The Black Days of Bear Markets: Defending a Democratic Conception of Higher Education

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Abstract

This article examines the promise of critical education in the contemporary era. It asks whether careerist or corporatist training models of university education are premised on the untenable assumption that educational neutrality is possible. It suggests that we reaffirm the role of the university as an autonomous, democratic, learning community and begin to see the need for a critical citizenship model of "higher" education. A central part of this equation is the need to reconceptualize tenure, not simply as a form of autonomy from external constraint, but, as a fiduciary obligation to democratic principles and communities.

Introduction: The Cost of Freedom?

As a young Ph.D. candidate, I was very troubled to read a recent Globe and Mail article entitled "Black Days for Those Dreaming of the Ivory Tower" (Church, 2009).[1] Though, in many respects informative, the piece exemplified a perspective which is the result of a public haunted by the interminable spectre of their own expendability. In my mind, it embodies the threat posed by two distinct but interrelated conceptualizations of university education: namely, a corporate training model and a "professional" careerist model. In some ways, both forms of university education make the mistake of assuming that democracy, like the free market, can continue to flourish on the fractured bedrock of easy choices. For too many students and teachers, democracy is a kind of theatre backdrop, there to provide a place for us to get on with the scripted action of getting ahead in the world.

Although the democratic conception of education is often associated with a naïve idealism, I want to emphasize its utility and its importance to the university as a progressive, socially responsive institution. In particular, the writings of critical educators such as John Dewey (1944), and, more recently, Nel Noddings (2006), Michael Apple (2003; 2004) and Henry Giroux (2004; 2005; 2006), stress the need to define collective forms of self governance which have their basis in a critical conception of an educated, informed citizenry. Towards such an aim, the university has an affirmative duty to balance public goods with a sense of the importance of individual autonomy. Starting with the assumption that these lessons have key implications for teacher educators uniquely positioned in relation to atrophying public spheres, I want to argue for the inevitability of ideological positioning, as well as, the futility of somehow attempting to place ideology above practical politics. The deteriorating state of democracy in the contemporary western world, the polarization of global society and the faltering economy are interconnected, deeply complex, problems. The primary educational issue, seen in such a context, is not whether the university will become a site of more effective post industrial training, but whether it will continue to act as an incubator for democratic values which themselves shape the direction of markets and governments.

How, then, can we as educators and citizens help cultivate democratic forms of political organization uniquely responsive to a broad array of problem solving approaches? For the critical educator, the problem is one of producing citizens who are both democratically minded and productive as opposed to acting as the simple pawns in partisan power plays or the neglected wards of self indulgent elites. In the words of Bill Readings (1996) "the University is becoming a different kind of institution, one that is no longer linked to the destiny of the nation-state by virtue of its role as producer, protector and inculcator of an idea of national culture" (Readings, 1996, p. 3). If Readings (1996) is right, the idea of the university as a democratic cultural inheritance can help us bridge this difficult time of economic, political and moral crisis by protecting democratic values even as the nation state and the civil protections it affords are assailed, both from inside and without.

The Marketplace in Ruins: Making Sense of the Prospects for Democracy In A World of Failing States

Much contemporary media commentary, like Church's (2009) Globe piece, seems to ignore the possibility that education is anything more than a form of training which takes its meaning from the "rational" marketplace. In such a system, the value of university training is to help educational consumers find higher paying, status enhancing, jobs. Since education is a demand driven activity, educational success is about the degree of congruence found between educational training and the market. "Good" higher education is education which enables students to achieve a good fit by remaining "mobile" and "flexible". Competition drives and structures educational systems for the better, university education included.

However, despite the importance of democratic education, the seriousness of today's economic challenges for new university graduates should not be understated. As Church (2009) points out, the past decade was characterized by predictions of a dire shortage of academic workers, driving dramatically increasing graduate school enrollments. And yet, suddenly, as the economic system began its recent precipitous decline, the threat of redundancy once again reared its ugly head for contemporary academic "knowledge workers".

