

Barefoot in New Zealand: The Politics of Campus Conflict

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While few members of either group are inclined to acknowledge each other's perspective, faculty and students both on the right and the left on American campuses feel beleaguered, isolated, outcast, and underrepresented in their higher education environments. What's more, divisions within these groups mean that some are castigated by others who share many of the same political beliefs.

Where the left is concerned, as cultural and political history tells us, today's conflicts are only the latest episodes in a long-running, multigenerational, now multimillennial story that entails fractious disputes about one's right to claim a place on the certified left. That such a history exists does not make today's fractious disputes less painful either to participants or observers.

One visible recent split on the left concerns the war in Afghanistan. It crosses all campus disciplines, involving not only the social sciences and humanities, but also the sciences and the professional schools. As Michael Bérubé reported on his blog, when some faculty long identified with the left argued that a military response to al Qaeda in Afghanistan was necessary and action to remove the Taliban defensible, even though they may not have endorsed the Bush administration's tactics there, they found themselves essentially pariahs among many on the campus left (n. pag.). Once the 2003 war in Iraq was launched, there was no social space in which to give qualified support to one military action and thoroughly condemn the other and not be treated with contempt. That was my own stance, and I simply gave up attending campus meetings on the Iraq War, because my only choices were to remain silent (not my style) or be personally denounced. I was better off avoiding the campus and instead criticizing the Bush administration in print, where I could articulate distinctions between the two sites of aggression.

As identitarian politics fragment and crisscross the categories of left and right still further, we now have even more versions of inner exile on campus than we have ever seen before. "Can't we all get along?" In a campus political context we'd have to answer, "Apparently not." What, then, are the prospects for committed but civilized campus debate, discussion, and advocacy? Can we do better? Should we try to get along? What pitfalls should be carefully avoided?

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Misrepresentation of the verifiable forms of psychological alienation is certainly a contributing feature to the current scene. For David Horowitz and Anne Neal, self-appointed higher education authorities, there is no doubt that the right on campus is silenced, discriminated against, and thoroughly alienated—and that the left reigns supreme and freely terrorizes everyone. But people on the left are just as likely to feel besieged. Some of the progressive faculty attacked in Horowitz's notorious book *The Professors: The 101 Most Dangerous Academics in America* now feel endangered by increased scrutiny. Untenured and part-time faculty feel vulnerable when they engage in progressive advocacy.

Genuine identity-based discrimination does exist on college and university campuses. But so do equal treatment, special privileges, and hystericized political correctness. The highly variable climate from campus to campus, even department to department, makes it difficult to generalize. Lesbian faculty with progressive commitments in some departments and on some campuses remain victims, whereas in others they are valued colleagues, often identified with leading areas of research. African American faculty in some settings get recruitment bonuses and in others have their progressive research commitments questioned.

The list could continue, and only careful quantitative and qualitative investigation will provide a clear nationwide profile. Nonetheless, several highly visible cases suggest there is one area where tension and misrepresentation reign supreme: campus incarnations of the Arab-Israeli conflict. Although there are players and forces with campus impact from both sides, an exceptionalist victimology has evolved in which each beleaguered campus cohort considers its suffering unique. To some degree, that pattern mirrors politics in the Middle East itself, though the campus is not a scene of life-and-death struggle and thus potentially could be a site for sober self-assessment; but that has been the exception, not the rule.

For professors such as Nadia Abu El-Haj of Barnard, Joseph Massad of Columbia, Norman G. Finkelstein formerly of DePaul, and some of their advocates, the pro-Israeli lobby is all powerful; there is no other force of consequence. Yet faculty and students with sympathies for Israel encounter implacably pro-Palestinian attacks in multiple settings; these include departments where no candidate supporting Israel in general or a two-state solution in particular would even be considered for a job. The prohibition would apply most strongly where Middle East studies is part of the job description, but it can extend to positions where it is not directly relevant to the advertised area of teaching and research.

Whether these competing forces are equally empowered on campus is difficult to estimate and often irrelevant, since all that often matters is how power is exercised in a given venue, whether a study group, a lecture series, or a department. That pro-Palestinian and pro-Israeli constituencies have not been equally empowered in civil society also colors campus perceptions and sometimes influences campus decisions.

