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Insider's Cautionary Tales of Academic Freedom

Review of *NO UNIVERSITY IS AN ISLAND: SAVING ACADEMIC FREEDOM* (New York University Press, 2010).

Is academic freedom in need of “saving” in the self-styled land of the free, home to “freedom fries,” “tea-partiers,” and the Crawford cowboy who slung his guns on behalf of “freedom itself”? And should the professoriate and citizens outside the United States care whether academic freedom is saved there or not? After reading this new book by a distinguished American literary scholar and long-term academic activist, many readers will probably answer “Yes” to both questions.

Cary Nelson's provocative tract for the times is replete with cautionary tales and timely counsel for Canadian scholars and anyone else who thinks of universities as canaries in the mineshaft of democracy or as ducks over the tailings ponds of development.

Indeed, taking one's cue from the feisty manner of Nelson himself, one might argue that in a prorogue state like Stephen Harper's Canada — a state that too often refuses entry to dissident scholars and related malcontents while maintaining a firewall round Redaction Central at the PMO and arms-length relationships with independent entities regularly traversed by the ministerial orangutan; a state moreover where global competitiveness is made to justify the replacement of basic research by opportunistic applications of other peoples' discoveries and the funding of private commercialization projects from a public purse both looted and disparaged — yes, Canadians need models of “the politics of struggle” (p. 27) and alternative visions of education wherever they can be found.

To be even more Nelsonian, if the ingestion of university autonomy and independent inquiry by “enlightened sovereignty” proceeds any further, then the public interest will suffer even more than it already has from scenes of anti-scientific and more broadly anti-intellectual obduracy such as Environment Minister Jim Prentice and his lightweight delegation recently offered the world in Canada's name in Copenhagen.

This is Nelson's 25th book, and its nine chapters bear witness to wide experience and frequent travels across North America, Australia and Britain. His narrative is marked also by fierce conviction and acute analysis, challenging all sorts of readers on a number of counts.

Academic quietists and those prone to lick the hand that starves them are unlikely to be

persuaded by the evidence and arguments assembled here — but they ought to read this book anyway. In contrast, those who sympathize with or actively embrace Nelson's anticapitalist critique will no doubt relish judgements such as this: "The combination of high culture and wage slavery is the hallmark of the contemporary university. The city on the hill is built on a mountain of hypocrisy." (p. 159)

The latter group might ask themselves why they have not more effectively contested those bent on reducing education to the production of a skilled but docile workforce and on conserving or expanding the privileges of traditional elites. Why have they not been defending our universities from the incursions of free-market muscle in the guise of market rationality and the cutting edge?

Such sympathetic or activist readers may also find themselves wondering why so much of Nelson's book is news to them, while what they do recognize as familiar still fails to provoke them more openly and consistently to struggle on behalf of academic labour across disciplines and throughout the hierarchies that too often separate tenured from limited term or contingent faculty, and from the reserve armies of graduate teaching assistants without whose energy and developing acumen many a university would, from the perspective of students, parents and ordinary folk, grind to a halt.

To be fair, many accomplished and dedicated scholars already do just that, but Nelson's evidence and my own experience serving on CAUT's Academic Freedom and Tenure Committee suggest we need to do much more, and urgently, with full professors in the lead and the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada no doubt bringing up the rear.

As his title indicates, Nelson believes that institutions, like individuals, exist in webs of interdependency sometimes beneficially and sometimes not. The realization that "no man is an island" came to John Donne in extremis. For Nelson, American universities are no more robust than the ailing Donne, but faith (far less faith tests) aligned with resignation and transcendence cannot save them. What is needed is the political mobilization of knowledge workers in defence of the public interest they seek to help shape and serve.

But in a political climate where corporate funding buys academic as well as political access, and where leadership is reduced to economic entrepreneurship by an academic managerial class externally meek and internally menacing, organizing and mobilizing a gerbilized and increasingly vulnerable academic labour force is no easy matter.

As Nelson demonstrates, compradors, quislings and thought police are to be found in most faculties and graduate student bodies. Moreover, playing favourites while threatening the mouthy and/or those insufficiently "excellent" are popular activities among administrators eager to impress headhunters and "senior" appointments committees who increasingly do their work in secret.

The problems of complicity and intimidation may not be a serious problem everywhere, but a quick scan of university websites and mission statements across Canada may tempt

one to conclude that what administrators care most about are dubious national and international rankings, external funding and the allegedly non-directive largesse of elite donors.

As in Nelson's reading of the U.S., "competitiveness" appears to be the meagrely contextualized mantra everywhere in Canada, while co-operation is reduced to coerced partnership from its historically and currently empowering role in communities, societies and economies across the world. In line with such priorities, institutions that should be havens of critique in the democratic West act far more like neoliberal madrassas than most would readily admit.

Nelson takes academic freedom as key to the health of universities in the U.S. This distinctive doctrine developed in response to ongoing threats from church and state to independent inquiry and the un-encumbered dissemination of its findings in classrooms, public fora, print and now mass media and new media. As a product of the European enlightenment, academic freedom from its inception affirms curiosity, reflection and communication as the lifeblood of the modern university.