What are we to make of such a sudden reversal of fortunes in a time when nation states are incongruously charged with the task of "bailing out" the very corporations which sought to avoid their "oppressive" taxation structures? Ironically the globalization entrenched by multi-lateral trade agreements regarding intellectual property rights, agriculture, services, and barriers to trade (such as the *World Trade Organization Agreement*) is premised on an undemocratic delegation of sovereignty by nation states to transnational regulatory bodies. A key aim of these treaties is the removal of barriers to trade and international finance through unfair competitive advantage. In practice this has also meant a massive reduction in the social function of nation states through the "rationalization" of the state's public functions.[2]

Of course, the new global citizen is often one who does not enjoy the more robust guarantees provided by constitutional freedoms and rights. Clearly, in an age of perennial outsourcing we have yet to fully appreciate the impact of a form of "progress" which downsizes our libertarian rights at the same time it places each of us at the mercy of a ruthlessly efficient (or indifferent) global marketplace. Unfortunately, forgetting that fundamental rights have their historical genesis in social struggle makes such an authoritarian future increasingly likely. Failing to recognize the fact that inherently rights are not defined solely in terms of utilitarian considerations, is a lesson often erased by a creeping cultural amnesia.[3]

Indeed, the contemporary crisis pedagogy often means that what Naomi Klein (2007) has termed “disaster capitalism” takes advantage of mass ignorance and confusion in times of crisis to effect hegemonic agendas. As media coverage of mass protests has shown, dominant cultures recognize the threat inherent in grassroots democratic movements and often take pains to emphasize the negative aspects of popular action. Such corporate mass media re-education has also prevented incidents such as the 2007 exposure of provocateurs at the Montebello summit from being appreciated for what they are: disturbing examples of the erosion of fundamental democratic rights under the pretence of collective security. Somehow we have forgotten that affording those we disagree with or feel threatened by the right to speak, march, or protest is at the heart of the rationale underpinning fundamental democratic rights. Somewhere along the line, radical protest has come to be the prerogative of a faithful few, pacing sallow faced, within the gloomy confines of walled, free speech zones.

Perhaps we need to reconceptualize our notions of success to realize the relevance of public goods? Here, at least, have the hard earned lessons of the past decade impressed upon us the fact that individual autonomy, like the environment, may be another such public good worthy of careful public attention? How does the fact that we live and work in a democracy influence our vocation as academics, citizens and teachers?

To answer these questions we first need to consider what it is that makes a democracy distinct from other forms of social organization. As a state sponsored activity, education is fundamentally a social process, and, as such, necessarily presupposes some conception of the desired formulation of society and the interaction of its identifiable constituent groups. As such, not only is educational neutrality impossible but any pretense to such a disinterestedness is, at best, disingenuous (deCastell, 2004; Fish, 1994). As Dewey (2005) puts it “the two points selected by which to measure the worth of a form of social life are the extent in which the interests of a group are shared by all its members, and the fullness of freedom with which it interacts with other groups” (Dewey, 2005, p. 60). Democratic education, or what Dewey (2005) terms the “Democratic Ideal”, always entails the need to balance socialization with freedom (Dewey, 2005, p. 52).[4]

Democracy then, tends to broaden notions of the “common interest” used to inform the collective activity of social governance, at the same time as it minimizes public forms of official interference. Thus, democratic education requires us to consider, not only the nature of interests it promotes, but also, the types of barriers which it may legitimately impose upon individuals and groups. In Dewey’s mind, it is as false to suppose that democracy should not be responsive to the needs of society as it is to define the needs of society narrowly in accordance with the privileged needs of any one dominant group.

Dewey’s social vision, however, is not furthered by educational aims and values which blissfully equate pragmatic and moral worth with professional norms, a practice which often confuses the vocation of the educator with that of the bureaucrat (Simon, 1996). In this case, the key virtue is obedience to institutional norms as the primary goal is professional recognition or advancement achieved in accordance with processes such as peer review: the ground rules set out by the professional meritocracy. Within the contemporary academy this tendency is reflected in the pervasive near ascetic notion of the academic as expert, as universities are popularly portrayed as the biding places of technicians whose work is, by and large, characterized by a greater degree of autonomy than in the private sector.

