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**THE CRISIS AT COLUMBIA:
Academic Freedom, Area Studies, and Contingent Labor in the Contemporary
Academy**

New York has always had its share of pest problems, but in spring 2005 a new species of vermin began setting up camp in front of some of the city's most august institutions. Like something from a nuclear-age horror movie, these grubby rodents were alarmingly large, often towering over fifteen feet tall when standing erect on their hind legs. Although New Yorkers have grown used to seeing these monstrous figures outside restaurants and building sites in recent years, the juxtaposition of one such grotesque, scab-encrusted rat with the serene sculptural figures in front of Columbia University's gates was nevertheless more than a little jarring. Planted firmly next to "Letters," the classically proportioned granite statue of a woman with an open book who greets visitors to the university's campus, the huge inflated plastic rat figure was part of a weeklong strike by Columbia University's graduate student employees demanding collective bargaining rights. Although the giant rat of Morningside Heights was placed in front of the university gates to support a specific campaign, it was a symptom of contradictions and conflicts that run deep in academia today.

In the spring of 2005, a cascade of apparently disconnected disruptions that included searing accusations of anti-Semitism and the first coordinated strike by graduate student employees at Ivy League institutions roiled Columbia University. Although they followed hard on one another's heels, commentators seldom linked these disruptions to one another, and never addressed their common cause. Instead, sensational talk of a

leftist putsch, of tenured radicals commandeering the ivory tower and purging right-thinking students, dominated the media and came to define the terms of public debate over higher education in state and national legislative forums. The concept of academic freedom became a keyword and battleground in the controversy over Columbia's Middle East studies program that unfolded on campus and in the media during 2005.¹ This much-misunderstood term refers to the set of practices such as tenure and faculty governance that allow academics to generate new knowledge in an unfettered manner and to disseminate that knowledge using pedagogic practices that inspire critical thinking among students.² With this freedom comes responsibility: scholars must conform to the mores of their disciplines, and their behavior is monitored through a network of institutions that enforce such professional conduct. The point of academic freedom, in other words, is to ensure the autonomous self-governance of higher education and, in so doing, to defend the production of original knowledge for the greater public good. Of course, over the last half-century in the US such notions of independence and public interest have been at best half-truths given the dependence of the humanities and social sciences on funds derived ultimately from the Cold War military-industrial complex. Nonetheless, key articulations of academic freedom such as the American Association of University Professors' "1940 Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure," produced in response to politically motivated attempts to control research and teaching, elaborated a code of professional conduct that has shielded scholars from outside meddling with some success and that has thereby contributed significantly to the dynamism of higher education in the US.

While critical thinking on campus has been embattled since at least the period of campus and counter-reaction during the Vietnam War, following the attacks of September 11 the teaching and scholarship of professors, particularly those working in controversial fields such as area studies, came under attack in a manner unparalleled since the McCarthy era. Waged largely by well-funded private advocacy groups rather than by legislative inquisition, these neo-conservative attacks gained traction not simply because of the broader national climate of anxiety over terrorism. In addition, the autonomy of scholars and the institutions in which they work has been weakened by the quiet but nonetheless dramatic transformation of academia over the last three decades by neo-liberal government policies and corporate power. As a result, not only is the university increasingly subject to external influence from big business and corporate-sponsored pressure groups, but academia itself has come to operate increasingly like a lean-and-mean American firm. As the events at Columbia demonstrate, it is all too easy for groups hostile to academic freedom to play to Americans' perennial antagonism towards what they view as the coddled world of the professoriate, in the process steamrolling over the weak defenses of university administrators whose eyes are increasingly on the financial bottom line, and thereby exacerbating the deep contradictions in contemporary academia. In what follows, I discuss the crisis at Columbia, linking the potency of the neo-conservative attack on the university's Middle East studies program to the creeping corporatization of the university and to the most visible manifestation of academic capitalism: the creation of a mass of contingent instructors whose lack of protection by the protocols of academic freedom hobbles the autonomy and the integrity of the university.

In the spring of 2002, the state of Israel had a serious public relations problem on its hands. Following a wave of deadly suicide bombings by Palestinian factions that culminated in the “Passover Massacre,” Ariel Sharon’s government unleashed Operation Defensive Shield to “catch and arrest terrorists” and to “expose and destroy terrorist facilities and explosives.”³ Within a week, the Israeli Defense Force (IDF) was carrying out major military operations in virtually every Palestinian city. During these operations, strict curfews were enforced, leading to complaints by human rights groups that needy Palestinian civilians were being denied water and medical attention and that Israel was practicing collective punishment, behavior that is prohibited by the Fourth Geneva Convention. Allegations of a slaughter of Palestinian civilians surfaced after the IDF began using heavily armored bulldozers built by the Caterpillar corporation to destroy houses in the Jenin refugee camp, where a protracted battle between Israeli forces and Palestinian militants raged for a week in early April. Rumors circulated for weeks in the world press that hundreds of Palestinian non-combatants had been crushed during the house demolitions. Although human rights organizations such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch ultimately found these rumors to be unfounded, their reports concluded that the IDF had “committed violations of international law during the course of military operations in Jenin and Nablus, including war crimes, for which they must be held responsible.”⁴ Controversy over the events was stoked when the Israeli government insisted that its troops be granted immunity from prosecution for potential violations of international law before agreeing to a United Nations fact-finding commission. The U.N.

mission was ultimately scuttled in the face of Israeli intransigence, leaving many vexing questions unresolved.

The events in Jenin galvanized pro-Palestinian activists on U.S. campuses into circulating divestment petitions. Despite the fact that the petitions *specifically* targeted U.S. firms such as Caterpillar that were providing military support to Israel, anti-divestment forces outnumbered pro-divestment ones by large margins on most campuses.⁵ Nonetheless, the divestment movement generated intense concern among pro-Israeli groups within the United States. That same spring, a group of national Jewish organizations – including the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), the Anti-Defamation League of B’nai B’rith (ADL), and the Zionist Organization of America – banded together to form the Israel on Campus Coalition (ICC). Backed by a \$1,050,000 grant from the oil- and banking-based riches of the Charles and Lynn Schusterman Family Foundation, the ICC drew, according to a Jewish Telegraphic Agency article, on the pro-bono services of a powerful Washington consulting firm, who drafted a plan to “‘take back the campus’ by influencing public opinion through lectures, the Internet, and coalitions.”⁶ Within six months, a student group at Columbia, cleverly calling itself Columbians for Academic Freedom (CAF), had begun work on a film documenting the intimidation allegedly experienced by pro-Israeli students on campus. At the center of their accusations were specific professors in Columbia’s Department of Middle East and Asian Languages and Cultures (MEALAC).

