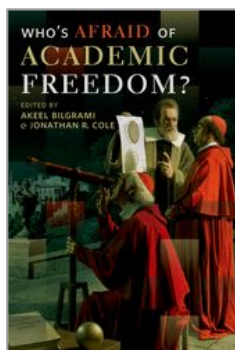


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Who's Afraid of Academic Freedom?

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Academic Freedom and the Subservience to Power

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[-] Abstract and Keywords

This chapter comments on the voluntary subservience of university administrators and intellectuals to state power, with particular emphasis on the recent history of this form of subservience as it relates to American foreign policy toward the Middle East. It cites the cases of Norman Finkelstein and Mehrene Larudee as examples of the ongoing assault on academic freedom. It also discusses the controversy surrounding the appearance of Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad at Columbia University, the reaction of Columbia's President Lee Bollinger to his visit, and the U.S. government-media campaign to demonize Ahmadinejad and his country. The chapter argues that, in a free society, there should be zero tolerance for institutions responsible for "the indoctrination of the young" or for the rest of the array of attacks on democracy under the cynical pretext of defending freedom.

Keywords: subservience, state power, foreign policy, Middle East, Norman Finkelstein, Mehrene Larudee, academic freedom, Iran, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, Columbia University

The subject of this brief essay is the decision by the DePaul administration to deny tenure to Norman Finkelstein, a remarkable teacher and outstanding scholar, whose work has received the highest praise from some of the most distinguished scholars in the many fields in which he has worked, notably the founder of Holocaust studies and its most respected figure, the late Raul Hilberg. And also the denial of tenure to another fine scholar, Mehrene Larudee, whose crime appears to have been her honorable support for Finkelstein. I will not review this sordid affair. The basic facts are clear enough in easily accessible sources. Instead, I would like to say a few words about the general background for the ongoing assault on academic freedom, of which this is an ugly example.

Perhaps a good place to start is with an observation by a prominent University of Chicago professor, Hans Morgenthau, one of the founders of the realist school of international relations, who condemned the intellectual classes for what he called “our conformist subservience to those in power.” Power comes in many forms, typically state or economic power, though one should not ignore the power of the defamation industries and depraved individuals associated with them who can lie, slander, and vilify with impunity, thanks to media that tolerate and even encourage such behavior.

The assault on academic freedom is broad, but it has specifically targeted Middle Eastern departments and peace studies programs. That makes sense. State power is focused on war in the Middle East, so impediments must be **(p.335)** removed and “conformist subservience to those in power” must be assured in these areas.

The matter goes far beyond purifying academic institutions of faculty who reveal unwanted truths. Subordination to power can take many other forms. Let us take a very recent case that has elicited a huge public outcry: the appearance of Iranian president Ahmadinejad at Columbia University. In the background is the frenzied government-media campaign to demonize Iran and its relatively powerless president, the “new Hitler” if not worse. New Hitlers have been a familiar refrain in the doctrinal system over the years, though the cast of characters changes depending on current plans for subversion and aggression. The propaganda campaign about alleged Iranian iniquity is accompanied by the threats of war that resound across the political spectrum, including every viable Democratic candidate. The threats are a serious violation of the UN Charter if anyone still cares about such marginalia. The campaign may also lay the basis for further U.S. aggression in the region, probably with even more catastrophic consequences than the invasion of Iraq.

Demonization is a conventional preliminary to aggression, and therefore is not to be regarded lightly, particularly when it is carried out in an academic setting, which in a free society should be as untainted as possible by the conformist subservience to power that Morgenthau deplored. Before turning to Columbia University’s instructive contribution, a few more words about the context.

Wars are almost always defensive wars in the eyes of the perpetrators—at least in their words—as when the original and authentic Hitler invaded Poland in self-defense against the “wild terror” of the Poles. And right now the ground is being prepared for a war of *self-defense* against Iran, in a manner that tells us a lot about the dominant intellectual and moral culture. Speaking for a very large segment of articulate opinion, the editors of the *Washington Post* thundered that Iran “is waging war against the United States and trying to kill as many American soldiers as possible” so that we must “fight back.”¹ Iran’s aggression is its alleged support for Iraqis resisting U.S. invasion, occupation, and virtual destruction of their country, right on Iran’s borders.

