

PIYA CHATTERJEE AND SUNAINA MAIRA (ed.), *The Imperial University: Academic Repression and Scholarly Dissent* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minneapolis Press, 2014). Pp. 400. \$90.00 cloth, 29.95 paper. ISBN 9780816680894.

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It is a given amongst progressive intellectuals today that the university, whether private or public, is decidedly a neoliberal one – fostering the idea of intense individualism and competition, but only under the regime of elite control and constraint and the privatization of the public. In particular, the public good is subordinated to the further accumulation of the private wealth of the already wealthy, and education is of course one of the most exploited public goods. What used to be the pathway for upward mobility is now devoted to the reproduction of elites, as Mitchell Stevens’ *Creating a Class: College Admissions and the Education of Elites* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009) so convincingly shows us. Colleges and universities are largely geared either toward turning students into workers almost immediately by dint of their student indebtedness or, in the case of wealthy private universities that can afford generous financial aid packages, transforming learning into career preparation aimed toward converting students quickly and effectively into generous alumni donors, satisfied with their “educational experience” and willing to “give back.”

The value of this collection of essays is that gives weight to our intuitions about American higher education with research and evidence, and from many different perspectives. Indeed, after reading this book one has a very good sense of the breadth and depth of this phenomenon. But, crucially, the book also contains sharp critiques that explore the fissures and weaknesses in this model, and examples of pockets of resistance and collective reimaginings of the academy. The

volume's treatment of academic freedom exemplifies this combination of critique and resistance. After a strong critical analysis of academic freedom in practice, the editors add: "[this] does not mean giving up entirely on academic freedom, for it can be, and is, often strategically used as a minimal line of defense to introduce critical ideas and broaden public debates in the academy" (42). It is precisely in that margin of possibility that we need to dwell and do our work to expand.

In my conclusion I come back to that last point after first reviewing a set of important topics. While I cannot, due to limited space, do justice to the whole volume and must let several essays go by uncommented upon, I can and will sketch out a trajectory that will let me arrive at my specific conclusion.

The premise of the book is "that the US academy is an 'imperial university.' As in all imperial and colonial nations, intellectuals and scholarship play an important role – directly or indirectly, willingly or unwillingly – in legitimizing American exceptionalism and rationalizing US expansionism and repression, domestically and globally" (6). Aside from two important essays, Victor Bascara's, "New Empire, Same Old University?: Education in the American Tropics After 1898," and Nicholas De Genova's, "Within and Against the Imperial University: Reflections on Crossing the Line," most of the essays operate within the domestic space of the US and do not address American expansionism abroad. What we find in the essays that focus on the domestic reinforcement of American imperial will is that this mostly takes the form of an entrenchment and expansion of the corporate university. What I see is not primarily a nation-based project, but essentially a capitalist-based one. These of course are not mutually exclusive by any means, but the weight tends to fall on the latter. It is in the overlap between US military "interventions" abroad and domestic politics of repression aimed toward the protection and accumulation of capital that De Genova provides a critical insight, quoting extensively from Randolph S. Bourne's, "The Idea of a University." This passage is especially useful because it discloses the long historical arc that has preceded our present condition:

As directors in this corporation of learning, trustees seem to regard themselves primarily as guardians of invested capital . . . the real offense of Professors Cattell and Dana [James McKeen Cattell and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow Dana, two professors who were penalized for their opposition to the US

entering World War One] seems to have been not so much that they were unpatriotic as that they had lowered the prestige of the university in the public mind.¹

We must understand that “loss of prestige” means a loss of both cultural and real capital. The real force behind the repression of dissent, the real agent driving the narrowing of debate and conversation, teaching and research on campus, is money. Understanding this helps us understand why this issue is not confined to only knowledge about politics (of whatever stripe). To fully contextualize our present situation we must recognize that research in STEM fields too is heavily impacted upon by the market imperatives of pharmaceuticals, the energy industry, the tobacco industry, biotechnology, and what is now known as the learning industry. We must be alert to the fact that outlawed knowledge also includes unprofitable environmental, medical, technological, and other research. That is, research that does not pay back many times over the initial investment. And note that whatever initial private investment there may be is supplemented by public monies (derived from NSF, for example) channeled into research universities that do the research and development work of corporations, whose profits accrue to themselves only. Unless states can be made to take on the cost (via increased taxes, for example), research that may benefit many but not be cost effective will either not take place or be back-burnered. Understanding this helps us understand the enormity of the problem. Here is the industrial-scientific- technological version of the impingement of academic freedom.

