

radicalism, politics, organizing and safety on campus: a little operationalization

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This essay draws on my service as an assistant professor during a very political time period from 1998-2007 at two universities, categorized by the Carnegie ratings as a Research 1 and a Private Masters I. (When referring to the universities I will call them R1 and PM1.) This time period included an intense period of student activism across the country regarding anti-globalization. Having filed my dissertation on the possible emergence of an international anti-corporate social movement a year prior to the Seattle WTO protests, I was thrilled to join my students in this movement, traveling with student-community groups to Seattle and 11 other global economy protests within four years from 1999-2003 and participating in related local and regional social justice campaigns and educational events. This time period also include 9-11 and a time of extraordinary ideological hegemony and censorship as well as courageous exercise of first amendment activity by a broad array of citizens concerned about the future of our country and the world. Finally, this period includes an unprecedented international anti-war mobilization of diverse tactics and participants.

As a scholar trained at a prestigious R1 school focused on publications and cutting edge intellectual battles, which were carried out at full force in faculty meetings and in the hallways, in an atmosphere in which faculty regularly confronted their own university over policies regarding race and gender, I was completely unprepared for the quite different cultural expectations at my first job, where I spent 5 years (I left for personal reasons unrelated to my career or the political climate). In both of my positions, I found myself perceived as responsible for every political action taken by students on campus.

I also found myself perplexed and paralyzed by the geography of campus dissent. Students reported my peers' quite partisan statements in

the classroom, and I observed cynical and pointed political messages displayed in cartoons and newspaper articles on colleagues' doors across many different departments and colleges on campus. However, when I spoke out publicly or organized around these very same issues, I found myself vilified and alone.

This essay is an attempt to characterize forms of academic repression, drawing on my own experience. While my relationship to the alterglobalization movement is unique, my relationship to the events of 9-11 and its aftermath is certainly not unusual. Although this essay does not make claims to representative data, it may be that I occupy a useful perspective for reflecting on these matters during this time period.

The Geography of campus dissent

Radicalism v. Activism: There is a very clear distinction between what people write about and the actions they take in the world. It is not possible to identify allies on the basis of the political positions and claims they make in their scholarship. Many academics take a “critical”, indeed “radical” perspective in their scholarship who do not participate in activism, do not support activism, and will not ally themselves with activists in any way regardless of similarity between their own scholarship and the political issues and perspectives being acted upon.

Private v. Public Statements: Many faculty will have conversations on campus in which they strongly espouse an anti-war position. They may argue passionately for these issues in their classrooms, and even for or against electoral candidates. They may paste very clear political positions to their office doors. However, these persons may avoid associating themselves with any formal public statements, public appearances, or campus visibility about these issues.

What is most interesting about this is that the “private” space I am referring to is *not* the private space of home and off-duty time. There is a perception that classrooms, office doors, and chatting at the beginning of faculty meetings or in the hallway, are “private” safe places in which to express politics, but appearing at a campus event, associating oneself with a student group, or participating openly in a campus campaign, is a more official and vulnerable “public” stance.

I don't know why my perception of space was inverted. I treat my classrooms as spaces where I need to carefully maintain a scholarly stance. I communicate clearly about issues of “bias” and, although I find certain scholarship more convincing than other scholarship, I do not spend class time discussing my personal opinions on political matters. I assiduously avoid any possibility of association with electoral issues (since

that is the legal definition of “political” activity that affects public funding for student groups and 501(c)(3) status). I also avoid partisan conversations that could polarize colleagues. My office door encourages critical and anti-oppression perspectives, but I would never put an anti-Bush message on my door, since I worry that could alienate students who I want to communicate with. I do assertively take political stances regarding militarism, economic globalization, and criminalization issues at rallies, on- and off-campus events, and in petitions and other public texts. I believe it is part of my responsibility as a public intellectual to participate fully, contributing my analyses and skills to such public fora.