The propaganda campaign illustrates an important difference between totalitarian and democratic propaganda systems. In totalitarian systems, the party line is openly announced: obey it, or else. The mailed fist takes care of the rest. In more democratic systems, that will not work. The party line is not articulated, hence is protected from easy refutation. Rather, it is

insinuated, (p.336) presupposed as the framework for debate. And lively debate is then encouraged, within that framework. That has the double advantage of making it appear that the society is free and open, while also instilling the party line even more deeply, as the precondition for responsible discussion. It is adopted as unchallengeable reality, like the air we breathe.

True to form, the current charges about Iran's crimes elicit a lively debate. The hawks say they we must bomb them in self-defense. The doves respond that the evidence is not entirely clear, so perhaps we should delay before we obliterate them.

By the prevailing logic, Russia would have been justified in bombing the U.S. in the 1980s, when Washington was quite publicly supporting resistance to the Russian invasion and occupation of Afghanistan. The CIA station chief in Pakistan in 1981, Howard Hart, reported that "I was the first chief of station ever sent abroad with this wonderful order: 'Go kill Soviet soldiers.'

Imagine! I loved it." "The mission was not to liberate Afghanistan,"² so Tim Wiener writes in his recent history of the CIA, repeating the obvious, but it was noble anyway, he says. Presumably the nobility includes support for Reagan's favorites, who amused themselves by such acts as throwing acid in the faces of women in Kabul they regarded as too liberated, and after the withdrawal of the Russian forces turned to tearing the country to shreds, creating such havoc and terror that the population actually welcomed the Taliban.

Killing Russian invaders and supporting crazed Islamic fundamentalist murderers was noble, but providing aid to forces resisting a U.S. invasion would be a shocking crime, which justifies military action in self-defense. The stand is arguable, on the tacit assumption that the United States owns the world; hence a U.S. invasion is by definition right and just. It may be a mistake, too costly to us, a quagmire. But it cannot be criminal, like comparable acts by enemies. Withdraw the assumption that the United States owns the world and the entire debate about Iranian interference in occupied Iraq is simply ludicrous.

Demonization as a preliminary to violence is standard operating procedure. The reason is that the population is generally opposed to war and has to be whipped into hysteria about the ultimate evil that threatens its existence. In this case the task is not easy, so the propaganda efforts must be fierce. Seventy-five percent of Americans are opposed to even threats against Iran and prefer entering into normal relations. Roughly the same percentage believe that Iran has the right to nuclear energy and call for a nuclear (p.337) weapons-free zone in the entire region, including Iran and Israel, an idea that is virtually unmentionable in respectable society. Though few of the respondents in polls are likely to know it, they are endorsing UN Security Council Resolution 687 of April 1991, to which Washington selectively appealed in its efforts to justify the invasion of Iraq: the resolution calls for "establishing in the Middle East a zone free from weapons of mass destruction and all missiles for their delivery."³ Rather interestingly, Iranians and Americans are in almost complete agreement on these matters and in radical opposition to the government and articulate opinion in the United States.

Let us turn to Columbia University's contribution. Columbia's President Lee Bollinger introduced Ahmadinejad with a tirade that has no precedent I can think of. Bollinger adopted without question the charge that Iran has committed the shocking crime of supporting

resistance to U.S. aggression on its borders, thereby adopting the familiar tacit premise that the United States owns the world. And he went on with the familiar refrain that has been trumpeted through the loyal media, which there is no need to repeat.

The most apt comment I have seen on this performance was in the *Asia Times*:

An even more appalling measure of Western arrogance ... is the diatribe with which the president of Columbia University, Lee Bollinger, chose to “greet” his guest, a head of state ... Were President Bush to be greeted in the same manner in any university in the developing world—and motives would abound also to qualify him as a “cruel, petty dictator”—the Pentagon would have instantly switched to let’s-bomb-them-with-democracy mode.⁴

To which we may add that Bush’s crimes vastly exceed anything attributed to Ahmadinejad, by a huge margin in fact.

