they never made. Horowitz targeted these intellectuals not because they are dangerous to their students but because he does not like their opinions and positions. Does that make them dangerous? Yes and no. The fact of being in this book creates the perception that they are dangerous, and once there it is they who are endangered.

Apparently, this kind of unethical behavior is sometimes OK. In 2000 Horowitz published a pamphlet entitled “The art of political war: how Republicans can fight to win,” where he argued that “there may be a need to make false statements and gain

http://www.horowitzfreedomcenter.org/FlexPage.aspx?area=2006_Year_End_Report
accessed April 10, 2007)

support unethically in order to win this political war.”⁴ How does this pamphlet fit with ABOR’s call for academic freedom? The key term is “political war.”

Since it is war time different rules prevail, norms have to give and, for the duration, the preservation of academic freedom sanctions lies, unethical behavior and criminalization of critical thinking. FrontPage articles are a good example of how this works. Filled with egregious misrepresentations of “liberal” academics’ political and academic positions, FrontPage employees fabricate facts and make dangerous allegations. These unreferenced articles then become authoritative sources for their other writings, like David Meir-Levi’s “The Nazi Roots of Palestinian Nationalism and Islamic Jihad” (2007). Distributed before and after screenings of the Horowitz Freedom Center’s film “Obsession,” the pamphlet accuses Muslims, especially Palestinian Muslims, of having been in league with Hitler and Mussolini, and for primary sources it cites FrontPage articles⁵. These are the people who criticize liberal professors for teaching critical thinking that they claim is repressing students’ academic freedom.

In this time of war that allows some people to lie and cheat, it is taboo for others to think critically. Especially problematic is any critique of the Israeli state’s treatment of the Palestinians or of its favored relationship with the U.S. that allows it to act with

⁴ Quotation taken from a review of *The Professors* by Zia Meranto in *New Political Science*, vol.28, no.3, September 2006 437-447

⁵ The Horowitz Freedom Center website announces that they distributed and sold 800,000 pamphlets and books in 2006

impunity⁶. It is dangerous even “to speculate about the relation between this war (in Iraq) and the geopolitical interests of Israel.” These are the words of Paul Gilroy, who, at the time of speaking, was chair of African-American studies at Yale. Enraged, his colleague Scot Silverstein compared him with Hitler and claimed that his words “illustrated the moral psychosis and perhaps psychological sadism that appears to have infected leftist academia.” (Younge 2006)

Joan Scott, chair of a committee on academic freedom and tenure that AAUP appointed shortly after 9/11, is another professor surprised to find herself accused of anti-Semitism for stating that there were “many more examples of attacks on critics of Israel than on students who are pro-Israel.”⁷ The passing of the Patriotic Act, she added, has had a chilling effect on civil liberties in general, on the academy in particular and above all on foreign scholars and students coming to the U.S.

Academics and especially Middle East specialists with years of experience and research in the region cannot criticize the problems they see in the Israeli leadership or in the pro-occupation Israel Lobby or in US policy in the Middle East without being labeled anti-Semites. Why are academics and academic freedom the focus? Mearsheimer and Walt, among others, point out that in the wake of 9/11 the Israel Lobby has had more success on Capitol Hill than in the academy, and Laurie Brand suggests that had the war in Iraq succeeded so might the war on academic freedom in higher education (see her article in this volume).

⁶ John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt in their March 2006 essay “The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy” exposed the role of the pro-occupation Israel Lobby in US Middle East policy. They were attacked for being anti-Semitic. Yet this 80-page article does not deal with Jews, rather it criticizes the Israel Lobby that harms both the US and Israel.

⁷ Joan W. Scott, “Middle East Studies under Siege” *The Link* 39/ 1 Jan-Mar 2006

Think tanks like the Horowitz Freedom Center, the American Enterprise Institute, the Washington Institute for Near East Policy and the Middle East Forum are trying to impose a new ideological orthodoxy in Middle Eastern studies⁸. Any professor who does not toe the pro-Israel, pro-war-on-terror, patriotic line is somehow infringing upon the academic freedom of supporters of the Bush administration and the Israel Lobby. When neo-con scholars, like members of the National Association of Scholars and the American Council of Trustees and Alumni (founded by Lynn Cheney and Joseph Liebermann), learned that the political affiliation of most humanities and social sciences faculty was Democrat or “liberal,” they protested. They were sure that these liberal academics were indoctrinating their students: “The assumption was that party politics *inevitably* intrudes on teaching and scholarship.”⁹ Neo-con think tankers reject the notion that universities are sites of critically engaged inquiry and debate over unpopular and subversive ideas. Their only concern is that professors should not teach critical thinking but only indoctrinate “patriotic” norms.

Academic freedom is not a right but a basic necessity. The disciplines have developed through the constant critique of their own norms without certainty about the outcome. The classroom is one place where this conflict should take place. Students should expect to be challenged and to be exposed to a wide variety of new ideas that do not conform to views, norms and values they bring ready-made from high school and home. The professor’s task is to examine with students how facts are shaped into persuasive, moralizing narratives by opinions, judgments and standpoints. Hayden White

⁸ miriam cooke, “Contesting Campus Watch: Middle East Studies under Fire” *Al-Azhar Journal of Research* 7/1 2004

⁹ Dean J. Salaita, “Higher Education and the dangerous professor: challenges for anthropology” in *Anthropology Today* 22/4 August 2006

has warned against the “impulse to moralize reality, that is, to identify it with the social system that is the source of any morality we can imagine... the demand for closure in the historical story is a demand for moral meaning, a demand that the sequence of real events be assessed as to their significance as elements of a moral drama.”¹⁰ Students need to understand how individual judgments are not only made but also moralized through narrative closure. In other words, they need to know to ask what is left out of an argument, what added to make an idea palatable. They have to be able to distinguish plausible truth from propaganda.