Although the Israel on Campus Coalition’s tactics sent Columbia administrators reeling, they were hardly novel. Back in 1974, representatives of AIPAC, the American Jewish Committee, and the ADL created a “truth squad” to challenge the supposed

growth of pro-Arab propaganda, which they felt threatened Israel's "special relationship" with the United States. According to Robert Friedman, the organizations that created the truth squad "turned into a kind of Jewish thought police" in their zeal to protect what they perceived as Israel's interests.⁷ Using committed college students as well as sources with access to classified documents, the ADL and AIPAC opened files on journalists, politicians, scholars and community activists who were critical of Israel. In addition to monitoring critics' writings, speeches, and professional activities, the groups often also smeared such critics with charges of anti-Semitism or with the pernicious label of self-hating Jew. As Friedman puts it, "the intention was to stifle debate on the Middle East within the Jewish community, the media, and academia, for fear that criticism of any kind would weaken the Jewish state." Similar tactics were in evidence more recently during the firestorm over John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt's article on the Israel lobby and U.S. foreign policy.⁸

Sitting at a dorm-room table whose crinkly aluminum foil covering lingers from recent Passover celebrations is Ariel Beery, a twenty-five year old senior, President of Columbia's School of General Studies, and one of the prime movers of Columbians for Academic Freedom. His shoulder-length curly brown hair and small oval glasses dramatize his public pose as a non-conformist intellectual. Beery's self-description seems calculated to undermine expectations of thought police-like behavior. He is, he says, a proud product of the New York public school system, having grown up in the city after his parents left Israel following the election of the nation's first Likud government. They did not, Beery says, want their children to grow up in such a political climate.

Since age eight he has been an active member in a Socialist Zionist youth movement and, after completing high school, he went to the Gaza Strip as a peace activist. Although he has served in the IDF, he states explicitly that he's against the occupation and the policies of the Sharon regime. Beery tells me he joined the army after meeting Palestinian youths who were "putting their lives on the line and saying, 'Look, I'm only here because I'm willing to defend my people.'" He says this made him ask, "what the hell right do I have to come and try to negotiate for the Zionist side or represent the Israelis if I'm not willing to even serve in the army."⁹

This kind of statement seems typical of Beery, who professes a strong desire to puncture established dogma at every turn, even if it involves serving in the army in order to gain first hand knowledge of what it means to be "on the other side." When I ask him to talk about what he learned from his experience of being in the IDF, he replies, "I truly still believe that there needs to be two narratives known before you can make peace. What was upsetting me a lot when I was in the youth movement here and in Israel was that people did not understand the Zionist narrative, they did not understand the *nakba* [the Arabic term for the 'catastrophe' of Israel's creation], they do not understand the human element of the occupation. The majority of people just see the Palestinians as a blob that they can't really deal with, and when I came here I was like, 'holy shit, nobody understands the Israeli side.'"¹⁰

It is this emphasis on knowing both sides, on negotiating one's way towards some sort of mutual understanding and accommodation that is at the bottom of Beery's complaints against certain MEALAC professors at Columbia. Beery believes ardently in his right as a student to interrogate and challenge his teachers. He tells me that

established precepts of academic freedom support this right: “Academic freedom in the beginning was conceptualized in two cases: it was conceptualized as the student’s right to learn and to learn whatever the student feels in the way that the student feels is correct; and the professor’s right to teach in the professor’s area of specialty.”¹¹ Beery is, strictly speaking, incorrect on this score. Academic freedom was originally elaborated in order to protect the faculty *as a whole* from the capricious power of their employers, who tended to react harshly when scholars punctured national pieties.¹² This origin of the term has, however, been largely forgotten as a culture of rights has developed over the last half-century, leading to the association of academic freedom with First Amendment rights to free expression. Of course, all “citizens of a free society” possess such entitlement to unregulated expression, a fact that helps explain Beery’s argument that he has just as much right to academic freedom as his professors.

Beery identifies two central problems in the teaching of certain MEALAC professors that he feels infringe on students’ academic freedom: first, these professors focus too heavily on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in their classes, to the exclusion of other important issues in the Middle East; and second, these professors construct their courses and run their classes in a manner that squelches dissent. The latter point seems to be the real crux of CAF’s argument, an issue Beery returns to again and again, driven by a sense that he has been silenced not simply in the classroom but at Columbia in general as a result of CAF’s criticism of MEALAC. Professors who claim to have access to the absolute truth make their students passive, Beery argues, and by doing so perpetuate an orthodoxy that is anathema to the students’ right to free speech and intellectual disputation. Beery concludes our discussion on a note that stresses the importance of this

perspective for progressives today: “My hope is that we can create a norm of dissidence. If you hold people to a certain responsibility of dissidence where they allow for dissent to exist in the classroom but also in the writings that they present, and the content that they present, then you create an academic culture that can withstand the shifting winds of ideological change.”¹³

Beery and his CAF comrades gained support in their efforts to challenge MEALAC from the David Project, a Boston-based organization founded in 2003 by long-time pro-Israeli activist Charles Jacobs. As the ICC’s sole “affiliate” organization, the David Project and its regional offices stand to benefit from a significant portion of the Schusterman Foundation’s substantial largesse. David Project-head Charles Jacobs, who writes frequently in the Columbia student paper and appeared on campus last spring, is hardly a dispassionate analyst of Middle Eastern affairs. In the past, he has written pro-Likud speeches, as well as editorials in favor of the annexation of Palestinian land by Israel in the name of security.¹⁴ In the late 1980s, Jacobs worked as the deputy director of CAMERA, a strenuously pro-Israeli media watchdog organization that in at least one instance assigned reporters to dig into the personal lives of journalists who questioned Israel’s policies during the invasion of southern Lebanon.¹⁵ Notwithstanding his involvement with organizations that have sought to stifle legitimate debate on the Middle East, Jacobs habitually couches his work and that of his organizations in the language of objectivity. Indeed, the David Project website states, “we believe that the values of tolerance, pluralism, and civil society are prerequisites for achieving genuine peace for all people of the Middle East.”¹⁶ This stance is an extension of the one adopted by

CAMERA, which cannily deploys peculiarly American notions of journalistic “objectivity” in order to ensure that pro-Likud perspectives get adequate coverage in reporting on the Middle East. The resemblance between the group’s pressure tactics to maintain journalistic “balance” in US newspapers and the efforts of Beery and CAF to promote “objectivity” at Columbia is surely more than a passing one.