The hysteria had its comical aspects—or what would be comical if it were not so serious. Since Ahmadinejad kept from being too offensive, the media and commentators leaped on his silly statement about homosexuality in Iran, which deeply offended Westerners, who have such a stellar record in defending gay rights ever since gaining independence centuries ago. Who can imagine that President Bush could have been governor of a state that outlawed sodomy, for example. And there is much more to say. Since we are discussing universities, we might recall the murder of the very distinguished mathematician and computer scientist Alan Turing by the British government, which (p.338) forced him to undergo hormone therapy for his “disease,” which led to his suicide. The year was 1953, which has a certain significance in U.S./UK-Iranian relations.

It also worth remembering the reaction in the media and at Columbia University to the events of that important year, in which the United States-Britain instigated a military coup to overthrow the Iranian parliamentary system, imposing the iron rule of a brutal tyrant and torturer. The *New York Times* editors were full of praise for the achievement. In their words, “Underdeveloped countries with rich resources now have an object lesson in the heavy cost that must be paid by one of their number which goes berserk with fanatical nationalism,”⁵ seeking to control its own resources. Columbia University played its part by inviting the shah to deliver the university’s 1955 Gabriel Silver Lecture Dedicated to International Peace, also granting him an honorary degree. In his lecture, the shah urged, “We must be strong enough internally and externally so that the temptation of subversion from within, supported from without, can be obliterated.”⁶ The *New York Times* report records no embarrassment. Its headline reads: “Shah Praises U.S. for Peace Policy; Iran’s Ruler Calls on West to Bolster Independent Nations”—as the United States and Britain had just done with such grace and nobility in his country.

Columbia’s delicate taste with regard to visiting dignitaries was revealed again when Pakistan’s military dictator Pervez Musharraf visited recently. His country of course not only developed nuclear weapons and refused to sign the Non-Proliferation Treaty, but also provides refuge to the world’s champion proliferator, Abdul Qadeer Khan, who “did more damage in 10 years than any country did in the first 50 years of the nuclear age,” according to James Walsh, executive director of Harvard’s Managing the Atom project.⁷

President Bollinger opened his fulsome welcome to the dictator by saying, “Rarely do we have an opportunity such as this to greet a figure of such central and global importance. It is with great gratitude and excitement that I welcome President Musharraf and his wife ... to Columbia University.... Mr. President, as you share your thoughts and insights you will give our students, the leaders of tomorrow, firsthand knowledge of the world their generation will inherit. President Musharraf, we thank you for being with us today. And we welcome you to Columbia University.”⁸

To enhance the imagery, while Bollinger was once again conforming to state doctrine by berating Ahmadinejad, Musharraf’s riot police were firing (p.339) tear gas and beating lawyers and human rights activists protesting Musharraf’s plans to have himself reelected while serving as chief of the military.

A few hours before Ahmadinejad’s arrival at Columbia, the university welcomed the president of Turkmenistan, another vibrant democracy with a stellar human rights record—and plenty of natural gas, which the United States covets.

This is just a sample, but perhaps enough to remind us that conformist subservience to power takes many forms in the academic world.

The current assault on academic freedom traces back to the activism of the 1960s and the elite reaction to it. This “time of troubles,” as it is called, had a dangerous civilizing effect on American society and culture in many domains: civil and human rights, opposition to criminal aggression, concern for the environment, critical analysis of dominant institutions and ideology, and many more. That aroused deep concern and elicited a backlash that has taken many forms. A good indication of how the problems were perceived is given in a 1975 publication of the Trilateral Commission called *The Crisis of Democracy*. This is a view from the liberal internationalist end of the political spectrum. The Carter administration was largely drawn from the ranks of the commission. The “crisis of democracy” that troubled the liberal internationalist commentators was that 1960s activism was making the country too democratic. It was mobilizing formerly passive special interests to enter the political arena to advance their concerns: women, the young, the elderly, working people, minorities, majorities—in simple terms, the population. The commission called for more “moderation in democracy” so that the natural rulers would not be disturbed by “ignorant and meddlesome outsiders,” the population, to borrow the phrase used years earlier by Walter Lippmann, the leading public intellectual of the twentieth century, expressing the same rather conventional thoughts.

One specific concern of the commission was what they called the institutions responsible for “the indoctrination of the young”—schools, universities, churches, and the like. They were not carrying out this task with sufficient rigor and must act more vigorously to inhibit the freedom and opportunity they provide for independent thought. That is the liberal end of the spectrum.⁹ At the other end we have today the attack by statist reactionaries who are outraged by the “liberal bias” that subjects “conservative students” to punishment and instills anti-American, pro-Palestinian, and other left-liberal dogma, to quote press commentary. The press reports that “Congress is taking (p.340) the first steps toward pressuring colleges to maintain ideological

balance in the classroom” by overcoming this extreme bias, claims that scarcely merit ridicule in the light of the realities of the academic world.

