

Jonathan Rees

# Thoughts on No University Is an Island, Part 1.

Feb. 5, 2010

Last week I saw that my dean was reading Louis Menand's latest seemingly dull work on higher education. In order to keep up my side of the employment equation, and thanks to a nice discount from Amazon.com, I decided to buy Cary Nelson's *No University Is an Island: Saving Academic Freedom*. I can assure you this about the book right off: It's not dull.

Nelson, the President of the American Association of University Professors, knows his stuff and can teach any professor a thing or two about the way things ought to be at their schools. As a loyal AAUP member, I feel like I'm way too biased to review it. Besides, I can do that in one post. Instead, I want to tie together some good parts of it here in a series of posts while I'm reading the book.

I'll start with Nelson on the greatly exaggerated problem of professors bringing their politics into the classroom (p.14):

"I find that most undergraduates arrive on campus with fairly well formed political beliefs. I am, however, very much interested in putting progressive, radical, and conservative views before them, but the students drawn to my views are always those who already share them. Beyond that, I could not care less whether my classes convert or persuade them. I put ideas out for consideration. They can take them or leave them. Then we get on with our lives."

Not only do I agree with that sentiment, I'll take it one further: If you do want to convert students to your point of view, grading them on their adherence to your views is the worst possible strategy. Nobody should ever be compelled to think anything, and should a professor choose to operate in that manner the students won't only resent them, they'll resent those views as well.

Explaining why you think how you think is about the best any professor can or should do. Here's Nelson again, who (if you don't know already) is an English professor (pp. 21-22):

“In my view and the view of many others, all human understanding is culturally and historically constructed. We have no unmediated access to any facts. Consequently, I teach the cultural construction of gender as true, although my students are free to disagree. I advocate for this view, as the AAUP allows, not only because it is what I believe but also because my students should see how I arrive at and account for my intellectual commitments.”

Transferring this same intellectual process to the history classroom, me and most other historians believe that slavery was the primary if not the sole underlying cause of the American Civil War. This may be controversial in some (probably Southern) circles, but I can easily explain to anyone why I believe this. It is a question of evidence, rather than values.

That’s not teaching politics. It’s teaching process, and that’s exactly what academic freedom is designed to protect.

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PART 2—Feb. 6, 2010

Does anybody go to grad school planning to be an administrator? If the answer to that question is no (and I hope it is), when do people start saying to themselves, “I think I’d make a great Provost.” If there’s any lesson to be learned from Cary Nelson’s *No University Is an Island* it may be that faculty who don’t want to run universities still need to know something about how universities should work. Otherwise, we’ll have to re-fight battles that the people who came before us already won. As Nelson explains (p. 74):

“The faculty hired in the 1960s and 1970s are being replaced by younger faculty and contingent teachers who have no memory of a time when some administrators could be counted on to defend academic freedom and occasionally do so eloquently. The loss of institutional memory among faculty makes for a wonderful opportunity for higher education’s corporate managers: they can remake higher education without objection from a faculty that does not know the difference.”

This is what underlies Nelson’s case for joining the AAUP. Learn about the way things should be and you can raise alarm bells on your campus as faculty rights slowly slip away. But what if this is one of those frog in boiling water situations?

While tenured people like myself have real concerns (like how I’m going to put my daughter through college on my salary), we’re fat and happy compared to contingent faculty or even community college professors. Here’s Nelson again, from earlier in the book (p. 52):

“Early in 2008, I spent a day with faculty members at Tulsa Community College, which has a vibrant and growing AAUP chapter. My time there brought home to me with special clarity and force some relatively new things. I had of course known that people without PhDs could serve critical roles in local vocational degree programs. What was new for me was to realize what a huge contribution to faculty governance could be made by people coming to academia from nonacademic careers.”

He goes on to suggest that people from outside academia are less likely to stand for the kind of abuse to which most professors have become conditioned. Perhaps people at cc’s might be more rather than less likely to organize than regular faculty because they understand the way employment is supposed to work, especially if they have experience in outside trade unions.

