

**Rebuilding the Common Ground:
Cary Nelson's *No University Is an Island:
Saving Academic Freedom* (NYUP, 2010)**

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We might begin by turning the campus itself into a work-place laboratory for social justice (133).

As any reader of the preceding volume of *Works and Days* will recall, to speak of academic freedom is inevitably to speak about social justice in a democracy. In simple terms, freedom has a lot to do with what's fair. Is it fair that in American higher education we have a select group of elite private colleges and universities that fly above the radar of monetary woes while public education flounders? Is it fair that tuition keeps rising faster than inflation; that student debt has been rising for years, just like class sizes? Is it fair that the principle of shared governance by which faculty are supposed to contribute to the administration of the university has been eroding? Is it fair that professors can be fired for holding unpopular or unpatriotic political views? Is it fair that in public universities in this country more than two thirds of the faculty are temporary and part-time, and thus have no job security, and often no benefits or health care, and thus very little academic freedom? These are, of course, rhetorical questions to the extent that the answers are obvious. The good news is that we now have a valuable new resource to combat these ills. Over the past several decades, Cary Nelson has been the leading intellectual activist in the struggle for academic freedom and social justice, just as the AAUP of which he is currently the president is the leading organization to define the terms for those struggles. So those are two good reasons to consult his latest and most comprehensive book on the subject, *No University Is an Island*.

I have little doubt that if all of the 1.4 million higher education teachers in the United States would read this volume, both students and faculty would be better off. (Although I concede that some university administrators and football coaches might not be.) That's because this book offers not just an historical analysis but a plan to change some of the growing injustices in our educational system. The struggle over the role and status of higher education links directly to the struggles over the economic, social, and political life of just about everyone on the planet. So a great deal is at stake in the coming years.

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As many of us have argued, the neoliberal principles of deregulation, down-sizing, out-sourcing, and market fundamentalism have reached deeper than ever into the precincts of higher education. That's at least partly because these links between education and economics have been well-understood by the leaders of the global economic institutions such as the World Bank, International Monetary Fund, and World Trade Organization. Indeed, they have made higher education around the world a priority in their plans for economic restructuring. More specifically, they have made the privatizing, vocationalizing, and instrumentalizing of education part of the specific conditions that borrowing nations must implement in order to receive desperately needed loans for basic human services. Around the world, public access to and control over many fundamental human resources from water supply to higher education has been shrinking alarmingly under what Naomi Klein has called the "shock doctrine." And in the U.S., most of us have also experienced the painful shifts from public to private sources of educational funding. Indeed, of the 1.4 million teachers, 1 million are now contingent or non-tenure-track faculty who are thus especially vulnerable to economic turbulence and uncertainty. All these changes have resulted in a contraction of academic freedom.

Yet many of us in higher education continue to find it difficult to integrate the often depressing (but sometimes inspiring) historical analysis with any tangible hopes or practical plans to battle the more destructive forces we confront. *No University Is an Island* speaks to anyone confronting this dilemma.

Nelson provides one of the most succinct yet historically accurate assessments of the changing meanings of academic freedom since it was first officially formulated in the U.S. in the AAUP's now famous "1915 Declaration of Principles." In his overview of what has happened since that date, he never indulges in nostalgia for a lost "freedom" that must be recovered. He clearly sees that academic freedom is not something "out there" like a monarch butterfly we can capture and display for all to see, but an historically evolving discourse, crucial to higher education in a democratic society that must be continuously debated, constructed, and re-constructed to address changing circumstances and changing histories. As he puts it, "Absolute academic freedom...cannot exist" (6), but there's a long history of case laws that have sometimes been legally enforceable: "academic freedom is historically clarified, defended, and sometimes put at risk" (27). Thus, for instance, the 1915 emphasis on faculty autonomy in the areas of both teaching and research still resonates, but the insistence that all disciplines are based on the "scientific method" will hardly serve those in the humanities, arts, and social sciences who seek some degree of independence from market forces.

More than most commentators, Nelson directly confronts the central conundrum of higher education and academic freedom: on the one hand, we have the guild privileges granted to the elitist, non-democratic character of disciplinary communities (neither plumbers nor English professors get to vote on what counts for the genetic structure of water bugs), and on the other, we have the fundamentally more egalitarian and democratic rituals of peer review (rather than managerial or public review). In stark contrast to Stanley Fish's

appraisal that there is nothing democratic about higher education because it excludes non-academics from internal decision-making, Nelson demonstrates that “academic freedom helps preserve our other freedoms, however imperfectly they may be realized” (5). Academic freedom is distinct from the more general freedom of speech precisely because the former “is marked by cultural, professional, disciplinary, legal, administrative, departmental, and psychological constraints” (3). As Nelson makes abundantly clear, even the limited faculty privileges granted by disciplinary forms of autonomy are crucial to the well-being of a free and democratic society.