The ICC’s economic investment and political savvy bore fruit quickly after the summer of 2002. Beginning in October 2003, CAF and the David Project organized screenings of *Columbia Unbecoming*, the constantly re-edited film documenting alleged student intimidation, for a highly select group of sympathetic Columbia faculty and for right-wing newspapers such as the *New York Sun* and the *Daily News*, generating a firestorm of public controversy. Even the *New York Times* eventually jumped on the bandwagon, publishing an editorial that blasted vaguely defined “anti-Israeli bias on the part of several professors” at Columbia.¹⁷ In response, a member of Congress wrote to Columbia president Lee Bollinger demanding the firing of faculty members impugned by the film. MEALAC faculty members such as Joseph Massad and George Saliba were subjected to barrages of harassing email messages and telephone calls, and Professor Rashid Khalidi’s job as advisor to a New York City public school program on Middle Eastern affairs came under intense scrutiny. Each of these professors, it should be noted, speaks to a transnational academic and political audience; their targeting, therefore, was no accident and was sure to have ramifications far beyond the walls that surround Columbia’s Morningside Heights campus. After months of silence, President Bollinger eventually reacted to the external attacks by appointing an Ad Hoc Commission to

investigate the charges against MEALAC professors and to evaluate the adequacy of student grievance procedures.

Rather than defending his faculty members' freedom to teach the materials they see fit, in other words, Bollinger decided to investigate the charges of a group of students, most of whom had not studied with the professors in question and none of whom had pursued established university grievance procedures against their teachers. The Ad Hoc Committee reported back in March 2005 that there was absolutely no evidence of anti-Semitic behavior on campus or of unfair treatment (such as biased grading) of pro-Zionist students in MEALAC courses. Although the committee did censure Joseph Massad, a then untenured assistant professor in MEALAC, for one instance in which they felt a student's testimony of his overly heated response during a classroom exchange was "credible," they also noted that Massad had endured a remorseless campaign of heckling and harassment during his three year teaching career at Columbia. The David Project and CAF attacked the Ad Hoc committee as soon as it published its report, claiming that it had engaged in a biased whitewash.¹⁸

Gil Anidjar is a young professor recently hired by MEALAC. We meet in his book-lined office in a building whose dark hallways feel eerily quiet: the building housing MEALAC stands across a small green courtyard from Edward Said's former office, which was firebombed in 1985. A certain sense of menace hangs in the air given recent events, and I'm surprised to find no security guards patrolling the halls. Seated in his office, Anidjar speaks quickly, with a beguiling accent that reflects his years of study in France and Israel, some of which were spent working with Jacques Derrida. Despite

this esoteric apprenticeship, Anidjar's response to me when I ask him about CAF's charge of a lack of dissent in MEALAC courses is completely pragmatic. For Anidjar, claims of bias in Joseph Massad's classes are hypocritical since they ignore the fact that he is a member of a political minority.¹⁹ Here Anidjar alludes not simply to the relative weakness of advocates for the Palestinian cause on the national stage in the U.S., but to equality in representation of views that challenge Zionist narratives at Columbia specifically. If we are going to discuss "balance," he says, we need to be talking about it at the level of the department and the university. Columbia's Center for Israel and Jewish Studies (CIJS), Anidjar notes, has seven endowed chairs, as well as fourteen faculty affiliates. MEALAC, by contrast, has one endowed chair and twenty faculty members, three of whom are CIJS affiliates. More than parity, in other words, between faculty devoting themselves to Israel and Jewish studies and those focusing not simply on North Africa and the Middle East, but also on South Asian countries such as India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. In addition, Anidjar points out, several blocks north of where we're sitting is the Jewish Theological Seminary, a Columbia affiliate and one of the foremost institutions of Jewish studies in the world. Barnard College, just across the road from Columbia, also has an endowed chair of Jewish studies. Of course, there's nothing to say that faculty members at CIJS will adopt a pro-Israeli perspective, but, Anidjar points out, the fact that Columbia faculty have chosen to associate Jewishness and Israeli identity in the title of their center says something about their general political orientation.

Interested in curricular offerings, I later check the course catalogue and find that MEALAC offers eight courses in explicitly Israeli or Jewish culture, including "Zionism: A Cultural Perspective," "Readings in Hebrew Texts," and "Post-Zionist/Post-Modern

Hebrew Prose.” Conversely, the department offers only eight courses with explicitly Arabic (*not* Palestinian) content, such as “Islam in Modern Arabic Literature”, “Survey of Islamic Science,” and “Culture and Power in Iraqi Literature.” Anidjar’s conclusion resonates: the situation is one that “to any sane person would be recognizable as one of minimally utter dissymmetry between pro-Israeli or Zionist views and non-Zionist views.”²⁰ By insisting on the introduction of dissenting viewpoints into the courses offered by one professor from a minority perspective and glossing over the many courses taught from an antithetical viewpoint, in other words, Beery and the other members of CAF are ironically working to entrench this very dissymmetry and thereby to diminish precisely the “norms of dissidence” they claim to espouse.