As major factions of the left have grown increasingly hostile and unforgiving toward Israel, the once progressive view that Israel should

trade land for peace and recognize a Palestinian state is now likely to get denounced as Zionist. The only socially and politically acceptable stance for some is that Israel has no right to exist, has no moral or political legitimacy, and must be dissolved into a larger regional nation-state. The risk to Israeli Jews in a one-state solution should not be an unacceptable topic of discussion. Nor should all protests against violence perpetrated by Israel be automatically considered anti-Semitic. It is nonetheless clear that some attacks on Israel are colored by anti-Semitism. Finally, history does not often warrant unqualified moral legitimacy for any major nation-state. Both the founding of the United States and the country's subsequent expansion were, after all, grounded in the genocide of Native Americans, and imperialist episodes have marked its history. Power and international agreements have more relevance than a blameless history.

Bringing all these issues to bear on campus curriculum, program planning, hiring, and tenure decisions can make them impossible to negotiate. Campus discussions about these matters are properly separate issues, not an appropriate symbolic terrain on which to fight a cultural simulacrum of the Arab-Israeli war; but we seem increasingly to be doing exactly that. The prolonged and well-organized attacks on El-Haj, Massad, Finkelstein, and others were real and amounted to fighting a war by other means.

False, inexcusable characterizations of their work were widely distributed and endorsed. External efforts were made to influence internal university decisions. Some faculty regrettably joined those efforts; they have every right to criticize a colleague's scholarly publications or political writings, either in print or in conversation, but should refrain from publicly attacking a colleague's right to tenure. There were real threats both to academic freedom and to shared governance in these cases. Those writing from outside the university were exercising their free speech rights, but the job of universities is to protect the process from unofficial external influence. Since Finkelstein settled with DePaul and thereby eliminated the possibility of a full-scale AAUP investigation, we are less likely to know how public controversy affected his case.

Massad and Finkelstein were very much controversial public intellectuals before their tenure reviews took place: El-Haj rather less so (Kramer). Massad and Finkelstein had been widely praised and attacked in print and online, both by scholars and by members of the public. Nonetheless, faculty familiar with academic freedom would have reason to expect their right to a job would not be threatened by extramural conflict. While the high-profile organized attacks on their tenure decisions are a new and immensely troubling phenomenon, they may have been inevitable. All it took it was one figure like Alan Dershowitz to come up with the idea to fight Finkelstein's tenure to trigger a series of such incidents.

And these are not the only highly publicized instances in which politics have compromised university decision-making. The decisions by Colorado politicians to make public statements attacking Ward Churchill's tenure, statements immediately condemned by the AAUP, are the most well-known examples. The 2008 decision by the University of Michigan Press to stop distributing Pluto Press books—

disingenuously characterized as a matter of principle based on Pluto's manuscript review procedures, but clearly grounded in resistance to Pluto's pro-Palestinian list—is a case in point. There is some evidence as well that departments are gaining the right to trump one another's hiring decisions in the area of Middle East studies, another dangerous precedent.

If self-righteousness and a sense of unique victimhood as a result come entirely to dominate the perceptions of campus players, then the dangers to academic freedom will only get worse. Already, reasoned comments on senior job candidates in Middle East studies, history, political science, sociology, and literature are occasionally characterized as “uncollegial” when the substance of differences among faculty members in the hiring department is actually political, and the comments themselves are well within professional norms. Of course, critiques of potential hires can cross the line and become abusive, even actionable. Nonetheless, wide rhetorical latitude needs to be preserved for full consideration of candidates' strengths and weaknesses to be possible.

Faculty hiring is clearly an area where political correctness can control the process on controversial appointments in some departments. Beginning appointments are rarely at issue, because applicants are not questioned about their political beliefs, and few dissertations telegraph a writer's politics. Since the overwhelming majority of appointments are at the less-expensive junior level, the problems I am describing substantially impact only a small percentage of faculty appointments. Senior scholars, however, may well have done a wider variety of work, and some of it may engage political questions directly. If some convictions are judged unacceptable, it can result in good candidates being ruled out, less-qualified candidates being interviewed and hired, and conscientious faculty being thoroughly alienated because their views about a candidate cannot gain a hearing. Indeed, they may be castigated for exercising and communicating their professional judgment. Middle East studies is a prime site for this sort of conflict in a number of disciplines, not just in Middle East studies programs themselves. The AAUP may well have to address the problem in a future report.

Because the climate and practice can vary widely from department to department—even in the same institution—it is thus primarily a department-level problem, at least in the sense that it may not require institution-wide remedies, though it certainly needs institution-wide discussion. But if a department head signs on to the suppression of departmental opinion and asks the dean to punish a faculty member whose professional take on particular appointees is unpopular, then it becomes a broader problem. I have seen both progressive and conservative faculty treated this way by deans, even at major universities. At Illinois, an irresponsible dean supported a homophobic department head's harassment of a progressive black lesbian scholar, first refusing to speak with her, then threatening her if she proceeded with a formal complaint.