I cannot pursue this broad line of inquiry now, but it’s important to recognize how the drying up of federal research money and state coffers has made a bad situation catastrophic across the board, and eats into any ethical project in debilitating ways. For example, even when making the case for divestment from fossil fuels, trustees are bound to first ask how this might affect the bottom line. In fact, as fiduciaries, that is their job. The problem for progressive intellectuals occurs when this kind of corporate thinking extends over into the educational mission of the university—into the hiring, tenuring, and promoting of faculty. Here the value of certain kinds of work is made manifest, as is the danger of other kinds of work to the equilibrium of the imperial university.

No other case so precisely illustrates this problem than the firing of Steven Salaita, a contributor to this volume in the very year of its publication. As has been reported over and over again, his hiring was all but complete (lacking only the pro forma signing off of the trustees), when a local newspaper reported on Salaita's graphic and acerbic tweets protesting, critiquing, and decrying the Israeli assault on Gaza in the summer of 2014. Immediately after the story broke, the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, issued a statement defending Salaita's academic freedom and free speech rights. Yet that support quickly disappeared, replaced with an announcement from Chancellor Phyllis Wise that she was not forwarding his file to the Trustees. What happened? Why did the university change its mind? The strong suspicion (and part of the grounds for Salaita's lawsuit against the University) is the known fact that wealthy donors had threatened to withhold any future donations to the university if Salaita were not fired.² This intrusion of trustees into the realm of faculty governance is deeply troubling, as it seems to complete a long process of appropriating power from faculty and turning it over to administrators, managers, trustees and regents, a process described in detail in Larry G. Gerber's *The Rise and Decline of Faculty Governance: Professionalization of the Modern American University* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014).

As Michael Meranze has pointed out, the American Council of Trustees and Alumni (ACTA), which was co-founded by Lynne Cheney and rose to prominence during the Iraq War, more recently issued a statement that argues for boards of trustees to be more activist; it reads in part:

Trustees *must have the last word* when it comes to guarding the central values of American higher education—academic excellence and academic freedom [emphasis added]. The preservation of academic freedom, freedom of expression, and the integrity of scholarship and teaching rightly falls under their purview. While the occasions should be rare, they must be prepared to intervene when internal constituencies are unable or unwilling to institute urgently needed reforms.³

While this avowed responsibility to protect academic freedom sounds positive on the face of it, what ACTA actually means is the academic freedom of pro-Zionist scholars. Using the argument that anti-Semitic

activist academics are not allowing “all sides” to be voiced (with scant proof), ACTA is intervening into the educational mission of the university. And this mentality again jibes with the action of the UIUC trustees in denying Salaita employment—the silver bullet that kills academic freedom is in this case “civility” combined with “balance.”

Consider Gary Tobin, Aryeh Weinberg, and Jenna Ferer’s *The Uncivil University: Politics and Propaganda in American Education* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2005). They begin their book by evoking the Free Speech Movement, only to immediately limit it by evoking the notion of civility. They note the inscription at Sproul Plaza commemorating the FSM, which reads, “This soil and the air space extending above it shall not be a part of any nation and shall not be subject to any entity’s jurisdiction.” Then they negate that: “Despite the myth surrounding the seal and its ring of soil, it is not—it cannot be—an absolute sanctuary for those who wish to abuse the right of free speech, because no such place exists. . . Both the rules of the larger society and the social norms of the campus require reasonable boundaries on what can be said. Perhaps the campus has fewer constraints, but safety and civility necessitate that some limits are imposed.”⁴