But the question of students’ right to dissent in the classroom still gnaws at me. When I ask him about this, Anidjar begins by acknowledging that all teachers grapple with pedagogy: “That many of us make mistakes, that’s not in doubt,” he says, “but I’m not convinced that mistakes were made here.” “Remember,” Anidjar urges me, “that there is no institutional trace of any damage to students’ rights in this case: no bad grades, no expulsions, no damning letters of recommendation.”²¹ Even the allegation by one student that Massad spoke to her in an excessively heated fashion has been challenged in a letter signed by twenty-three students who participated in the same class.²² Yet, he claims, in a Derridean moment, “a certain violence, which is part of what pedagogy is, has to exercise itself.”²³ This apparently startling admission is based on a facet of classroom life that has come to appear inescapable: there seems to be an inherent conflict between the student’s freedom to hear views of their own choosing and the teacher’s freedom to teach the subject as they understand it. Unless the professor ceases to be a

teacher, that is, s/he will always be in a position of power over the student. Simply to put together a syllabus is to engage in a gesture of authority, as was made abundantly evident during the canon wars of the 1990s. Indeed, contrary to Ariel Beery's assertion, the American Association of University Professors' (AAUP) definition of academic freedom is predicated on recognizing the teacher's – *not* the student's – right to define the field of knowledge in the classroom. While the AAUP's 1940 statement enjoins teachers to respect students' opinions and to avoid introducing issues unrelated to the class topic, it unequivocally states that teachers are "entitled to freedom in the classroom in discussing their subject."²⁴

Of course, such freedom, which is a kind of power, should be exercised in a professional, sensitive, and nurturing manner, establishing relations of cooperation between teacher and student. In today's increasingly polarized national environment, however, such ideals of mutuality are becoming difficult to achieve. But for a teacher to abdicate this position of authority would be an act of great irresponsibility. After all, the point of research and teaching is to discover and communicate the truth, unless one assumes that there is no truth and that it's simply a matter of balancing different, mutually exclusive opinions against one another.²⁵ Admittedly, there is a distinction between advocacy, which characterizes all great scholarship, and indoctrination. Yet one person's blatant bias is another person's judicious overview, as the heated debates over MEALAC suggest.

Who is to judge in controversial cases? Should it be the responsibility of university administrators? Should students be able to take their professors to court if they disagree with their research? Do we want politicians and powerful lobbying groups

adjudicating academic research and classroom teaching? Over the last century, academics in both the sciences and the liberal arts developed a self-regulating system based on peer review, falsifiability, and standards of evidence precisely in order to guarantee the accuracy of research and to hive it off as far as possible from overt political manipulation. As the AAUP states, “the line between indoctrination and proper pedagogical authority is to be judged by reference to scholarly and professional standards, as interpreted and applied by the faculty itself.”²⁶ It is precisely this right to self-governance and expert, impartial review by one’s peers that is endangered by recent developments.

As the controversy over MEALAC continued to heat up, I decided to attend a high-profile conference organized by a group called Scholars for Peace in the Middle East, hoping that it might offer a forum for establishing dialogue and healing the wounds opened over the last year at Columbia. In order to get into the conference, however, I had to run the gauntlet of an airport-grade battery of metal detectors, x-ray machines, and body searches that made the organizers’ title seem rather wishful. When I eventually found a seat in the well appointed but jam-packed auditorium at Columbia’s business school, a wiry man in a suit was standing at the podium, denouncing the Ad Hoc panel appointed by President Bollinger to investigate MEALAC. He was, a woman in a surprising combination of cowboy boots and a brown wig informed me, a U.S. Congressman. I had missed most of his presentation, but the general tenor of the conference became unmistakably clear when Laurie Zoloth, a professor of religion and bioethics, stepped up to the microphone to offer us greetings from “the West Bank of

Lake Michigan.” While affirming the duty of academics to govern themselves and the problem of commenting on events at Columbia from afar, Zoloth opined that the academic Left has become a hotbed of anti-Semitism. In addition, human rights organizations are helping perpetuate this new form of racism. According to Zoloth, photographs of Palestinian children killed by the Israeli security forces have reawakened a species of blood libel. Where once Jews were held responsible for the killing of Christ, she argued, they are now seen as a source of sin in the world because of the suffering they are inflicting on the Arab world. According to Zoloth, postmodern philosophical relativists who dismantle ideas of truth are reproducing the views of early Modern anti-Semites who helped foster pogroms and the Inquisition in Europe. The presentation concluded with Zoloth calling for the “reconstruction” of the academy in order to stamp out this rising tide of anti-Semitism, an injunction that was greeted with thunderous applause.

The atmosphere in the room grew increasingly electric as speaker after speaker rose to denounce the new anti-Semitism. Natan Sharansky, an ex-Soviet dissident who resigned from Israeli Prime Minister Sharon’s cabinet to protest his plan to dismantle settlements in the Gaza Strip, described the atmosphere at Columbia as “like a ghetto” since Zionist activists suffer unpopularity on campus. Rachel Arenfeld, director of the American Center for Democracy, argued that Middle East studies programs are part of a “Saudi fifth column” in U.S. universities. Things proceeded smoothly in this vein until a young man interrupted Dr. Phyllis Chesler’s account of the nihilistic romanticization of terrorism that has infected academia. Chesler had been arguing that Leftists view suicide bombers as doing the work that the Soviet Union failed to do to bring capitalism down

and that human rights observers are regularly taken in by fake massacres performed by Palestinian actors when a man in his mid-twenties spoke up, saying that he personally had been tortured with electric shocks by Israeli security forces. Someone in the audience yelled back, “they should’a killed ya.” Cacophony ensued, until the conference MC, a business school professor, stood up and admonished the audience by saying, “this is precisely what *they* want to happen.” Calm restored, a beefy guy with a shaved head and a t-shirt with “security” written on the back got up from a seat near me and sat down in the aisle next to the electrocuted heckler. He didn’t seem to be trying to make the young man feel more at home. The unflappable Chesler wound up her presentation, without further interruptions, by explaining that the feminist academy has become “Palestinianized” out of a desire to atone for European racism. We must fight back and not appease the terrorists, she concluded, by which she meant students and scholars critical of Israel.