The problem with this model is that the line between corporate influence and academic autonomy is becoming blurred, as research agendas, at least in the broad sense, are increasingly influenced by large corporations in pharmaceutical, defence, and high tech industries (Fink, 2008). The key goal of the academic worker in this framework is profitable innovation. Through funding regimes and the disposition of intellectual property rights, autonomy becomes increasingly subject to utilitarian considerations. As the Canadian Association of University Teachers has recently pointed out this is especially evident in the case of the 2009 budget, which, not only reduces research funding for Canada's three major research institutes (SSHRC, NSERC and CIHR) by some 5% or $148 million over three years, but also takes the disturbing step of tying funding to very particular aims (CAUT Bulletin, 2009). A recent article in the University Association newsletter describes some of the most egregious examples of political interference:

> The 2009 budget…provides $87.5 million for new Canada Graduate Scholarships over the next three years, but specifies that 'scholarships granted by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council will be focused on business-related degrees.' The budget also stipulates that the bulk of infrastructure money given to the Canada Foundation for Innovation is for future priority projects identified by the Minister of Industry (albeit in 'consultation' with the foundation). And, instead of allowing the peer-review process to determine which research centres are funded, the budget allocates $50 million to the Institute for Quantum Computing in Waterloo for a new research facility 'that will contribute to achieving the goals of the Government's science and technology strategy.' (CAUT Bulletin, April 2009, p. 1)

In an open letter to the prime minister dated February 12, 2009 the CAUT Executive further describes the recent history of government interference in Canadian research institutions and universities:

> Compounding the problem are attempts to direct what research is done. This is not a new issue. The 2008 federal budget stipulated that increased funding for NSERC could only be spent on research in the automotive, manufacturing, forestry and fishing sectors – leaving no opportunity for the majority of Canada's biologists, chemists and physicists. SSHRC was limited to spending its new funding in two areas – researching the impact of environmental changes on Canadians and examining economic development needs in northern communities. Important as these are, it was a narrow directive to apply to the only council responsible for funding Canada's research in philosophy, history, criminology, anthropology, drama, literature and other humanities and social sciences. This followed the 2007 budget, which restricted all new SSHRC funding to research in management, business and finance, meaning there was no new funding for the majority of Canada's scholars in the social sciences and humanities.
>
> (CAUT Bulletin, February 12, 2009)

While we all want to ensure that the proverbial trains run on time, what are the social costs of such blatant forms of political interference? All too often, unfortunately, public problems have been defined in terms which require radical, top down solutions and unquestioning adherence to the dictates of a radical right conception of governance.

In many respects such an elitism relies upon a form of public pedagogy that justifies or acclimatizes populations to large scale, often disadvantageous, structural changes. Recently, this authoritarian prerogative of the knowing expert was evident in the way the late Nobel Prize winning economist and Chicago School luminary, Milton Friedman and his acolytes, saw the Katrina disaster as a unique opportunity to reform the public educational system, by using New Orleans as a mass test case of sorts for private charter schools. In Friedman's words:

> Most New Orleans schools are in ruin…as are the homes of children who have attended the. The children are now scattered all over the country. This is a tragedy. It is also an opportunity to radically reform the educational system. (Friedman in Klein, 2007, p. 5)

Freidman's ideologically driven opportunism might equally apply to the contemporary state of the university in the wake of the crisis created by the end of Cold War funding, and the norming of right wing authoritarian values. Without wishing to be alarmist, it is worth noting that Germany in the decade leading up to the war saw similar economic and security related fears, as it imagined itself to be assailed by hidden foreign enemies – a crisis cumulating in the far reaching Reichstag Fire Decree of 1933 which effectively placed Germany under one party rule. This may seem like a far fetched example, but, given what is at stake, I think that the specter of what Giroux has termed "proto fascism" is at least as worthy of attention as the absurd figure of the shadowy, cave dwelling terrorist (Giroux, 2004; 2005).

The War on Terror has no doubt impressed upon us the need for all of us to be continually vigilant against the ubiquitous, unseen threat of the state's powerful and unprincipled enemies. Perhaps in some way this is a shadow of another form of threat, equally pernicious and equally dangerous to the integrity and survival of our lives and our form of governance as we know it – the perennial, often unseen, threat of authoritarianism. Nietzsche's famous dictum "[w]hoever fights monsters should see to it that in the process he does not become a monster" might equally apply in the contemporary world to the dangers inherent in trading security for liberty (Nietzsche, 2000, p. 297). Freedom, apparently, is one "good" which globalism cannot seem to mass produce more efficiently. In such a context, careerism or corporatism appear as equal parts cowardice and short sighted self indulgence, in their largely unchecked proliferation, and form an historical indictment of sorts on the current generation.