After briefly mentioning an anecdote wherein some African American and Latino colleagues ostensibly complain of “incivility,” the book turns to focus specifically and exclusively on criticism of Israel, which it argues is exactly the same as anti-Semitism:

This volume examines one particularly egregious and uncivil violation of public trust—the ideology and expression of anti-Semitism and anti-Israelism in higher education. We examine these two closely-related prejudices on college campuses, because the presence of anti-Semitism in a community has always been a reliable indicator of its ill health. In a civil university, no group is singled out for slander, no democratic nation is declared illegitimate, no political ideology warps the pursuit of truth. . . And yet, Jewish students report being intimidated, both inside and outside the classroom, and being intellectually and socially threatened for what they believe. In many universities that otherwise consider themselves to be models of civility, anti-Semitism and anti-Israelism are not only tolerated but allowed to flourish.⁵

Not only are “anti-Semitism” and “anti-Israelism” conflated here, but also note that although “no group” should be slandered, it is specifically the presence of anti-Semitism that may serve as a “reliable” indicator of an institution’s ill health. Not only are administrators now charged with enforcing the civility code, but they are also faced with boards of trustees that are pressing them to do so, even if it means short-circuiting faculty governance. Consider this blurb for *The Uncivil University*:

The one-sided coercive atmosphere prevalent on so many of our campuses is depriving an entire generation of the kind of education they deserve. When it comes to social, political, religious, and ideological matters, the academy has too often shown a pronounced preference for only one perspective. As this important book makes clear, it is high time for all of us to insist that colleges promote a civil yet robust exchange of ideas – the very foundation of a liberal education.⁶

It is instructive to compare the original target of ACTA activism and its targeting of anti-Israel criticism today. In 2001, ACTA published a pamphlet entitled “Defending Civilization: How Our Universities Are Failing America and What Can Be Done About It,” which contained a list of 115 “suspicious” statements protesters made that were worthy of concern. Here are some examples from that list: “[We should] build bridges and relationships, not simply bombs and walls,” and “[I deplore those] who are deploying rhetoric and deploying troops without thinking before they speak,” and “There is a lot of skepticism about the administration’s policies of going to war.” Today, ACTA’s aim is toward anti-Israel protests, but like its attack on antiwar activism, it uses speech control, now in the guise of “civility” management. So much for freedom of expression – the specific topics of permissible expression are manifest here. What we see in Salaita’s case is the convergence of ideology and capital. The case against Salaita was fueled doubly – by the strength of external and internal Zionist forces and the power of an economic boycott.

Steven Salaita’s contribution, “Normatizing State Power: Uncritical Ethical Praxis and Zionism,” maps out the violent contraction of the liberal premise:

While most scholars and university administrators talk glowingly of engaging broad audiences and working to improve the world, such talk is invariably in the abstract, denoting a reproduction of ideals and not actual change—at least not the type that would threaten the socioeconomic privileges most administrators and professors ardently protect. It is sometimes from within this gap between discursive showmanship and substantive praxis that controversies over faculty activism and scholarship arise.... To be more specific, charges of unjustifiably politically motivated research and of unwarranted politicization of scholarship work overwhelmingly—sometimes implicitly but often explicitly—to maintain Zionism’s normative status and to protect Israel from any serious criticism, no matter how demonstrable and legitimate (218).

As many of the essays show, while the Zionist censoring of criticism of Israel (even in the tamest forms) is a major part of the clamp down on academic activities of a certain sort, it is not the only thing that can bring about censorship, intimidation, and soft and hard threats to those who speak out. Basically, anything that seriously affects the cultural and real capital of universities is to be controlled. In general anything that blemishes the university’s entirely unreal depiction of itself as a safe, liberal, balanced, well-functioning machine dispensing knowledge to happy and employable consumers, all engaged equally in the common pursuit of real learning, unencumbered by racism, sexism, homophobia, is to be discouraged. Of course, as part of the classic liberal contradiction, universities often do mount very important and valuable antiracist, antisexist, antihomophobia efforts, and one should not not commend them for doing so. And yet there is always a line that cannot be crossed—actual structure changes that might be seen to impinge on the “real” educational mission of the university are mostly contained.