Two concepts are increasingly coming into play to restrain outspoken or ideological outliers on the left or the right. Once again, it is critical to realize that both ends of the political spectrum can be

targets. Strategic and improper use is increasingly being made of accusations of “creating a hostile work environment” or of “lack of collegiality.” The first of these categories is legally based and requires elements of gender or race for the claim to apply, but a university administration can trigger an internal investigation on the flimsiest of bases. These principles, thought to be progressive victories when they were put into place, are now coming back to bite us. Although the impulse to take any victory offered is difficult to counter in the United States, it is always best to ask how people at the other end of the political spectrum will use a procedure once it becomes available.

The AAUP explicitly condemns the use of collegiality as an independent criterion in tenure decisions, but collegiality is now undergoing mission drift, and the AAUP may need to expand its analysis. In the Finkelstein case, a standard for collegiality was inexcusably applied to his publications, making the forceful critique of other scholars’ published positions a new ground for termination. The prevailing rhetorical standards vary not only by discipline, but also by field and subfield. However, scholars need to have the right to challenge rhetorical conventions by employing the rhetorical strategies of any discipline in their work. Claims about collegiality are being used to stifle campus debate, to punish faculty, and to silence the free exchange of opinion by the imposition of corporate-style conformity.

At the University of Illinois, a white graduate student employee was investigated for months after he approached an African American graduate employee for advice. A student in one of his classes used the word “nigger”; the graduate student was upset and wanted advice about how to handle the problem. The African American graduate student filed a complaint that the white graduate student had created a hostile environment by telling him the story. The complaint should have been dismissed immediately instead of being allowed to fester so long. On yet another major research university campus, a faculty member was severely chastised (and financially penalized) for arguing on behalf of Israeli scholar Benny Morris for a Middle East studies area position and against the less widely published pro-Palestinian scholar the search committee had recommended. The grounds in this case included lack of collegiality and contributing to a hostile environment.

One contributing factor in these incidents is that abuses of power identified and debated in the 1970s and 1980s—including gender and racial discrimination, sexual harassment, and behaviors creating a hostile working environment—are by now explicitly prohibited by a formidable array of official campus codes, guidelines, and regulations. This is not bad in itself, representing long, hard work by many passionate and well-intentioned people. But now, it is also a tool that serves the powerful as much as the powerless. Administrators, as always, find new uses for such tools, including uses beyond their intended function.

But administrators are not the only culprits. These incidents are part of a larger pattern in which the right and the left—both on and off campus—use established regulations or attempt to create new ones in order to advance a political cause. Horowitz is eager to see universities investigate what he regards as inappropriate political speech in the classroom, meaning any historical reference not falling

precisely within the course syllabus. Though Horowitz's examples are becoming increasingly ludicrous—as when he helped a Penn State University student file a formal complaint that a course in effective social science writing covered public attitudes toward global warming, arguing, as Robin Wilson reports, that global warming “is a matter of environmental, not social, science” (n. pag.) (apparently sociologists cannot write about attitude formation!)—such investigations themselves have a chilling effect. Unfortunately, some faculty members are willing to endorse opportunistic political strategies in their own interrelations.

The intrusion of politics into senior faculty hiring, however, rarely rises to the level of formal proceedings. More often, it plays itself out in a series of intellectually substandard, coercive, and embarrassing departmental debates. This brings us to the central story of this essay—and to an explanation of my deliberately incomprehensible title.

Not long ago, my department was considering appointing a faculty member teaching in New Zealand to a senior position. Just before the candidate would have been selected as our first choice for a campus interview, someone Googled the candidate's name and turned up a letter to a New Zealand newspaper in which the candidate had contributed to local debates about whether it was appropriate to go barefoot in public places. The letter suggested it was uncivilized not to wear shoes and that it promoted the transmission of disease. One of my colleagues decided the letter was an attack on the Maori people and thus racist and circulated a petition to that effect, demanding that the candidacy not go forward. After negotiations among potential signers, the claim was modified to say that the language in the letter was “articulated to racism and colonialism,” which fell short of a personal accusation of racism but amounted at least to a claim of intellectual limitation and fundamental insensitivity.

On that basis, nineteen of my colleagues were willing to sign. The department atmosphere immediately became highly charged and unstable. Some faculty were not approached with the petition, and some of them were deeply upset as a result: Were they not asked to sign because people thought they were racist? At the same time, given the intellectual independence of the department's African American faculty, it is not surprising that several of them did not sign. As news of the petition and its growing number of signatures spread through the department, it became increasingly difficult for people to speak against it. While some proponents disingenuously characterized the petition as a call for further discussion in the face of an appointment that appeared to be a “done deal,” in point-of-fact the petition was an intervention destined to close off discussion, to make it impossible to proceed with the appointment.