In an age of austerity how do we deal with the contradiction posed by taxpayer sponsored bailouts for the wealthy, irresponsible purveyors of exotic, dubious financial instruments? In many cases our democracy has become hostage to a reductive, sensationalist infotainment industry which has, by in large, removed any vestige of an informed, critical, public sphere. All too often the popular will is mesmerized by a narrowly defined conception of patriotism which can be seen as vacuous at best. Indeed, Ann Coulter's (2005) anger at Ward Churchill's questioning of the highjackers' motivations for the 911 attacks is a case in point. Coulter (2005), in characteristic bombastic fashion, uses the Churchill "incident" to question the institutional norms and values which safeguard tenured speech:

> The whole idea behind free speech is that in a marketplace of ideas, the truth will prevail. But liberals believe there is no such thing as truth and no idea can ever be false (unless it makes feminists cry, such as the idea that there are innate differences between men and women). Liberals are so enamored with the process of free speech that they have forgotten about the goal.

Faced with a professor who is a screaming lunatic, they retreat to, "Yes, but academic freedom, tenure, free speech, blah, blah," and their little liberal minds go into autopilot with all the slogans.

Why is it, again, that we are so committed to never, ever firing professors for their speech? Because we can't trust state officials to draw any lines at all here? Because ... because ... because they might start with crackpots like Ward Churchill — but soon liberals would be endangered? Liberals don't think there is any conceivable line between them and Churchill? *Ipse dixit.* (Coulter, 2005)[5]

Coulter's (2005) vitriol glosses over the long history of struggle which created and sustained academic tenure in the west. Some examples include Bertrand Russell's ordeals at Cambridge, Lee Lorch and Chandler Davis under McCarthyism, as well as David Healy, Israel Halperin, Harry Crowe, Sunera Thobani (Turk & Manson, 2007); and, more recently, the University of South Florida for its firing of Sami al-Arian – an institution whose Board of Trustees, incidentally, has defined misconduct for even tenured professors as any "behaviour the university deems 'detrimental to the best interests of the university'" (Catano, 2003; Schrecker, 2006).

In most of these cases, the offensive, often "unpatriotic", nature of speech is deemed sufficient cause for discipline despite the traditional protections offered by academic freedom. In times of crisis, quite often, authorities close ranks around the guiding principles of security, order and the national interest, without remembering that the fabric of civil society is made up of those rights and principles which allow it to remain democratic. Regardless of the content of offensive speech, then, the independent thought which the university is intended to protect is premised upon the idea that the peace and order which governance is designed to protect are defined, even made possible, by the continued existence of fundamental rights. Order without democratic principles is, in short, tyranny.

Despite their rancorous tenor, then, there is a lesson to be learned from Coulter's (2005) comments. Firstly, they illustrate the importance of solidarity within academic ranks, around the principle of academic freedom as well as through proactive professional associations (Fink, 2008, p 232). Secondly, despite the impertinent, insensitive, nature of Churchill's remarks, clearly the furor surrounding the issue was very much related to a broader and more systematic attempt to discredit the academic left (Giroux, 2006). As Cole (2007) notes, such institutional witch hunts are often rooted in a desire to reign in outspoken critics of corporatism and chill further dissent:

> [this] Orwellian ploy—of calling intolerance 'tolerance'—must be seen in a broader context. There is a growing effort to pressure universities to monitor classroom discussion, create speech codes and, more generally, enable disgruntled students to savage professors who express ideas they find disagreeable. There is an effort to transmogrify speech that some people find offensive into a type of action that is punishable. (Cole in Giroux, 2006, p. 12)