Think tankers who call for the imposition of their singular version of academic freedom are rejecting critical thinking and the deconstruction of moral meaning making in order to create uncontested space for their ideas. They are calling for an end to education. In so doing, they recall the lackeys of tyrants in places like North Korea, Iraq, Iran and Syria who control and crush dissent and deny academics and students the right to speak their minds without fear of retaliation.

If students are not taught to think critically, they will be at the mercy of anyone with a persuasive story. How, for example, can they decide between equally urgent arguments about 9/11? Whereas some claim that the terrorists from the al-Qaeda network were solely responsible for the attacks, others counter that incontrovertible evidence proves that the Bush administration not only let the catastrophe happen it was actually involved.¹¹ How can they make an informed decision about the validity of an argument

¹⁰ Hayden White, “The value of narrativity in the representation of reality” in Richard Mitchell, *On Narrative* 1982, 14, 20

¹¹ The film “Loose Change”

such as the one proffered by Daniel Pipes? In March 2005, he asserted that peace can only come to the Middle East through “a total Israeli military victory over the Palestinians... the Palestinians need to be defeated even more than Israel needs to defeat them” (quoted in Scott 2006). Students need the critical skills to make their own judgments about how a statement is structured, what are the stakes involved and whether its claims are credible. Only then can they agree or disagree about the proposition that it is better for the Palestinians to be defeated than to defeat. After having reflected on the identity of the author of this statement and the stakes involved for him and his watchdog organization Campus Watch in making such a statement. In other words, they need to understand and deconstruct the implications of this statement for all involved. Only then can they make an informed decision about the basis for its truth claims, its intention and its expected outcome.

Critical and engaged pedagogy, the hallmark of academic freedom, can only be effective in a classroom that is safe: safe for the professors to provoke students and to push them to think differently; safe for the students to defend ideas they have not yet thought to question. Students need to learn how to address difficult issues thoughtfully. At a time when there is a growing belief that universities are pre-professional schools, we need to insist that they are in fact institutions for engaged scholarship and pedagogy.

Some argue that this is not McCarthyism because threats to academic freedom do not seem to involve the state. Others like Ellen Schrecker counter that the focus on the classroom is “reaching into the core academic functions of the university, particularly in Middle Eastern studies.” (Younge 2006) Neve Gordon, professor of politics at Ben-

Gurion University in Israel, explains that the main difference between McCarthyism and today's academic witch hunt "is that today private interest groups and not the government are running the show. Of course, the major players within these think tanks have unhindered access to the corridors of government and are frequently successful in influencing high-ranking public servants; yet the resources for the campaign to delegitimize academic dissent and to control the production of knowledge come from opulent think tanks." Gordon goes on to quote Robert Post, a Yale law professor and a former general counsel of the AAUP. For Post the danger of the current campaign and the call for greater outside surveillance of departments of international studies is that they might transform academic institutions "into programs that merely promote opinions held by the people who provide funding and therefore undermines the social function of the university as a free market of ideas that advances knowledge."¹²

I propose a curriculum committed to what I have called a multiple critique.¹³ It is difficult but also necessary to learn how to judge and critique problems in a number of different communities *at the same time*. This is vital in international studies: to criticize the Bush administration is not to be in co-hoots with Islamists¹⁴ or to love Saddam Hussein; to criticize Saddam Hussein does not mean condoning the US invasion of Iraq; to be opposed to the bombing of the Afghan people does not mean giving "thumbs up to

¹² Neve Gordon, "Academic freedom after September 11" from History News Network <http://hnn.us/roundup/entries/28818.html> accessed August 24, 2006

¹³ I define this concept in my *Women claim Islam: creating Islamic feminism through literature* NY: Routledge 2001

¹⁴ See Susan Buck-Morss, *Thinking past terror: Islamism and critical theory on the left* London & NY: Virago 2003

the Taliban”¹⁵; to warn against the dangers of the pro-occupation Israel lobby is not to be anti-Semitic or to support the oil lobby; to point to colonial legacies as in part responsible for domestic violence in post-independence countries is not to let abusive husbands and brothers off the hook. Multiple critique allows for a simultaneous condemnation of US policy in the Middle East, Saddam Hussein’s dictatorship, the pro-occupation Israel lobby and the oil lobby, the Taliban’s treatment of its people, Osama bin Laden and his murderous al-Qaeda, violence against women wherever it happens and whoever the perpetrator, and also legacies of European colonial rule in the region. No single affirmation of guilt and responsibility should be singled out to constitute cultural betrayal. There are many necessary reasons behind outbursts of violence; none taken alone is sufficient. Students should be supple enough to understand this fact and then to make connections so that they may consider both the problems and the dangers in many institutions.

Academic freedom is not a soap box from which to declare oneself right and others wrong. Academic freedom is both a right and a responsibility. It is a right to deal with those who disagree with us without being reduced to silence; it is a responsibility not to silence those with whom we disagree and also to see and to teach others to see many sides to an issue so that they can make and safely articulate their own opinion about the complexity of the world in which we live.

¹⁵ Cinnamon Stillwell, “Duke Feminist gives thumbs up to the Taliban” FrontPage Magazine, September 27, 2004