The conference reached a kind of crescendo with an appearance by Martin Kramer, who was piped in live by a satellite feed from Tel Aviv. Kramer edits *Middle East Quarterly*, a journal published by the Middle East Forum under the leadership of Daniel Pipes, one of the founders of Campus Watch, an organization that blacklists scholars who challenge U.S. and Israeli policy in the Middle East. Kramer’s Ivory Towers on Sand, published by a conservative Washington think-tank that has supported prominent neo-cons such as Paul Wolfowitz, attacks Edward Said’s Orientalism and the movement to criticize scholars’ complicity with imperial power of which Said’s work was a part.²⁷ Kramer’s book provided the ammunition for key testimony by Stanley Kurtz, also of Campus Watch, during the Congressional Hearings for H.R. 3077, the

International Studies in Higher Education Act, in fall 2003. This amendment to Title VI of the Higher Education Act of 1965 provides government oversight of funds disbursed for international education and area studies programs. Such government supervision would take the form not of peer review, as has traditionally been the practice, but of an International Advisory Board composed in part of non-academics invested in national security. The amendment explicitly shifts Title VI funds from knowledge production and teaching to advancement of “Homeland Security and effective U.S. engagement abroad.” Department of Homeland Security funding has perhaps rendered H.R. 3077 unnecessary by initiating the creation of a new national security cadre, completely bypassing existing area studies programs.²⁸ In his appearance at the Scholars for Peace conference, Martin Kramer built on his previous work by attacking Columbia for lobbying against passage of H.R. 3077 when it reached the Senate. In order to underline the urgency of measures such as H.R. 3077, Kramer described MEALAC and similar area studies programs around the country as “ticking away like time bombs.” His message to student activists at Columbia, however, was that they are the turning point. “9/11,” Kramer concluded with a flourish, “means we have the wind at our backs and it won’t take too long to unravel the appointments of the last two decades.”

The strategic acumen and confident tone on display at the “Scholars for Peace on the Middle East” conference is a product of decades of organizing to uproot the opening of the humanities and social sciences to the social movements of the 1960s. In fields such as English, for example, which purposely cultivated its marginality during the Cold War in the name of an insular anti-capitalist aesthetic, challenges to the elitist character

of the canon led to the opening up of departments to literature written by African-Americans, women, Latinos, gays and lesbians, and non-Westerners, among others.²⁹ In addition, programs created explicitly to serve U.S. national interest during the Cold War such as area studies were shaken when student activists attacked the complicity of academics with initiatives like Project Camelot, a program created by the U.S. Army's Special Operations Research Office in 1963 to develop PSY-OPS techniques to manage the national liberation movements of the era.³⁰ As the Vietnam War turned into an increasingly bloody quagmire, many area studies scholars were driven to challenge the motives and outcome of U.S. behavior in their region of specialization. Having gained control of most of the public sphere, right-wing activists now seek to exirpate the residues of post-1945 liberation movements from the academy using politically motivated litmus tests for hiring and tenure decisions. Of course, they don't admit to this. Instead, they claim that they are acting *in the name* of academic freedom. In the forefront of this campaign is Students for Academic Freedom (SAF), one of the many groups founded by lapsed Trotskyite sexagenarian David Horowitz. SAF operates out of Horowitz's Center for the Study of Popular Culture, an organization that has received over \$13,895,000 from archconservative donors such as the Olin, Bradley, and Sarah Scaife Foundations alone over the last decade.³¹ Horowitz set up his organization after having an epiphany during the first Reagan administration, and it has since grown into a mini-empire incorporating a publishing imprint, multiple websites, a weekly policy-oriented lecture series, and multiple offshoot organizations, including the Committee on Media Integrity, the group behind the recent campaign to defund public television. Given the knee-jerk anti-statist ideology that drives much of Horowitz's activism, it is rather ironic that he has

now begun pleading for a form of state-mandated affirmative action for conservatives, but contemporary cultural warriors tend to be caught up in such contradictions. While posing as the saviors of critical thinking and humanistic education, Horowitz and company are bankrolled by the corporate interests responsible for the bulk of our culture's philistinism and subscribe to the Manichean sound bite strategies that characterize the worst contemporary political demagogues.³²

Some initiatives undertaken by Students for Academic Freedom seem to live up to the group's name. For instance, SAF counsels students on methods for investigating and obtaining parity of funding for right wing campus organizations. Other tactics encouraged by the organization, however, cross over into distinctly neo-fascist territory: for example, the group runs a website where students are apprised of the ins and outs of informing on their professors.³³ Students are encouraged to record classes clandestinely and to log complaints on the website as a prelude to seeking redress in the courts or the local legislature. But by far the most ominous initiative launched by SAF is the "Academic Bill of Rights" (ABOR). Authored by Horowitz, ABOR appropriates and slyly undermines language from the AAUP's landmark 1940 statement of academic freedom to produce a set of standards that would enforce political "balance" in classrooms. Where the AAUP cautions professors not to introduce tendentious subject matter into classrooms, for example, ABOR makes it illegal to discuss material not directly pertinent to the course. In contrast to the AAUP's injunction to teachers to exercise professional judgment when selecting course materials, ABOR mandates standards of diversity in teaching, hiring, and scholarship that are measured in purely political terms. While it is unlikely that chemistry departments will be forced to hire

alchemists any time soon, in states such as Florida Christian conservatives have already begun to make noises about legislating equal time for “Intelligent Design.”³⁴ Who will adjudicate diversity? Not scholars. In the version of ABOR advanced by advocates in Colorado, for example, responsibility for student evaluations is transferred into the hands of administrators or the legislature based on the principle of the “uncertainty of knowledge,” an intellectually nihilistic position that ignores the search for truth that is academia’s cardinal value. Versions of ABOR have been moved for consideration in thirty state legislatures and in a bill introduced by Congressional Republicans to reauthorize the federal Higher Education Act. Uniting these disparate efforts is one central principle: the move to demolish faculty autonomy and self-governance. As the AAUP puts it, “The Academic Bill of Rights threatens to impose administrative and legislative oversight on the professional judgment of faculty, to deprive professors of the authority necessary for teaching, and to prohibit academic institutions from making the decisions that are necessary for the advancement of knowledge.”³⁵

Even if organizations like the AAUP succeed in beating back Students for Academic Freedom, the fight will consume precious, scarce resources. In addition, Horowitz’s drive to “empower” students and promote “balance” is helping to foster a climate of witch hunting that is inimical to free inquiry and discussion. As Steve Leberstein, a historian who has written on the purges of progressive professors at City College in New York during the 1940s, put it to me: “Many people feel that there’s a Damocles sword hanging over their heads. There’s been no equivalent to the House Un-American Activities Committee hearings, not that there has to be ... The real threat here

is that people will simply censor themselves. I think that's already happening. That's obviously the purpose here – to impose a kind of political orthodoxy on the country.”³⁶