Farah Godrej’s excellent, “Neoliberalism, Militarization, and the Price of Dissent: Policing Protest at the University of California,” shows how this is accomplished. Like many of the other essays in this volume, Godrej’s shows the way rhetorical contortion—what she calls “rhetorical criminalization” (131)—allows for and legitimizes discipline and punishment from several angles and agents at once. She notes the combined use of a militarized police force and “deliberate and systematic criminalization of all dissent” (127). Furthermore, she notes

“in instances where the university does not directly criminalize its own faculty and students, it appears to encourage and even assist the state’s legal authorities to act against those who threaten the systematic logic of privatization and neoliberalism” (139).

Like Steven Salaita’s suggestion that “rather than demanding an enforcement of academic freedom, it might be useful for us to appraise the insidious descriptive commonplaces that, like ‘political,’ undermine whatever protections academic freedom has the power to offer” (229), Vijay Prashad’s, “Teaching by Candlelight,” similarly broadens the scope and degree of the kinds of critique in which we need to engage, precisely along the axis of democracy: “Campus democracy needs to be understood on a far greater canvas than in the terms of ‘academic freedom.’ We have to be alert to the fact that it is this narrowed notion of democracy (academic freedom) that allows our intellectual institutions to get away with a great deal of undemocratic activity” (330). In a countermotion, Prashad proposes the “creation of a culture of solidarity over a culture of hierarchy” (338). And this is precisely what we find in a fine series of meditations by Sylvanna Falcón, Sharmila Lodhia, Molly Talcott, and Dana Collins in “Teaching Liberal-Imperial Discourse: A Critical Dialogue about Antiracist Feminisms.” In this series of statements, the authors tell of the genesis and development of the Collective of Antiracist-Feminist Scholar Activists (CASA):

We are fostering a distinct academic community with CASA, one where all of us not only belong but also are essential to a new way of thinking, teaching, writing, and practicing antiracist and anti-imperialist feminisms... not only does our sharing agitate against the isolation and individualism of academic work but also our dialogue has allowed a creative, and at times magical, convergence of our areas of expertise and approaches (276).

Here then is a refreshingly unfettered and unprogrammed notion of “interdisciplinarity,” that evades instant commodification and purposing by the academy.

I will end this review essay with the final segment from a recent blog I did in Salon, commenting upon the new entry into the field of rhetorical criminalization (“divisiveness”), specifically as it is evoked

to stifle talk about divestment from firms doing business that enhances and advances the illegal Occupation in Palestine:

Civility (or something that would describe a mutually-negotiated protocol for how debate can be conducted such that each party is equally free to express their views), is certainly important, most especially in the classroom. But along with the need to look carefully at exactly how the idea of civility is being sometimes very selectively enforced by administrators, it is crucial to look at another term that is now being trotted out. If civility is the positive ideal to which we should adhere as we enter into our debates over divestment from companies that facilitate the Israeli Occupation, then "divisiveness" is the negative consequence of even broaching the subject, according to some people. And just as much as we should be very careful indeed about signing on reflexively to "civility," so too should we pause before we back off from the topic of divestment (or boycott, or sanctions) because it is "divisive."

For many of us who were alive during both the civil rights era and the Vietnam war, the call to maintain "peace" and tranquility, to keep the status quo, seemed an all too transparent pretext for keeping the forces of oppression, injustice, and authoritarian discipline firmly in place. It rang entirely false. The condemnation of protest, of calls for change, all in the name of protecting us from "divisiveness," were to our minds premised on the illusion that the world was not already divided. And it was divided in a way in which the weak, the powerless, the disenfranchised, were contained and exploited. And from the point of view of those who were comfortable with that situation, calls for change were variously annoying, troubling, upsetting, outrageous, depending on the nature and the volume of protest against and resistance to the status quo. The label of "divisive" was slapped on any and every serious protest.