Once the politically correct interpretation of the candidate's letter had taken hold, it was essentially impossible to intervene. One colleague who did have the courage to speak against the interpretation of the fatal letter to the editor later characterized his delivery as “too ironic, passing, and nervous,” suggesting the considerable emotional difficulty of speaking out forcefully. My own comments had no effect on those who signed the petition. Meanwhile, a colleague with some knowledge of New Zealand argued that the debate there had nothing to do with race, that the only people who went barefoot there were

white hippies and that the candidate's letter to the editor had to be seen in that context. No one listened to him either. Six months later, in Australia, I met two faculty members who had grown up in New Zealand and were now teaching there. I asked them about the whole incident. They had no doubts. The Maori people, they informed me, would never go barefoot in public. Indeed, they were relatively formal and had detailed codes about acceptable social conduct. They would never, for example, casually sit on the edge of someone's desk. Furthermore, only one section of New Zealand had a climate suitable for going barefoot, and there, indeed, some white hippies did so. Australian aborigines, on the other hand, did indeed go barefoot, so a similar debate in Australia would have a very different character.

But my colleagues, including people I very much admire, had no interest in accurate information about the historical and cultural context. After all, it was the language in the letter that was pertinent. What matter if it were not "articulated to racism and colonialism" in a New Zealand barefoot context? It was surely so articulated in the sands of the Kalahari or in the Mississippi Delta. But, in any case, high dudgeon about a single letter to the editor, however eloquently flaunted, was not the central matter. For white faculty this was, in part at least, about proving themselves to colleagues of color. And for a very few faculty it was about racializing department decisions that had, thankfully, never been racialized before. It was about changing the configurations of self-consciousness and the lines of power in the department. The prospective appointment was a target of opportunity for a broader professional and political agenda. One of the casualties of success would be academic freedom as we had exercised it for decades. All this culminated in a department meeting, which I will not describe because it was confidential, though I will say that more than one colleague later described it as "the meeting from hell." Suffice it to say that the position was not offered to the candidate from New Zealand.

Notably, I have not provided the person's name, gender, rank, institution, or area of specialization. That is not only to protect that individual's privacy; it is also because the whole controversy was about local, national, and international politics, not about the candidate in question.

For at least a few of us, this controversy was a transformative moment—the point when the department ceased to be the department we had known for decades, when efforts at group coercion replaced discussion. Thereafter, all senior appointments would be promoted or disparaged with hyperbolic praise or hyperbolic denunciation. Each candidate was either a descending angel who would save us from ourselves or a venomous and ignorant assassin who would spread dissension everywhere. Unfortunately, the universally overheated character of every evaluation made it impossible to recognize that an actual near sociopath might be under consideration.

It was not only the national climate that encouraged this departmental shift away from academic freedom and civilized debate. It was also because we had hired a large number of faculty in a few years, and they had not been integrated into departmental culture. For better or worse, however, that process of integration had never

been either overt or planned: it was inertial and carried out by example. With a sudden influx of new colleagues, very different examples could be put in place. In the light of the emerging character of higher education, it may have been inevitable that we would eventually endure our own local episode of frenzied political correctness. Given the demographics of the profession, other departments on other campuses are experiencing similar pressures over hiring and thus face similar possibilities.

I have talked about this case at length not simply because I know it well, but also because it enables me to testify to the reverberating impact of a highly politicized hiring debate. Exquisitely intelligent, ethically meticulous, and discriminating faculty were turned into the obverse of themselves—bullies, liars, and opportunists. The process was more like *Lord of the Flies* than democracy at work.

When things reach that point, appeals to decency and reason—the only recourse that seemed available to our department head—may have no effect. The only solution may be to try to take senior appointments out of the political arena, though the necessity for a tenure vote makes that difficult. Colleagues would have to be willing to honor the decision of a small, fair-minded hiring committee. Indeed, the same damaging impulses can spread to other areas, most notably internal tenure decisions, as we saw in the El-Haj, Massad, and Finkelstein cases. Then people may be tempted to prevent people they disagree with from speaking on campus.