Contrary to popular stereotypes, the majority of red baiting during the McCarthy period was not conducted by governmental panels, but by private organizations such as Allan Zoll's National Council for American Education, which deluged local school districts with pamphlets with inflammatory titles like “How Red Are the Schools?” and “They Want Your Child.”³⁷ Terrifying parents with lurid warnings about schools infiltrated by subversive teachers, Zoll's group and its many local front organizations attacked public funding of education as a concession to collectivist ideology and pushed campaigns for lower taxes that were quietly bankrolled by corporate business interests. Ironically, it was during precisely this era that the New York Board of Education fired David Horowitz's father when he refused, on First Amendment grounds, to testify before a local commission of inquiry into his political affiliations. But it seems that a salary of over \$300,000 dollars a year and the perks that come with an insider's ties to powerful conservative politicians have inspired a certain strategic historical dementia in David Horowitz.³⁸

Maida Rosenstein is standing next to the United Auto Workers' giant rat, telling me about what she calls one of Columbia's biggest dirty secrets. Next to her, graduate students bundled up against the chill that's still in the air of this spring morning file past, holding hand-written signs saying “Colmart,” “We are the Union,” and “Will Teach for Food.” Now president of UAW Local 2110, Rosenstein gained her first union experience as a Columbia clerical worker, fighting in the 1980s for the right to collective bargaining

with the university. But currently she's marching back and forth in front of Columbia's gates with graduate employees, young people in their twenties and thirties who are struggling to persuade the university to recognize their vote to join the UAW. Columbia is one of the richest universities in the world; it has an endowment of \$4.5 billion, a figure larger than the gross national product of 95 countries around the globe. It is one of New York City's largest landholders, and, as a non-profit institution, it does not pay real estate taxes. Its president, Lee Bollinger, makes over \$650,000 a year.³⁹ And yet Columbia's graduate employees make only \$18,000 a year – “at least half of which we have to pay back to the university as rent and health insurance,” a passing grad student chips in. And guess what, Rosenstein says. These graduate students milling round in circles on the picket line teach *over half* of Columbia's classes. Graduate student employees are particularly vulnerable to attacks on academic freedom, Rosenstein tells me, since they have no right to security of employment, let alone to the protections afforded by the AAUP guidelines. Shortly after I discuss these issues with Maida, Gil Anidjar speaks at a rally organized by the union, underlining the links between the contingent character of graduate employees at Columbia and precarious status of dissident scholars in MEALAC.

Columbia is not the only institution where vulnerable and ill-paid graduate students and adjunct instructors do most of the teaching. According to recent Department of Education statistics, 44.5% of all faculty members in U.S. higher education are employed part-time today.⁴⁰ In 1969, only 3% of faculty held non-tenure track appointments; today, 60% have no chance of gaining tenure and the protection for critical inquiry it was designed to afford. How could the university have been transformed so

quickly? During the Cold War, the government pumped money into universities, which functioned as an integral research arm of the military-industrial complex.⁴¹ This infusion of government funds subsidized a massive expansion of higher education, a transformation that benefited the liberal arts as well as defense-oriented scientific research. During the 1970s, the fiscal crises of federal and state governments choked off this flow of funds. As neo-liberal economic dogma began to take hold and taxes were cut, education was refigured from a public good to a private investment. Student loans, for example, were developed under the Nixon administration in order to encourage students to think of their education in precisely those terms. Faced with their own fiscal constraints and the siren call of corporate ideology, university administrators began casting about for ways to save money. The primary measure that universities have adopted since the 1980s to cut expenditures has been the systematic replacement of tenured and tenure-track faculty members with casualized temporary workers. As a result, academic employees are now divided into core and peripheral populations, the former enjoying many of the perks of popular stereotype and the latter grappling with exploitative conditions typical of the nether reaches of the service economy.

Although university administrators don't talk about and may not even be aware of this, the casualization of the academic labor force is part of a systematic attack on tenure and on academic freedom more broadly. As the ranks of tenured professors dwindle, so the university as a whole becomes more divided and, consequently, unable to manage its own affairs. The faculty's ability to regulate its own affairs diminishes, making higher education more vulnerable to corporate pressure and the profit ethic. Power lost by faculty flows directly into the hands of administrators, who today behave far more like

corporate CEOs than like intellectuals dedicated to the pursuit of knowledge for the public good. Increasingly, the only moral imperative that binds them is that of satisfying the trustees, most of whom are corporate lawyers or bankers, by squeezing steeper profits out of the university.⁴² This also leaves the university increasingly susceptible to well-funded pressure groups such as the David Project and Students for Academic Freedom, which have become adept at bringing economic and media pressure to bear.

The rise of academic capitalism is changing the university beyond recognition. University funding has shifted out of liberal arts fields that are “unproductive” according to corporate ideology, and into areas such as biotech, where professors also tend to be CEOs of start-up firms flush with venture capital. Faced with an uphill battle for well paid employment, students are flocking to forms of vocational and professional education that they see as increasing their luster as job candidates, further gutting funding for fields designed to promote critical thinking and active citizenship. In addition, the deteriorating working conditions of graduate students and adjuncts militate against quality teaching.⁴³ The implicit message sent by cost-cutting administrators to students is that teachers and the life of the mind they seek to cultivate are not the real concern of the university. And, as Jennifer Washburn explains in her recent book University, Inc., since the passage of the Bayh-Dole Act in 1980s, professors and the universities where they belong increasingly vie for patent rights for government-subsidized research, leading to a creeping privatization of the knowledge commons.⁴⁴ Research, once undertaken in the name of the public good, is now all too frequently framed and pursued in terms of private gain.

Faculty in the liberal arts and sciences, home to critical inquiry and greatest victims of the contemporary downsizing of academia, are the logical opponents of this transformation of academia. Yet they have been remarkably silent in the face of this sea change. This is partially a result of the fragmentation of the university. Professors in the humanities and social sciences often fail to see beyond the pale of their own disciplines. In addition, however, some liberal arts faculty members also choose complicity with university bureaucrats consciously, seduced by the promise of lighter teaching loads as the grunt work of undergraduate instruction is shifted onto the backs of grad students and adjuncts. But these opportunists, more numerous than one would suspect, are shortsighted in the extreme, for by abetting the division of the faculty they hasten the eclipse of their own privileges. As Maida Rosenstein put it, a resigned expression on her face, “The whole set up of the university has evolved. The real action goes on at the medical school and biomed labs. It’s a completely different track. I don’t know if liberal arts faculty get this. But I think they’re so irrelevant to most of what goes on at the university. They’re in their own little shrinking world, you know.”