Of course, ideas cross the Atlantic and other oceans although never without some degree of transformation en route. In the U.S. therefore, *academische Freiheit* does not function at the pleasure of bodies of scholars enjoying enhanced but uneven freedoms inside universities in exchange for keeping their noses out of the nation's political and theological business (to summarize brutally Kant's wonderfully adroit articulation of that tradeoff in *The Conflict of the Faculties*).

Nelson recognizes the different role played by boards of governors in American universities while he emphasizes a key distinction between appointees and employees. Still highly relevant today, this distinction was well captured in the American Association of University Professors 1915 Declaration of Principles where academic staff are understood as "appointees, but not in any proper sense the employees, of the (trustees). For, once appointed, the scholar has professional functions to perform in which the appointing authorities have neither competency nor moral right to intervene ... the relationship of professor to trustees may be compared to that between judges of the federal court and the executive who appoints them." (292, 5; cited in Nelson p. 3) This remains the fundamental support of what Nelson terms the "three-legged stool of academic freedom, shared governance and tenure." (p. 31)

The rest of his book unpacks the complications of the "appointments" in question, the implications of the shift from professorial to professional functions, and the rise of academic unionism in response to academic administrators' and trustees' ever more eager emulation of the ways of big business.

From this account, academic unions and AAUP emerge as the best counter to a growing crisis in shared governance and violations of academic freedom, whether brazen or discreet, that aim to defend the institutional brand or, in the wake of ample embarrassment incurred by Big Brander and the Logo Cops, efforts at institutional

“positioning” which will have us implanted with academic GPSs any day now so we can more obsessively monitor where we stand in “the darkening groves of academe,” (p. 15) especially if we function outside “signature” programs where the strobe lights play and the hype makes most of us cringe or gag.

Nelson expertly documents the interdependency of academic freedom, effective collegial governance and the job security that nourishes the intellectual independence essential to good scholarship and research, and also to teaching and community engagement. But doing our job as academics is an increasingly fraught endeavour. Horror stories abound behind the high-profile challenges associated with Ward Churchill at the University of Colorado, Bacone College in Oklahoma, or the severely purged universities of New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina.

But there is perhaps more to be learned from everyday abuses than from the most egregious ones. And Nelson rightly identifies the casualization of academic labour as perhaps the greatest injustice and one of the greatest threats to academic freedom and the ongoing health of American universities — second in rank after “instrumentalization” in the list of 16 he offers in his witty and dismaying second chapter. From this insight Nelson develops a searing indictment of “the many faculty simply hoping for the best” (p. 128) and a powerful case for collective bargaining as the only tool that “can restore shared governance to a campus where it has declined or can establish it for the first time.” (p. 131)

Only by acting collectively, and on the basis of an inclusive, effectively intergenerational and cross-disciplinary campus solidarity, can we also function with much needed independence and critical engagement within and beyond the universities that appoint and employ us.

Perhaps the most contentious chapter is the one dealing with the internal workings of AAUP, the organization in which Nelson has been intensely and productively active for much of his career and over which he has recently presided. This is not to say that until this point in his narrative he has been uncritically on the side of academic staff against academic management and conservative lobby groups. From the outset Nelson insists on academic freedom as both “a right and a burden for individual faculty members.” (p. 7)

He argues the collective interest is grounded in the academic in-dividual — not as possessive individualist or narrow careerist — but as someone who serves his or her discipline, students, institution and society. Only when she or he understands academic freedom as more than a guild privilege misprised or actively resented by outsiders, do the university and its scholars exercise appropriate forms of interdependency with their multiple constituencies. This point is well argued, as is the need for disciplinary and professional norms, and their regular review by those who are guided and enabled by them.

But the attack on the staff of AAUP would, I think, have been better confined to meetings of the association. In this chapter an overdetermined and errant animus plays

unforgivingly on people and practices that are imperfect but scarcely deserving of the treatment to which Nelson subjects them.

Here, intentionally and unintentionally, Nelson gives ammunition to the enemies of unionization in all its forms, and this at a time when the stock of organized labour in the U.S. is alarmingly low. What is the point in playing the implacable tribune in this way? Why take such deliberate aim and shoot the wild duck directly over the tailings pond? Is it out of some naïve sense of a need for so-called balance? How does such telling of stories out of school fit into a “politics of struggle”?

This chapter does a disservice to AAUP and to the work of a courageous and gifted contrarian. It is one part of a fine book that does not apply in Canada. Here, CAUT’s staff evince a collegiality, efficiency, initiative and resolve which, while not to the liking of all, inside or beyond its membership, I and many colleagues across the country find both reassuring and inspiring.

Without CAUT, all that is solidarity melts into air while minds succumb to minders, an outcome damaging not only to all Canadians but also to the many beneficiaries across the world of unexploitative internationalism. Let’s not go there.

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