Higher education’s distinctive contribution to such a society is based upon the interrelationships among the three legs of a “stool” built with academic freedom, shared governance, and tenure. Working together, these are the three main institutional practices by which higher education has negotiated (not severed) the relations between epistemology and labor, knowledge and politics. Despite all the historical compromises, these three principles provide some guidelines for the regulation of management, capital, and heavy-handed political repression in the domains of teaching and scholarship. Deregulation has thus been all in the favor of management as it gains greater leverage to regulate faculty according to its own interests.

What many of us have referred to as the restructuring of higher education is the process by which all three of these institutional practices have eroded under the economic and political pressures of neoliberal capitalism so that we are left with what Jeffrey Williams appropriately calls the “post-welfare state university.” Without the job security represented (in part) by tenure, and without direct power of some sort represented by the historically evolved compromise of “shared governance,” there can be no academic freedom. A distinct advantage of Nelson’s analysis is that he clearly demonstrates why shared governance and tenure improve the lot of both tenured and non-tenure track faculty: in short, contingent faculty members are actually weakened when tenure is abandoned across the institution. Equally as important as the general analysis, Nelson narrates numerous case studies, and what we get is often an insider account of what has happened because Nelson himself has so often been a participant in those events.

A good example of theoretical clarification that has practical consequences can be found in his sharply formulated distinction between advocacy and indoctrination in the classroom. Nelson’s analysis counters the pervasive misrepresentation of these issues by the National Association of Scholars (NAS), the American Council of Trustees and Alumni (ACTA), and the falsely labeled “Academic Bill of Rights” proposed by David Horowitz, and many others. These organizations demand “balance” but what they really mean is that “disciplinary consensus be compensated for with extradisciplinary perspectives” (167). These highly organized and deeply funded right-wing efforts have been mounted “to confuse the public by eliminating any distinction between advocacy and indoctrination” (174). They end up in a resounding contradiction: by ignoring the fundamentally social, historical, and contextual nature of the epistemological warrants arrived at through disciplinary consensus, the right-wing argues for

the non-political while furthering its own politics. In contrast, and in the absence of any universal criteria, genuine forms of “Academic freedom must protect instructors from reprisals for challenging their students” (10). A key resource for such protections is the “AAUP’s model of showing them an instructor taking a strong position and modeling informed advocacy” (15).

These arguments regarding the necessarily social and political implications of any form of education gain a sharp focus over the issue of history and context. An easy target here is a writer like Stanley Fish who seeks to detach education from any social utility or any “real world urgency” (180), as if democratic freedom has nothing to do with academic freedom. Such ivory tower models of the academy may now seem quaint, but the important point we need to keep reiterating is that neoliberal capitalism and the dominant culture already decontextualize, dehistoricize, and depoliticize. That’s the *modus operandi*: profit does not want the stories of its exploitations to be front page news. For the humanities especially, the historical contextualizing of the production of knowledge demarcates the social value of that knowledge.

Needless to say, this analysis will not make everyone happy, as Nelson admits. If Stanley Fish reads Nelson’s critique (as I presume he probably will), then he will certainly want to eliminate Cary Nelson from any realm of education even faster than he already confesses he would like to do so. (Fish will undoubtedly love this line: “If Fish really believes a message endorsing employee exploitation is apolitical, he is a fool” [181]). But for many non-academic as well as academic readers, Nelson’s examples (many from his own teaching) and his general analysis on these distinctions will be persuasive.

The book itself can really be divided into three parts. The introduction and the first two chapters address the general issues of academic freedom, shared governance, and tenure, followed by a point-by-point description of what he feels are sixteen threats to those freedoms. Chapters three through seven focus on specific segments of the academic community: the huge increase in contingent faculty as a threat to academic freedom; the controversies surrounding the debates over the role of politics in the classroom and the furor over “political correctness;” the history, significance, and issues surrounding faculty unionization; and a powerful chapter on the rise and importance of graduate student employee unions (these chapters draw deeply on the work of Marc Bousquet and others). Chapters 8 and 9 focus on the AAUP. Before I elaborate a bit on the crucial last two chapters, I should point out that this organizational strategy has some clear benefits because individual readers can get a clear overview in the intro and first two chapters, yet in the succeeding five chapters they can selectively focus attention on those issues (and chapters) most pertinent to their positions and interests, thus avoiding some of the necessary repetition that occurs when addressing the same issue of academic freedom in different contexts.