Target location: With the exception of the first few months following 9-11, faculty feel most comfortable taking a position on distant political events. Involvement in contentious civic issues is less common. Finally, taking a position on administrative policies is viewed as unwise or even “career suicide”. For example, faculty may feel comfortable using the term “racism” to describe federal policy with regard to Hurricane Katrina. They would be reluctant to use that word with regard to a local event like a police shooting. They would be unlikely to use the word with regard to campus policies; doing so would be considered antagonistic.

To an outsider, this all makes little sense. People unfamiliar with the University might expect it either to be a normal organization, in which people work, leaving their politics at home, or a realm of unlimited free speech. The political containment zones are hard to understand.

Confrontational behavior regarding campus policies, while it cannot be directly censored at a university as insubordination, is seen as unwise from a career perspective because it indicates conflict with administration. In his important 2000 book, *Disciplined Minds*, Jeff Schmidt explains that the most important function of graduate training is to enforce ideological discipline not over the personal political viewpoints of professionals (which have little impact on the world), but over their willingness to conform to professional hierarchies (which has much more serious consequences). He begins the book by noting that “professionals are fundamentally conservative” in the workplace even though most are liberals in their social views. [4] He notes that “depression is most likely to hit the most devoted professionals” because “Today’s disillusioned professionals entered their fields expecting to do work that would ‘make a difference’ in the world and add meaning to their lives...In fact, professional education and employment push people to accept a role in which they do not make a significant difference, a politically subordinate role.” [2] The professions maintain the status quo through the work they define and permit. In the social sciences it is publishing highly specialized articles in elite journals. In medicine it is

"patching people up...never to take a stand against the social inequities that generate so much stress and disease." [109]

Aspiring professionals who are unable or unwilling to conform are weeded out, marginalized, or abused (always using the rhetoric of meritocracy) . As junior professionals realize they will not be able to fulfill their vision of social transformation, they embrace ego and status (and, in fields that offer it, high pay) as the "compensation for intellectual interests and social goals abandoned...Deprived of political control over their own work, they become alienated from their subjects and measure their lives by success in the marketplace." [119, 146] Success is determined by conformity with institutional business. "The qualifying attitude, the way it is favored and the way it is measured are very much the same across the professions. " [21] The attitude which must be demonstrated is "subordination".

Social concepts

Collegiality: Although universities mete out little oversight or sanction to professors, an informal set of priorities serve to restrict political action. In my experience, "collegiality" is one of the most important. It is the secret, determining, ingredient in hiring and promotion decisions. It is an acceptable framework through which to communicate discomfort with or disinterest in queers, women, and people of color.

To me the biggest shocking difference between the R1 where I was trained and the R1 where I found myself working was the latter's top priority emphasis on collegiality, over and above research quality and productivity. Now I certainly like people to be friendly, but several times I saw collegiality get in the way of attempts to assess quality, competence, and the department's diversity responsibilities. Indeed, I was punished for providing an expert assessment of a candidate; this was perceived as an uncollegial act although the task at hand was assessing competency. I thought I was doing my job as a faculty member, only to find out I had a new, overriding job which countermanded scholarly expertise.

While some political activity seems to be *part of* collegiality, such as standing in the halls discussing (loudly and with clear partisanship) presidential candidates and party strategy, other activity is interpreted as an affront to it, such as inviting colleagues to participate in campaigns consistent with their published analyses and espoused politics. During the joke-filled announcement section of a faculty meeting, I announced that the local chapter of Jubilee 2000 was looking for good speakers to speak in churches about third world economics. Since many of my colleagues had published prolifically in this area, I thought they might be interested.

Another very serious violation of collegiality involved a poster produced and distributed by the organizing committee of a teach-in regarding 9-11, of which I was a member (along with other faculty, students, and university staff). The poster included the phrases “Faculty: Send your students!” and “Students: Walk out!” This poster was interpreted as *my* “disrespect” of fellow faculty members rather than as a contribution to the work and traditions of the university and the faculty.

“Brainwashing”/“ringleading”. After some attempts to organize political action with fellow faculty and graduate students, I concluded that they were not a fertile field. Meanwhile, undergraduate students were pouring into my office asking for my support and help with their projects. I decided to “work with the people who are ready to move.” [King 1981] Over the years I worked with several formal student organizations and also with many ad-hoc groups involving a few fellow faculty, along with students, staff, alumni, and community members.