While most of the privileged professoriate hunkers down behind the embattled walls of their disciplines, the movement for unionization among graduate student employees is highlighting the destructive impact of academic capitalism on core values of the university, including academic freedom. When I arrived at the picket line one afternoon during the five day coordinated strike of Yale and Columbia students, I found people gathered in tight knots of agitated conversation. Since 2001, a solid majority of teaching and research assistants at Columbia have expressed support for establishing a union. Columbia’s administration has obstinately refused to recognize this majority and

negotiate a fair contract, instead joining with other elite universities such as Yale and Brown to fight collective bargaining rights by reversing a landmark National Labor Relations Board ruling. Now, the text of a memo by Columbia provost Alan Brinkley had just been made public. Professor Brinkley is a celebrated liberal labor historian who has lamented the decline of unionization in the U.S. as a blow to democracy and has stated that “students are free to join or advocate a union, and even to strike, without retribution.”⁴⁵ Yet in his official capacity as provost, Brinkley penned a memo alerting departments of the sanctions they could impose on graduate student employees should the strike be prolonged. In his memo, Brinkley suggested requiring department chairs to report teaching fellows who honored the strike and warned that disciplinary steps against such students could include loss of eligibility for summer stipends and other special awards as well as black balling from further instructional assignments.⁴⁶ These measures would be illegal if graduate student employees were covered under the National Labor Relations Act. As one angry grad student explained, “Union busting is perfectly normal, you know, you can be the most liberal, progressive intellectual institution but you can behave like a Walmart manager and that’s fine. I just don’t understand it.”⁴⁷ The goal of preserving academic freedom – not to mention respecting democracy – evaporates all too quickly, it seems, when the interests of the corporate university are at stake.

These battles over the right of graduate employees to collective representation became even more bitter during the 2005-2006 academic year, when New York University took advantage of the regressive NLRB ruling to try to destroy the school’s graduate employee union. NYU, which has engineered a meteoric rise to academic prominence by hiring scads of academic stars while quietly staffing its undergraduate

service courses with graduate and part-time employees, triggered a protracted and painful strike by offering a new contract replete with union busting clauses to the graduate employee union. Despite the fact that the NYU administration is filled with prominent refugees from the Clinton administration, under whose sway the NLRB had ruled in favor of the NYU grad employees union, President John Sexton now cited the Bush NLRB decision that graduate students teaching at private universities are essentially apprentices rather than workers in order to delegitimize the union. If academic freedom was originally developed to curb the arbitrary power of dismissal wielded by university administrators, it became clear in the course of the NYU strike that contingent faculty today are sorely in need to such protection. Yet, in a supremely cynical move that demonstrated the extent to which the term has been perverted away from its original intention, NYU claimed that the graduate employees' attempt to secure a fair contract was inhibiting their control of the university's resources and was, consequently, an infringement of administrators' academic freedom.

From the time of Socrates' execution for misleading the youth of Athens, teachers have always been under suspicion for disloyalty to the interests of the powerful. Over the past half century, attacks on teachers have come with incremental frequency if not severity: the witch hunts of the McCarthy era, backlash against critics of the Vietnam War, the culture wars, and now, the assault on academic freedom. Given the increasingly crucial role of higher education in reproducing a social order that has grown manifestly more unjust in recent decades, it should not be so surprising that academia should be coming under such concerted attack. Pundits from across the political spectrum

incessantly drum home the importance of university education for individual economic mobility and for the nation as a whole. We live, the line goes, in a knowledge economy, a world of cut-throat Darwinian competition in which only those individuals and nations with the most up-to-date and flexible forms of learning will be able to compete successfully.⁴⁸ Middle- and working-class Americans have reacted to this information by scrimping and saving to send their children – and themselves - to college. The U.S. currently has the highest rate of college attendance in the industrialized world. Yet, although they frequently gripe about the spiraling cost of education, parents seldom recognize that the schools to which they send their kids increasingly resemble Walmart stores rather than ivory towers.

Today, the questions posed by the great British historian E.P. Thompson during a university struggle in the 1960s weigh more heavily than ever on our society: “Is it inevitable that the university will be reduced to the function of providing, with increasingly authoritarian efficiency, prepackaged intellectual commodities which meet the requirements of management? Or can we by our efforts transform it into a center for free discussion and action, tolerating and even encouraging ‘subversive’ thought and activity, for a dynamic renewal of the whole society within which it operates?”⁴⁹ Thompson’s hopes for the university seem very far away today, his fears all too prescient. The recent spate of attacks on academia by powerful, corporate-funded groups such as the David Project and Students for Academic Freedom has made the intimate connection between the corporatization of the university and the decline of academic freedom that Thompson described several decades ago particularly vivid. As the internal structure of academia has changed, so its autonomy has declined and the impact of external political

pressure has grown. All too often, educators have allowed those outside the university to define the terms of debate around these issues by adopting a purely defensive posture. It is certainly important to defend academic freedom, tenure, and the values of independent inquiry more broadly. Faced with assaults by powerful corporate interests, educators have begun to strike back by emphasizing that it is they who are the true conservatives, intent on preserving access to higher learning by resisting tuition hikes, budget cuts, tax giveaways to the rich, and the assault on critical thought by neo-con activists backed by wealthy private foundations.

Ultimately, however, the only way to reassert the university's public role is to challenge what French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu called the *doxa* or commonsense of neo-liberalism: that every sphere of social life should be subjected to the ruthless calculus of market-based efficiency.⁵⁰ After all, the university does not simply offer individual students the possibility of class mobility. Scholarship should not be pursued for private profit alone. Instead, as the founders of the modern university system in the United States recognized, education builds community and prepares students to be engaged, responsible citizens in a democracy. Similarly, research must ultimately be conducted for the public good, or else the basic foundations for building the edifice of scientific knowledge will crumble. The scientific research and critical thinking produced by U.S. universities over the last century are a vital part of our collective patrimony. Faced with a daunting new set of challenges, educators and their allies need to open a public debate about the shape and future role of the university in our culture. The university and the values of skeptical inquiry and academic freedom that it harbors are public goods, after all, and their enduring health should be seen as a fundamental element of our democracy.