But everyone should read the last two chapters. If anything marks this book as truly unique it is the remarkably open historical account of both the problems and the promises of the AAUP. As the major national organization to combat the woes of higher education, Nelson does not shy away from recounting some of the most embarrassing

moments of organizational ineptitude and political blindness. What will undoubtedly strike some readers as an exposé is nevertheless consistent with his own plans as president for reorganizing, revitalizing, and rebuilding the organization: only through such openness and transparency (uncharacteristic of much of the secretive history of the AAUP staff) can the organization achieve its own greater purpose to serve all higher education faculty in the United States. From the McCarthy era blunders and political backtracking, to the more recent mismanagement of the national office that led, among other things, to a precipitous drop in membership and effectiveness...it's all here. (Including a brief recounting of the remarkable faculty, student, and community response in the face of the terrible situation at Antioch University that Jean Gregorek relates in much greater detail in this volume.) The goal, as Nelson puts it is repair: "fundamental reform of the AAUP's power relationships is necessary" so that it can more effectively become "a time-sensitive advocacy organization" (251).

No University Is an Island makes a very strong case that all faculty from all disciplinary fields and from all sectors of both public and private higher education need to join hands to find a shared common ground by participating in and contributing to the rebuilding efforts of the AAUP. He acknowledges the enormous range of faculty privileges and prestige, from obscure community colleges to the brand-name Ivies, but he is still able to draw with some distinctness the profession-wide concern for the "three stools," no matter what position one occupies in the hierarchies. No other organization than the AAUP functions on behalf of the rights of both faculty and students, and it also does so no matter whether individuals identify with either the political right or political left. The common ground is not a place from which any one political position can argue that its specific views must necessarily be included in the curriculum even when disciplinary peer groups have excluded such views as lacking epistemological merit (such as racism, sexism, creationism, or religious fundamentalism, to name a few).

The national advocacy role of the AAUP has a great deal to do with protecting the distinction Nelson makes between legitimate advocacy and unethical indoctrination in the classroom. With respect to its larger social mission, the AAUP must also advocate for the common ground represented by the rights of all faculty and students to dignity and justice in their workplaces and classrooms. The common ground of academic freedom protects the rights of faculty to disagree, and Nelson knows as well as anyone that not everyone will agree with his own political positions. In this context, it is worth pointing out that Nelson occupies a relatively identifiable position on what many have called the academic left. He makes every effort to make sure any reader will know exactly where he stands on key political positions, even as he argues for the common ground of academic freedom that protects both right and left perspectives from direct managerial and administrative control. Many readers will, therefore, disagree strongly with some of Nelson's specific political views. Indeed, while he occupies a politically progressive orientation, in several passages he admonishes what he sees as the excesses of the far left and some of the people he criticizes will no doubt be angered by these remarks.

From my perspective, the important thing to keep in mind is that the concrete problems we are suffering from have little to do with the fringes of either the right or left, and much to do with the liberal-center-right coalition of neoliberalism. In a strategic sense, we may not have time to snipe at everyone with whom we disagree (especially when they are likely to vote the same way on basic policy decisions) unless they pretty directly contribute to the powerful centrist coalition. In the sixties and seventies, we used to call this form of cultural dominance the “establishment,” or the “military-industrial complex,” but whatever we call it, the material reality is that neoliberal capitalism roars along, denying nationalized health care, escalating the war in Afghanistan, and privatizing higher education at the expense of academic freedom. We should not lose sight of that historical context because it is global in scope and with us for the foreseeable future.

With the exception of those few sentences attacking the far left, Nelson emphasizes this basic point. He argues persuasively that it is in everyone’s interest to create solidarity around the common ground represented by the AAUP. Indeed, he provides fair warning: “As the only effective voice for all the faculty..., the AAUP is an organization we all have a vested interest in strengthening. There is otherwise little hope of reversing the most insidious trends in higher education and shaping our future for the common good” (204). We should heed these words, read the book, and learn more effective ways to save academic freedom.