Getting back to the educational question, what is wrong here? I want to argue that what is missing from many contemporary tertiary educational models is some sense of the university as an integral democratic institution, comprised of a self directing, autonomous learning community. This is the very public historical tradition of the university which is suffering a protracted, painful, demise. Unfortunately, negative views of university professors based on outdated stereotypes and a lack of understanding of the real nature of tenure and its very real

limitations make defending academic freedom in the current political climate increasingly difficult (Schrecker, 2006, p. 6). In addition, the increasing numbers of sessional and adjunct faculty in many institutions along with the implementation of additional forms of review for even tenured professors raise further concerns (Fink, 2008, p. 230; Schrecker, 2006, p. 9). The reality is, then, that in the words of one commentator, "it makes little sense to talk about defending academic freedom without addressing the structural barriers to it" (Schrecker, 2006). In some ways, it seems, meritocracy raises interesting questions about the ways in which we define and defend our collective interests.

To what degree is the current crisis the result of a state of affairs wherein which "an empty self-referential discourse of excellence has replaced an ideology of national culture and citizenship as a source of university self-evaluation" (Fink, 2008, p. 231)? Despite the fact that all too often efforts to democraticize public education end up becoming simply a form of apologetics for "more big government…dressed up in the language of fairness and balance" (Giroux, 2006, p. 20), university educators can take some direction from this century long public school tradition of social studies education which seeks to combine self exploration, career advancement and values exploration with the development of critical, probing, public orientated, minds. This, in part, is premised on the notion that a hallmark of democratic forms of governance is that they allow citizens to question the legitimacy of their norms and values since this very questioning allows not only for the exposure of error but also the exploration of fundamental democratic principles.

How does this compare with the forms of socialization which we find in the university system? In the case of contemporary "higher" education little credence is given to any form of intellectual work which does not advance one's prospect for either securing funding or career advancement. Primarily this means good marks, grants (increasingly influenced by corporate agendas), marketable theses and peer reviewed publications. The result is an educational system where students have become simply compliant consumers, obedient career opportunists or withdrawn technicians. But, is it possible to instead create a college curriculum which "offer[s]…students the opportunity to learn within a culture of questioning and critical engagement….the knowledge, values, skills, and social relations required for producing individual and social agents capable of addressing the political, economic, and social injustices that diminish the reality and promise of a substantive democracy" (Giroux, 2006, p. 2)?

As Giroux (2006) reminds us, all too often we fail to take the time to examine, or at least, to publicly discuss, the merits of the values and norms we are striving to measure up to. Seeing the university as a place secured by the institutional safeguard of tenure and maintaining a sense of its public mission are indispensable aims for all those concerned with keeping education democratic. Unfortunately, as a public good, it requires going beyond the corporate – careerist paradigm towards a view of education which is both progressive and proactive in its orientation. Perhaps the university itself is in need of a bailout? An infusion of ideas and people who see democracy itself as a training ground - a form of higher education with the university as one of its few beleaguered remaining refuges. A peer review of a different sort?

Conclusion: Those Who Fight Monsters……

As William Readings (1996) has astutely illustrated, when we question the aims and utility of the university as an institution "the analogy of production must itself be brought into question….[f[or what is at stake here is the extent to which the University as an institution participates in the

capitalistic-bureaucratic system" (Readings, 1996, p. 163). While the erosion of tenure remains a key threat to the institutional integrity of the university can we defend it if the parameters of tenure are narrowly interpreted tenure as simply a contractual guarantee of financial security and creative independence? What I want to suggest is that the university, as a cultural phenomenon cannot continue to exist unless we come to see and define tenure not only as a form of freedom from constraint, but, also as essentially a type of fiduciary obligation. Rather than seeing tenure as a kind of privilege held by an elite minority of reclusive scholars, perhaps we should take pains to educate the public of the fact that "academic freedom at universities is built upon a compact between these critically important institutions and the larger society" (Cole, 2007, p. 195). That is, paradoxically, tenure, like democracy itself requires commitment to the institutional frameworks and values which enable it to exist.