Endnotes:

¹ In fact, the group of Columbia students behind attacks on the university's Middle East studies department called themselves Students for Academic Freedom.

² For extended discussion of the history and definition of academic freedom, see Robert Post, "The Structure of Academic Freedom" and Judith Butler, "Academic Norms, Contemporary Challenges: A Reply to Robert Post on Academic Freedom," both in *Academic Freedom after September 11*, ed., Beshara Doumani (New York: Zone, 2006).

³ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Operation_Defensive_Shield.

⁴ <http://web.amnesty.org/library/Index/ENGMDE151432002>.

⁵ The ratio of anti- to pro-divestment signatures was 20 to 1 at Columbia University. See Anidjar interview, minute 12.

⁶ Scott Sherman, "The Mideast Comes to Columbia," *The Nation* 280.13 (April 4, 2005): 22. On the sources of the Schusterman Foundation's wealth, see Bob Feldman, "The Israel on Campus Coalition and the David Project: Sponsored by U.S. Oil and Israeli Bank Profits," *Electronic Intifada* (25 April 2005). <http://electronicintifada.net/v2/article3795.shtml>.

⁷ Robert Friedman, "PACmen," *The Nation* 6 June 1987: 770-773.

⁸ John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt, "The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy," <ksgnotes1.Harvard.edu/Research/wpaper.nsf/rwp/RWP06-011.

⁹ Beery interview, minute 49.

¹⁰ Beery interview, minute 50.

¹¹ Beery interview, minute 20.

¹² Robert Post, 62.

¹³ Beery interview, minute 73.

¹⁴ Yohai Ben-Nun and Charles Jacobs, "Mideast Parley: Israel Should Annex Land Now," *Atlanta Journal and Constitution* 8 Dec 1991: C7.

¹⁵ Friedman, 773.

¹⁶ <http://www.davidproject.org>.

¹⁷ *New York Times* editorial (7 Apr 2005).

¹⁸ See Charles Jacobs statement on the David Project website.

¹⁹ Anidjar interview, minute 11.

²⁰ Anidjar interview, minute 13.

²¹ Anidjar interview, minute 11.

²² See <http://www.censoringthought.org/twentystudentpetition.html>.

²³ Anidjar interview, minute 9.

²⁴ <http://www.aaup.org/statements/Redbook/1940Stat.htm>.

²⁵ See Stanley Fish, "'Intellectual Diversity': The Trojan Horse of a Dark Design," *The Chronicle of Higher Education* 13 Feb 2004, <http://chronicle.com/free/v50/i23/23b01301.htm>.

²⁶ <http://www.aaup.org/Issues/ABOR/aborsummary3.htm>.

²⁷ Naomi Paik, "Education and Empire, Old and New," unpublished paper available online at http://www.yale.edu/amstud/wkgrp_essays.html.

²⁸ William Martin, "Manufacturing the Homeland Security Campus and Cadre," *ACAS Bulletin* 70 (Spring 2005).

²⁹ Richard Ohmann, "English and the Cold War," in André Schiffrin, ed., The Cold War and the University: Toward an Intellectual History of the Postwar Years (New York: New Press, 1997): 73-107.

³⁰ Christopher Simpson, "Universities, Empire, and the Production of Knowledge: An Introduction," in Christopher Simpson, ed., Universities and Empire: Money and Politics in the Social Sciences during the Cold War (New York: New Press, 1998): xi-xxxiv.

³¹ <http://www.mediatransparency.org/recipientgrants.php?recipientID=63>.

³² Donald Lazere, "The Contradictions of Cultural Conservatism in the Assault on American Colleges" Cultural Studies 19.4 (July 2005): 421.

³³ I'm referring here to the Nazi practice of encouraging students to inform on professors who didn't support the party, a practice that led to the decimation of Germany's famous university system in the 1930s. Of course, this persecution of intellectuals ultimately provided a major boost to higher education in the U.S., where many of Germany's exiled academics fled.

³⁴ Tom Auxter, "Faculty and Students Defeat 'Academic Bill of Rights' Legislation in Florida," email letter, 1 June 2005.

³⁵ <http://www.aaup.org/Issues/ABOR/aborsummary3.htm>.

³⁶ Leberstein interview, minutes 45 & 54.

³⁷ Stuart J. Foster, Red Alert! Educators Confront the Red Scare in American Public Schools, 1947-1954 (New York: Peter Lang, 2000), 63. See also Ellen Schrecker, No Ivory Tower: McCarthyism and the Universities (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

³⁸ For Horowitz's financial data, see <http://www.mediatransparency.org>.

³⁹ Columbia teaching research assistants ON STRIKE brochure.

⁴⁰ Washburn, 202.

⁴¹ For a very useful historical overview of the role of higher education during the post-1945 period, see Michael Denning, "Lineaments and Contradictions of the Neo-liberal University System," unpublished paper available online at http://www.yale.edu/amstud/wkgrp_essays.html.

⁴² Columbia University's board of trustees, for example, is composed of eight corporate CEOs, four lawyers, six investment bankers, one doctor, and three academics (counting President Bollinger himself).

⁴³ According to Ana Marie Cox, 75% of part-time faculty members are paid less than \$3,000 per course taught. See Ana Marie Cox, "None of your Business: The Rise of the University of Phoenix and For-Profit Education – And Why It Will Fail Us All," in Benjamin Johnson, Patrick Kavanagh, and Kevin Mattson, Eds., Steal This University: The Rise of the Corporate University and the Academic Labor Movement (New York: Routledge, 2003), 22.

⁴⁴ Washburn, 59-71.

⁴⁵ Jennifer Washburn, "Columbia Unbecoming," *The Nation* online (25 Apr 2005), <http://www.thenation.com/doc.mhtml?I=20050509&s=washburn>.

⁴⁶ Brinkley memo, 2.

⁴⁷ Mahadevan interview, minute 33.

⁴⁸ See, for instance, Thomas Friedman, The World Is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-First Century (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005): 275.

⁴⁹ E. P. Thompson, Warwick University Ltd. (London: Penguin): 165-66.

⁵⁰ Pierre Bourdieu, Firing Back: Against the Tyranny of the Market 2 (New York: Verso, 2003), 80.