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Securing the Three-Legged Stool

No University Is an Island: Saving Academic Freedom
Cary Nelson. New York: New York University Press, 2010

Reviewed by Paula Rabinowitz

When the president of the AAUP decides to air academia's dirty laundry, attention must be paid. In his new book, *No University Is an Island*, Cary Nelson takes on a wide range of issues—from the operation of university boards to the inner workings of the AAUP staff, from graduate student unionization to campus speech codes—that demonstrate the oft-stated AAUP mantra: tenure, academic freedom, and shared governance are “the three-legged stool” supporting a vibrant professoriate. Each of these principles is under attack, and the primary culprit is the surge in contingent labor brought on by budget cuts by legislatures and an explosion of efforts by administrations to increase flexibility.

Since issuing its 1915 *Declaration of Principles on Academic Freedom and Academic Tenure*, the AAUP has served as a barricade, protecting academic freedom across the enormous range of U.S. institutions of higher education. Nelson describes the 1915 statement—a kind of gentleman's agreement crafted during an era of vastly different academic concerns and systems—as being akin to the Bill of Rights, flexible and pointed. It is a document that pressures university administrations to respect the uniqueness of the academic workplace, which, unlike most other workplaces operating under capitalism, depends upon the shared, decentralized expertise of its constituents: intellectual laborers. Of course, the ideal has rarely obtained, and in

recent years, globalization and the financial disaster have taken enormous tolls on academic freedom and its bulwarks, tenure and shared governance.

Shared governance is not simply the consultative process through which administrators engage with faculty senates and other constituted faculty bodies. Instead, it must be understood as the underlying premise of disciplinary and departmental autonomy, the small and large faculty responsibilities that keep classrooms full and scholarship innovative—peer review, faculty control of the curriculum, hiring and promotion processes, admissions and funding of students. Shared governance becomes the sine qua non of professional engagement and, as Nelson insists, it is disappearing.

Like academic freedom, shared governance emerged when higher education was a limited and elite formation. Since 1915, as academia has been democratized and reshaped by a panoply of forces—including the creation and expansion of community colleges, the GI Bill, draft exemptions, the rise of the service economy, feminism, and the civil rights movement—tenure, academic freedom, and shared governance have extended across a range of institutions. But tenure has lately contracted as the neoliberal push to corporatize the campus realigns power within the academy, turning it into yet another flexible workplace within the globalized knowledge-based realm of what political philosopher Maurizio Lazzarato calls “immaterial labor.”

This complex process—the result of many factors, among them an increasingly feminized workforce, a focus on technology transfers, and an explosion of underprepared students—resulted in a redefinition of the professoriate. The predominantly tenured professoriate of the 1970s has been replaced by a workforce composed of nearly 70 percent contingent faculty, with

contingency encompassing a broad array of categories—part-time and non-tenure-track faculty, academic professionals, graduate assistants—often located at community colleges, whose enrollments exploded as higher education became exorbitantly expensive. All this is well known to anyone who reads *Academe*.

Nelson's book proposes a way out of this morass. His strategy is two-pronged, mirroring the "two worlds of tenure" superintending most of our workplaces: resist and unionize. Mounting an impassioned defense of academic freedom means understanding and fighting for tenure as the fundamental attribute of our professional lives, a standard that is held nationally, is collectively achieved through professional training and peer review, and provides a "necessary bond between academic freedom and job security." This effort must be undertaken by current tenure-track and tenured faculty, who unfortunately have not been socialized into thinking of themselves as responsible for the struggle against corporatization through shared governance.

Meanwhile, the AAUP and other professional organizations must jump into the fray to confront the erosion of the profession by challenging the new forms of instrumentalization, including political incursions, operating in higher education. Faculty members need to work collectively; organizations need to act forcefully. The decision by the AAUP to help chapters organize for collective bargaining means that it engages in these labor struggles and provides leadership and resources, but it often does so anemically. Other professional organizations have joined the Coalition on the Academic Workforce and recognized that the nature of their membership needs may be fundamentally at odds with tradition. The Modern Language

Association, for example, is finally developing a new effort to respond to the increasing casualization of the humanities professoriate.

At my own university, the AAUP provided crucial help to beat back an attack on tenure led by the regents about fifteen years ago. However, when it came to actually voting for unionization, the same faculty that had embraced the AAUP demurred. The net result: we won the battle and lost the war. Yes, tenure remained intact, but the composition of the faculty altered rapidly, with tenured and tenure-track positions declining from 80 percent to 50 percent among the faculty as a whole. My institution is a case study of Nelson's Neoliberal U. Citing the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina on New Orleans colleges as a cautionary tale, Nelson notes, "From a profession characterized by a high degree of job security, we have become one characterized by complete insecurity of employment."

Nelson concludes with a dissection of the internal operations of the AAUP—its staff disputes, its loss of membership, and its strengths as an investigative organization challenging administrative fiats. En route to this critique, he castigates David Horowitz, champion of the students' "academic bill of rights," and chides Stanley Fish, protector of the classroom as idealized space for rhetorical disputation. The key issue, however, remains the system of tenure that maintains the heart of a vital, democratic, and intellectually bold profession. This, the AAUP has struggled to define and expand. The battlefield is far more varied now than it was in 1915 or in 1940, when the AAUP and the Association of American Colleges issued the landmark *Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure*; but that is in part precisely because of the AAUP. Peer review, job security, freedom to pursue ideas—in this job market? Tenure? It

sounds crazy. As our professional control of our workplace is fast eroding, Neoliberal U is surely no island paradise. It can be otherwise, exhorts Nelson. Join up.