1999-2002 was an upsurge in political activity regarding globalization all over the country and around the world. Students were among the leadership of this activity across the US. Amazingly, I was seen as orchestrating this activity on our campus. Despite my colleagues’ manifest knowledge of the great difficulty of manipulating our students into reading, they believed that I had the capacity to manipulate students into endless meetings, complex planning, uncomfortable travel, and frightening situations involving police. Proud of my teaching as I am, my powers seem to have suffered a marked decline since 2003 — along with the US alterglobalization movement. On the basis of my association with some student activities and activities, I received hysterical phone calls from facilities management blaming me for events about which I had no knowledge whatsoever. Due to phantasmic beliefs about my powers and goals, by 2001, any rumour about me was believable, no matter how unprofessional. My patient department chair would call me in “just to check” that I hadn’t “actually offered your students extra credit for throwing bricks through the windows of Starbucks.”

“*Your* students”: While I may logistically or proudly refer to students as “my students”, it is quite apparent that they do not do what I want or hope they will do. I know that all my colleagues know this to be the dynamic with even their favorite students. Since my days as a graduate student instructor, not one of the 200 students I have worked with each year for more than a dozen years has done what I would have had them do. Standing in the street with my students as they are approached by TV newscameras, they do not say what I would have them say. So if the meaning of “your students” has something to do with ideological or

behavioral obedience, I have been a total failure — a common experience which I know to be a painful one for many faculty.

This is because our students are very much their own people, living in a highly individualistic society, and finding their own path. Any exposure to critical education such as what I and my colleagues offer in our fine sociology courses only expands the array of political and professional opportunities that our students consider. My colleagues know this to be true. Yet when students speak up in colleagues' classes, organize events, confront administrators, and write newspaper articles, they are seen as my puppets. Not only does this indicate a terrible disrespect for *our* students, but it indicates a desire to vilify my work in the most base way, as a cultist. “My” students have been disrespected in this way for conveying information from the *New York Times* of the prior week, for persisting in the use of the word ‘queer’ despite the non-gay professor’s discomfort with that word (and their having provided him with documentation of the use of the word in the academy and by the GLBT movement), and for their sophisticated choice of thesis topic (to which I contributed only one part of the methods section).

At PM1, students who had never actually taken a class with me engaged in spontaneous confrontation of an administrator. The event occurred during a picnic I did not know about until afterwards. They spoke on behalf of an organization of which I was not a participant and which had ignored the advice they sought from me. Their actions were discredited (and I along with them) as “my students”.

Fear & safety

The next layer of understanding academic repression is how faculty deal with their fear and how they try to establish security. Worried about academic repression, faculty try to be “safe”. They do this by navigating the political geography carefully, by disassociating themselves from activities or persons they think might be “dangerous”, and by trying hard not to say the wrong thing.

The most interesting case in this regard is Ward Churchill. When the press, the state of Colorado, and his University sought to punish Ward for a piece of writing, his peers across the country, many of whom agreed with the substance of the point in question if not the rhetoric, did not jump to the aid of his academic freedom and free speech rights. Instead, to a shocking degree, they agreed that he had been unwise in his choice of words.

They bulwarked their personal sense of safety by believing that the massive political assault geared against Churchill would only be used against people who actually *did* something.

As an activist, I know that state repression does not use this kind of

fine grain policy and technical distinction. Instead it releases illegal force indiscriminately to intimidate people from behavior it does not want. The assault on Ward Churchill successfully discouraged academics from speaking their minds, from asserting their rights to speak, and from defending the university's historic role in safeguarding unpopular ideas in the interest of the future.

Faculty behavior in this and related matters is ahistoric, unstrategic, and delusional.

Notes

King, Mel. 1981. *Chain of Change: Struggles for Black Community Development*. South End Press.

Schmidt, Jeff. 2000. *Disciplined Minds: A Critical Look at Salaried Professionals and the Soul*. Rowman & Littlefield.