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Review: *Academic Repression: Reflections from the Academic Industrial Complex* edited by Anthony J. Nocella, II, Steven Best, and Peter McLaren

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Academic Repression: Reflections from the Academic Industrial Complex edited by Anthony J. Nocella, II, Steven Best, and Peter McLaren. Edinburgh: AK Press, 2010. 600 pp. ISBN: 978-1-904859-98-7.

In his foreword to the book, Michael Bérubé describes how *Academic Repression* “managed to generate hostile commentary well before it was published” (p. 1). From the opening lines of the text, *Academic Repression* announces itself as something that exudes controversy, a tell-all look. This is a book of fear-mongering amongst liberal educators and Bérubé’s introduction wants the dewy-eyed reader to know that there are forces at work that would rather you spent time reading something else. However, instead of simply creating a tactical counter-offense to the discussed right’s attack on intellectual freedom, Bérubé merely contextualizes the internal debates of the authors within the text.

What is most clear, however, is not necessarily the overwhelming tyranny of an oppressive right on academic freedom. The editors take the initial strides to historically situate the repressive academic practices only long enough to convey fear, point fingers, and leave a glooming gap in the area of steps for proactivity.

Demarcating itself as more than a left versus right polemic, the argument delineated in *Academic Repression* is one that moves beyond the binaries that mire political growth. It is not a “conservative/liberal/radical issue, it is rather a viral concern for all scholars, whatever their race, ethnicity, gender, or ideological-political orientation” (p. 30).

Over the course of the more than 80-page introduction, the book’s editors paint the picture of a less than free academic landscape. Instead of pointing to current conservative swings in academic policies, the authors describe the current climate as simply part of an ongoing shift in repressive policies, reactionary politics, and capitalist instructional practices.

The book continues the ongoing campaign to illustrate the suppression within the academy: Henry Giroux’s 2007 *The University in Chains: Confronting the Military Industrial-Academic Complex*, for instance, is a wholesale prelude to the work compiled here.

A book seen more as a product, a controversy, or a call for action than an academic tome, the chapters in *Academic Repression* are not above name-calling and pointing fingers when legitimizing their larger arguments. And while the approach in some chapters and the introduction makes for fun he-said-she-said tattletale interlocutors, it needs to be clear that it is beyond the scope of this book to further research. Instead, it is a work disseminating a warning call and lobbing the shuttlecock of debate back toward the described adversaries of academic freedom. Namely, David Horowitz, Phil DiStefano (the interim chancellor at the University of Colorado at Boulder), and critic Todd Gitlin are among the company named who are establishing the contemporary precedent of repression in

the academy. The context in which these individuals and others are identified is often striking; what is problematic, however, is that they are summarily dealt with less with critical response than with name-calling. Rik Scarce, in his preface, writes, “Perhaps the greatest danger in contributing to a book like this is that authors can come across as whining, self-serving, or both” (p. 5). And Scarce could not be more apt in his analysis; this danger is oftentimes the reality for portions of this book.

The description of higher education as “anathema to free thinking” (p. 13) is one that is not only reiterated but also cemented in chapter after chapter of the book. This central conceit, in fact, is not merely repeated as an issue of current concern. Instead, the editors attempt to pull back the curtain and reveal the legacy of higher education as a place that is staunchly situated within repressive practice. Bluntly, the book’s editors describe an ongoing history that makes academic freedom little more than brobdingnagian illusion: “Perhaps the largest myths to expose in our culture today still are freedom and democracy – institutional and personal conditions that are not only in steep decline in the current post-9/11 era, but have never existed in any significant form” (p. 13).

This history is one that helps contextualize academics—at least early on—“as a largely placid and privileged bunch that lacked the practical savvy to organize to protect their interests” (p. 17). Responding to the influence of the corporatization of universities, the founding of the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) in 1915 began a “long and crucial path of institutionalizing academic freedom in a formal tenure system” (p. 18).

Aside from a couple of brief contributions in the section titled “Fast Times at Corporate Higher Ed.,” the book disregards one of the powerful points of analysis the editors make in the introduction. In describing proactivity to resisting the academic industrial complex, the authors write, “It is important to stress that the groundwork for advancing and protecting academic freedom was laid down by students, not by professors – by the youth, the counterculture, and the New Left, none of whom had titles, positions, reputations, retirement packages, sponsors, bosses, or any such ballast” (p. 39). By not paying heed to this potential of fomenting change by youth, opportunities for fundamental change are lost. It is this very element that is missing which would singlehandedly elevate this book above anecdotal cautionary tales to a necessary tome of reason and action.

In considering this point, it is worth questioning the intended audience of this work; the lengthy case studies from academics suggest this book is an illustrative concern for colleagues within the academy. The fact that the book is published by AK Press, an anarchist-centered publisher not typically known for academic tomes, indicates a work intended for more general consumption. Ultimately, however, the lack of guidelines for youth, for including young people

in analysis or scope, indicates a tragic affinity with the repressive efforts the authors are fighting against: “The flip-side of the strategy to demonize professors is to *infantilize* students” (p. 50). This analysis is not to be read as an attack on the work as a whole; it is an attempt to highlight a lost opportunity within the larger scale of a powerful argument that incites readers’ interest in action.

With such a strong array of academics aligned and taking their best shots at repressive institutional practices, it would be useful to better illustrate how the academic industrial complex is or is not fostered prior to post-secondary matriculation; what are the precedents for this in the public school system? Indeed, the corporatization of public schools in both structure and media depiction is not only recognized but also elaborated upon by the very scholars who comprise this collection. Similarly, the way an undemocratic higher educational institution affects the very students it coerces, shapes, and pushes through its corridors is something with effects that reach well beyond the few years most participants undertake a college degree.

Howard Zinn calls for action in the book’s concluding section, stating: “Our education system is geared to prepare young people to become successful within the confines of the present society. It doesn’t prepare them to question this present society, to ask if fundamental change is needed” (p. 466). Likewise, the need for sparking action is reiterated in a recycled interview with Peter McLaren in this section. Again, the illustration of the need for renewed criticality—as advocated in the form of critical pedagogy—is prescient; pragmatics are left for the trial-and-error of the student, professor, and post-doc inspired by the work here.

The sheer numbers represented within the book offer an impressive array of viewpoints and foundational support for the central conceit of repressive practices in the ivory tower. Across the 33 chapters—within seven sections of the book with titles like “Repression At Home and Abroad: Middle East and African Perspectives,” “Academic Slapdown: Case Studies in Repression,” and “Fast Times at Corporate Higher Ed.”—the contributors to this work continue to emphasize the way that higher education is corporatized, militarized, and continuously pushed toward a neo-conservative stance.

In fact, though the text is occasionally problematic as stated above, the sheer scope of the tome makes it an enlightening and necessary read. In representing disciplines ranging from the humanities to marginalized areas and post-colonial studies, *Academic Repression* illuminates and speaks to a wide readership without trivializing or disregarding readers. Further, the more than 40 authors who are included run the gamut of reputation and reception in the public eye: from highly scrutinized researchers like Bill Ayers and Howard Zinn to scholarly activist John Asimakopoulos to rising eco-pedagogue Richard Kahn. From burgeoning scholars to those with legacies of research, the lasting effects of

a corporate and repressive academic regime is seen from the myriad positions that researchers find themselves holding throughout a career in higher education.

Academic Repression represents the needed response to an attempted hostile takeover of higher education in America. The words here—though problematic in response—are necessary. It is worth wading through the assemblage of rhetoric here. What happens next is unclear; the authors indicate the prescience of acting but position themselves to wait merely for the intellectual ball to bounce back into their court.

Reviewer

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