The attack is quite real, however. The press also reports that the House of Representatives “unanimously passed a bill that could require university international studies departments to show more support for American foreign policy or risk their federal funding.”¹⁰ The resolution was aimed particularly at Middle Eastern programs, which, as I mentioned, are the main targets, along with peace studies programs. The late Baruch Kimmerling, one of Israel’s leading scholars, warned of the dangerous consequences of “this assault on academic freedom by a coalition of neocons and zealous Jewish students supported by some Jewish ‘mainstream’ organizations,” inspired by David Horowitz’s “crusade.” The title of his essay was: “Can a ‘Patriotic’ Mob Take Over the Universities?”¹¹ His article was rejected by the *Chronicle of Higher Education*. Writing in the *London Review of Books*, Harvard University Middle Eastern scholar Sara Roy quotes Horowitz’s attack on 250 peace studies programs in the United States, which he asserts “teach students to identify with America’s terrorist enemies and to identify America as a Great Satan oppressing the world’s poor and causing them to go hungry ... The question is: how long can a nation at war with ruthless enemies like bin Laden and Zarqawi survive if its educational institutions continue to be suborned in this way?”¹²

It is pointless to debate such lunacy. But it is wrong to disregard it. The goal of the statist reactionaries is not to tell the truth, but to shift the range of admissible options even more toward the conformist subservience that Morgenthau condemned. It is understandable that Middle Eastern departments and peace studies programs should be the primary targets. Peace studies are inherently threatening to power, if they are at all serious. The common term “peacenik” insinuates the attitudes that serious people should hold toward the subversives who seek peace; there is no word “warnik.” And Middle Eastern departments might expose the truth about the region and U.S. policies there, as Norman Finkelstein has done with scrupulous documentation and penetrating analysis. Truth poses a serious barrier to the policies carried out by state power and supported by all too many among the educated classes—whether invading Iraq to establish a client state and base for U.S. power in the region, or restoring Iran to the happy days under the shah, or destroying Palestine under the pretext of defense and democracy promotion, or a series of other crimes too long and familiar to mention.

(p.341) These crimes are likely to persist into the future in the region that President Eisenhower described as “the strategically most important area” of the world, which contains two-thirds of the world’s energy resources. Sixty years ago, the State Department recognized that these resources constitute “a stupendous source of strategic power and one of the greatest material prizes in world history.”¹³ What is more, they are a lever of world control, a matter that has been understood by planners from the early postwar period until the present day. A successful conquest of Iraq, for example, would provide the United States with “critical leverage” over industrial rivals, Zbigniew Brzezinski observed at the outset of the war, echoing remarks of George Kennan when he was a leading planner right after World War II, and explained that control of Middle Eastern oil would provide Washington with “veto power” over allies.¹⁴ The George W. Bush administration understood the point very well. Control over pipelines can provide “tools of intimidation and blackmail,” Dick Cheney warned. Control by

others, that is. Control by us is, by definition, for the benefit of the world, another tacit presupposition that provides the framework for discussion in polite society

The assault on academic freedom has deep roots and ominous portent. It should be resisted with the steadfastness and courage that has been shown by the students at DePaul University who have courageously and honorably protested its manifestations at their own university. In a free society, there should be zero tolerance for institutions responsible for “the indoctrination of the young” or for the rest of the array of attacks on democracy under the cynical pretext of defending freedom.

Notes

Notes:

- (1.) “Tougher on Iran,” *Washington Post*, August 21, 2007.
- (2.) Tim Weiner, *Legacy of Ashes* (New York: Doubleday, 2007), 484.
- (3.) United Nations Security Resolution 687, April 3 1991, www.fas.org/news/un/iraq/sres/sres0687.htm.
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- (7.) Stephen Fidler, *Financial Times*, May 22, 2005.
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- (12.) Sara Roy, *London Review of Books*, February 15, 2005.
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(14.) Zbigniew Brzezinski, "Hegemonic Quicksand," *National Interest* 74 (Winter 2003/2004).



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