It is an enormous irony (and "irony" does not even begin to describe this) that recently it was our current Secretary of Homeland Security, Jeh Johnson, who reminded us that Martin Luther King Jr. was considered 'divisive' in his time:

‘Almost every American alive knows the words “I have a dream” should be associated with Martin Luther King,’ Johnson said in a speech at the Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial in Washington. ‘How many Americans know what Martin Luther King actually fought for and died for?’

Johnson alluded to the violent reaction that often met protests led by King. ‘The reality is that, in his time, the man we honor today with a national holiday was divisive; to many, he was a troublemaker, to force the social change we now all celebrate,’ Johnson said. ‘When Dr. King arrived in many of the same cities for which a major street is now named for him, the mayor and the police commissioner viewed his visit with dread and couldn’t wait for him to leave.’ In fact, a document found in the King Center archive is specifically entitled, ‘Race Hate and Divisiveness’: ‘Rev Dr Martin Luther King’s plan to disrupt the larger Northern cities with massive demonstrations of civil disobedience is the latest in a series of misguided moves that can only provoke greater divisiveness and discord.’

We have to understand how it is that Secretary Johnson can say he did.

In the safe distance of history, it’s fine to “remind” us of who King was—a man who was scorned, condemned, hated, and yes, spied upon by the FBI, an agency whose function is not at all unlike that of Homeland Security, after all. It’s fine to say these righteous things when you are on this side of history, when the struggles of King and Malcolm X and others have finally yielded some degree of freedom.

But how about we learn from that insight—that those we condemn in the present for creating ‘divisiveness’ might be the voices of liberation and justice that we will celebrate in the future? The success of the student movements to divest, the success of organizations and cultural workers engaged in the academic and cultural boycott of Israel, the endorsement of BDS by Jewish Voice for Peace, might be seen as charting the way

out of a false sense of unity, a unity that has been underwritten by silence and fear.

Indeed, in his famous 'Letter from a Birmingham Jail,' Martin Luther King, Jr., spoke explicitly on this issue: 'I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro's great stumbling block in his stride toward freedom is not the White Citizen's Council or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate, who is more devoted to "order" than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice.'

No one would want to endorse divisiveness for its own sake, divisiveness in a thoughtless and purposefully destructive manner. But it's important for us to take stock of why and how we are 'united.' And why be united around injustice? Is our peace of mind worth backing off from serious discussions of complex and urgent social issues? Is that what a university is for?⁷

I would suggest that we broaden the point I was making here about the specific actions to divest to the larger one that presses against supposedly "liberal," but actually very *illiberal* ideas and practices in the University (and in our world in general)—we must reclaim and reinfect words like "political," "democracy," and "academic freedom." But even more importantly, we must instantiate more radical ways of putting them into practice, and remain in solidarity with those of us who are then disciplined for doing so.

NOTES

¹ Randolph S. Bourne, *War and the Intellectuals, Collected Essays, 1915–1919* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1999), 152–53.

² For more information, see my piece, "Why the 'Unhiring' of Steven Salaita is a Threat to Academic Freedom," *The Nation*, 28 August 2014, <http://www.thenation.com/article/181406/why-unhiring-steven-salaita-threat-academic-freedom>.

³ Mark LeVine, "The Latest on the Salaita Case at the University of Illinois," *Remaking the University*, 23 August 2014,

<http://utotherescue.blogspot.com/2014/08/the-latest-on-salaita-case-at.html>

⁴ Gary Tobin, Aryeh Weinberg, and Jenna Ferer, *The Uncivil University: Politics and Propaganda in American Education* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2005), 1.

⁵ Tobin et. al., *The Uncivil University*, 6.

⁶ Anne Neal, president, American Council of Trustees and Alumni.

⁷ David Paumbo-Liu, "What Would MLK Say?: Divestment and the Call for 'Order' Over Justice," *Salon*, 17 March 2015, http://www.salon.com/2015/03/17/what_would_mlk_say_divestment_and_the_call_for_order_over_justice/