This makes me think of the Socialist I worked with back in 1996 who voted Bob Dole for President “in order to make the revolution come faster. While I’m hoping it doesn’t come to this, perhaps more people in my position might need to understand what it means to be powerless before we can all begin to build a better tomorrow together.

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### PART 3—Feb. 8, 2010

The administrators who run my university are all very nice people who I’m quite certain do not read this blog. If they did, I don’t think they’d object to this characterization of them: they’re nonetheless pretty typical. By that, I mean they prefer to make decisions by themselves rather than gather, let alone seriously consider, faculty input.

I’m not sure I really understood how typical my university administration is until I went to my first AAUP Summer Institute last summer. Most notably, I went to a session on budgetary shared governance and instantly realized, “My university doesn’t operate that way at all!” It was an epiphany and a radicalizing moment all rolled into one.

In *No University Is an Island*, Cary Nelson explains why no budgetary shared governance is a bad thing (p.77):

“The only longstanding faculty consensus is that higher education is underfunded. That complaint plays poorly in the public sphere, in part because the public is at least vaguely aware that some higher education enterprises are very well funded, just as they are aware that some faculty and administrators are handsomely rewarded. Tenured faculty members need to focus on **how universities spend the money they have**. The

moral implications of budgeting—including the ruthless exploitation of some employees—needs to be addressed if we are to have any credibility.”

[Emphasis added]

It’s not just a credibility issue. The exploitation of contingent faculty degrades the entire profession of college teaching. As I wrote a couple of weeks ago, hang together or we’ll all hang separately.

As Nelson explains, the failure of shared governance is one thing that the contingent and the tenure-track have very much in common (p. 93):

“At present, the two worlds—with and without tenure—seem sharply divided. Yet in some critical respects they are becoming steadily more similar. The most critical cultural overlap is in administrative impatience with the element of faculty authority in shared governance. In too many elite institutions faculty have carelessly let thorough faculty oversight over programmatic development, budget allocation, and educational mission wither. Administrators have filled the vacuum and are increasingly frank in their contempt for the delays inherent in the democratic process. We have learned too often that when the bedrock of shared governance crumbles, erosion of academic freedom follows.”

Nelson makes a similar point elsewhere that I’ve heard the AAUP’s Gary Rhoades make well. Faculty might actually have some expertise in areas that university administrators need to understand in order to make these decisions. In other words, shared governance isn’t just about protecting faculty rights, it’s about making the university run better.

I wonder what the counterargument to that would be because I can’t think of one.

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PART 4, Feb. 9, 2010

It must have been around 2005 that the administration sent out a note to everyone here who had been hired in the last ten years ago that they had forgotten to sign a loyalty oath. We all had to swear to protect and defend the Constitution of Colorado.

I had no idea what was in the Constitution of Colorado, so I was wondering if I really had to sign it. I’m not sure how my thinking went, but pretty soon I dropped an e-mail to the AAUP. I got a response back by phone in about half an hour.

The answer to my loyalty oath question was yes, but what really impressed

me was that they had the information at their fingertips. Reading Cary Nelson's *No University Is an Island* made me realize that what should also have impressed me was that the organization would go to the trouble of helping someone who wasn't a member.

You can see the same sentiment in this story (pp. 254–55):

“In 2008, I presented a long-term staff member in the national office and a long-term Committee A member with the same hypothetical grievance and asked if the relevant regulation would apply. Their opinions were diametrically opposed, with the staff member convinced the AAUP would not pursue the grievance and the Committee A member convinced it should. Both were coauthors of the very regulation in question. The Committee A member went on to say the regulation would be rendered worthless were the AAUP to refuse such a complaint and I agreed...The staff member insisted a long-term and broadly qualified part time faculty member could be terminated if an institution asserted that the precise courses the faculty member happened to have taught recently were no longer needed. Moreover, the staff member added, it would always be acceptable to dispose of a highly qualified part-timer in order to hire a considerably less accomplished tenure-track faculty member.”

That's why the AAUP isn't really a labor union (even if they do conduct collective bargaining). The staff member (whether consciously or not) here was acting on interests. The two faculty members were motivated by principles, the same principles that motivated them to call me so quickly.

That's not like most labor unions. It's even better.

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