While some may regard this as anathema, in many ways it is much akin to challenging the assumption that neutrality in the face of free choice is possible. But of course, neutrality itself is an active stance, a form of choice. In this case, while held individually, tenure and the academic freedom which it makes possible, are at their heart, a form of public good. As such each comes with a responsibility, at least to consider whether the status of tenure entails some form of professional responsibility to safeguard the university's role in ensuring the ongoing viability of democracy. In contrast, the danger is that, in the words of Tierney (2004), "when tenure becomes a goal rather than a structure to preserve the goal, then we [will] have bastardized the meaning of academic life" (Tierney, 2004, p. 175). The self governing, responsible, democratic faculty is at the heart of this conception of academic freedom: an institutional grouping which provides a much needed hedge against the creeping threats embodied by overbearing administrators, academic charlatans and meddlesome bureaucrats (Schrecker, 2006).

Very often, the university remains culturally positioned in relation to the tenuous balance between the demands of a militant populism or an elitist, authoritarian corporatism. As Giroux (2004; 2005; 2006) and others have pointed out, the function of the university as a vital, integral element of the public sphere is of inestimable value in an age of corporatized media and bureaucratized governing interests. The inevitable corollary of this position, of course, is the notion that a university education is much more than mere training or self serving careerism. Given this reality, rather than seeing the University as simply the physical locality for the transmission of inherited forms of knowledge or research into issues of contemporary relevance, we might come to see it as an inherited, transmissible set of cultural values (Giroux, 2006).

And yet, we live in a culture where democracy is being constantly assailed. If the intensification of teachers' work and the standardization of curriculum mean that public schools are being robbed of their democratic heritage, and, if the possibilities for local democracy within communities and labour movements are being simultaneously undermined, where does that leave us? While the internet does provide cause for optimism, it is increasingly being undermined by the twin threats of security concerns and mass consumerism. Given the current state of the public sphere, the university as a set of cultural practices, public and critical in their orientation, fulfills a vital role in democratic socialization. Because of the increasingly rapid erosion of democratic cultures, the reality of economic pressures and the expendability of many potential dissidents, tenured academics are uniquely positioned to exercise their independence in the fulfillment of what might most appropriately characterized as a democratic, fiduciary duty.

Although many of us have been relieved to see a long awaited change in political climate are we at risk of losing sight of the hegemonic constellations of power which rest unchanged behind the masquerade of official partisanship? In some ways, the litmus test of positive change is not

simply whether we are safer but, whether change has allowed us to maintain our most valued and vital democratic institutions. The idea that universities should simply exist as a type of handmaiden to commerce fails to see the value in its role as a purveyor of democratic ideals and values. Good government has its genesis in an informed, critical citizenry and the university plays a key role in ensuring that free, independent thinkers can contribute to an informed, vibrant, public sphere. Unfortunately the opposite seems to be occurring as shallow political rhetoric and a democracy of mass consumption replaces any possibility for a resurgence of an accountable politics of grass roots engagement. Indeed such a state of affairs brings to mind a particular passage from Lewis Carroll (1993):

> 'When I use a word,' Humpty Dumpty said, in a rather scornful tone, 'it means just what I choose it to mean, neither more nor less.'
>
> 'The question is,' said Alice, 'whether you *can* make words mean different things.'
>
> 'The question is,' said Humpty Dumpty, 'which is to be master - that's all. (Carroll, 1993, p. 223)

Will the ubiquitous forces of terror and the market ever allow us to once again be our own masters? I think not, unless we first learn to step through the distorted looking glass of the current age – one which tells us that we should forget the possibility of freedom, for the often illusory promise of a world ruled solely by the intractable gods of unbridled greed and wealth.

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ENDNOTES

1. http://www.globecampus.ca/in-the-news/article/black-days-for-those-dreaming-of-the-ivory-tower/

2. With the obvious exception of defence and surveillance capacities.

3. Though Plato was no democrat by any stretch of the imagination, his "Socrates" provides a timely warning when he admonishes us to consider that "[t]his and no other is the root from which a tyrant springs; when he first appears above ground he is a protector" (*The Republic*, viii, 565).

4. "The two elements in our criterion both point to democracy. The first signifies not only more numerous and more varied points of shared common interest, but greater reliance upon the recognition of mutual interests as a factor in social control. The second means not only freer interaction between social groups (once isolated so far as intention could keep up a separation) but change in social habit—its continuous readjustment through meeting the new situations produced by varied intercourse. And these two traits are precisely what characterize the democratically constituted society" (Dewey, 2005, p. 52).

5. http://www.anncoulter.com/cgi-local/article.cgi?article=42