Among the conclusions one can consider is that Horowitz and other right-wing culture warriors have mistakenly focused on political mistreatment of students, a phenomenon that is far less prevalent than he suggests. But then, he has never taught in a university and has no real knowledge of faculty decision-making. The critical issue is the politicization of faculty self-government at the departmental level—and the willingness of some deans to support the department head's will at any human cost. Horowitz is too ill-informed to understand a senior job candidate in the humanities or social sciences is just as likely to be rejected for being too left as for being not left enough. Faculty commitments on the right can be equally finely calibrated when disciplines like business and economics do their hiring. Indeed, faculty culture remains socially conservative. No one minds faculty politics in print, which may well be ignored in the public sphere, unless their own commitments are challenged, but public activism on the right or the left makes many faculty uneasy. What some faculty are more than willing to do is mistreat one another and to politicize their own decision-making.

Given the rather vicious way local and national politicians can conduct their business—the crude characterizations of opponents, the false rumors, the eagerness to destroy careers—is there any reason to expect universities to do better? Perhaps not, but countries need spaces where passionate but reasoned debate can be conducted and where advocacy can partner with relative civility. The alternative in too many public conflicts is to reach for weapons and kill one another. Institutions of higher education are one of the few places that can offer an alternative model, though that need not mean forbearing to denounce positions one believes to be genuinely damaging.

Nor does it mean that passion needs to be suppressed, though it does need to be moderated. The idea that all university dialogue needs to be conducted in a calm, dispassionate, unvaryingly respectful way in fact makes the university less useful as a social model, for then the university seems unrealistic and irrelevant. The University of Michigan has an interesting and atypical policy that permits brief interruptions of speeches for protests, with the proviso that the presentation be allowed to continue. Too many campuses mix a stifling and inflexible imposition of reasonableness on public events, while tolerating faculty discussions that are genuinely uncivil. When those discussions embody political conflicts, the results can be particularly ruthless since everyone thinks much more than local interests are at stake.

Part of what is critical is for campuses to set aside political considerations in tenure decisions. Whether you agree or disagree with Finkelstein, El-Haj, or Massad, they all met long-established academic criteria for tenure. Finkelstein, of course, lost his job; El-Haj kept hers.

As I write, Massad's case is being reconsidered. If he loses his bid for tenure, academic freedom will have suffered a telling defeat, and the role of politics in university decision-making will require major rethinking. At the same time, the sometimes hyperbolic character of hiring discussions needs to be reined in and based more consistently on careful analysis.

The university needs to be a place where faculty and students can voice political opinions forthrightly and passionately, and where they will not be punished for doing so. The only realistic answer to "Can't we get along on campus?" is "Not always." But we need to establish spaces and define circumstances in which civility and mutual respect can prevail, among them being departmental decision-making. To do so across all campus contexts would impose an Orwellian corporate conformity of its own sort. And transgressions against standards for good decision-making and productive communication can also be instructive. Over the years, we learn as much from bad decisions as from good ones. As a teaching environment, the campus instructs by error as usefully as it does by success. Bad decisions indeed tend to haunt us, remaining teachable moments that last for decades.

What I have sought to emphasize here, however, is that the dangers to critical thinking on campus come not just from the organized right outside the university, but also from internal intolerance and self-delusion. To the extent that the right has succeeded in putting progressive students and faculty on the defensive, it has made it harder to acknowledge problems and find the will to address them. Thus while political correctness is not the all-defining campus cultural force the right makes it out to be, it does operate, in some contexts, absurdly. We can do better.

We are now confronted with the need to make some rather nuanced decisions and set some rather difficult standards for ourselves. The need grows partly out of unintended consequences. Having argued repeatedly that "the personal is political" in the 1970s and 1980s, we find ourselves now in a world where "the professional is political." I played a role in the development of that notion myself, having repeatedly chastised tenured faculty with progressive publication

histories for failing to support graduate student employee job actions. What I would not do is allow such judgments to influence either a tenure or a hiring decision. Similarly, I might disagree at many points with Finkelstein, El-Haj, or Massad, but, as I said above, I would support their tenure. Would they do the same for me? I have no idea. Whether these amount to a personal code of professional ethics or standards that should be universal remains to be seen. But it is time for all of us to be discussing such distinctions.

The Ford Foundation has established one of its “difficult dialogues” programs on the issue of the Arab-Israeli conflict on the campus of the University of California-Irvine, and we may all be able to learn from that effort to promote rational debate. A conviction that one is absolutely in the right is certainly not a hopeful way to begin that political discussion. Recognizing and at least provisionally validating each others’ experience is a first step. Collectively identifying and acknowledging productive and unproductive behavior is another. Simply determining to set aside our political differences in tenure decisions is a parallel critical step. The campus does not need to be a consistently ideal human community, but it needs to ask what the components of such a negotiated community might be.

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