

INTERVIEWS

Interview with Anthony J. Nocella, II on Academic Repression: Reflections from the Academic Industrial Complex (co-edited with Steven Best and Peter McLaren, AK Press, 2010)

Richard J White

Richard: Anthony can you tell me how this book came about?

Anthony: It started from my personal experiences of being mentally disabled in school. From the first until twelfth grade I was segregated from the “normal” students. During those days I was beaten up regularly, spat on, and dragged along the cement at the school playground by the other children, and in class, I was held down by teachers in-order to sit still. In college, I was told to get with the program and stop complaining. One professor expressed her surprise that I was even allowed into graduate school because of “horrible writing,” while another professor told me that I should think about working with my hands and that higher education is not for everyone. This brought me to tears as he asked me to leave the office so he wouldn’t be late for another appointment. So, Academic repression was nothing new for me. But I suppressed my experiences for a long time and only started analyzing the concept as a graduate student, which led me to develop the book proposal. I invited my friends and fellow repressed scholars Steve Best and Peter McLaren to co-edit the book and sent the proposal off to one of the most radical presses, AK Press. Initially it was to have about ten articles, but soon I learned that more and more people wanted to share their experiences of academic repression and it grew to over 30 contributors.

Richard: So why did you connect with Steve and Peter on this project?

Anthony: I have been working for a number of reasons with Peter McLaren and Steve Best, both of whom got broadsided by academic repression. Steve, a prolific scholar, was Chair of his department until the department faculty members summarily deposed him from his position for openly supporting animal liberation politics. This is

a department, I must add that he did much to build and foster, including hiring many of those who later turned against him Brutus-like. This is a philosophy department, right? Where people are supposed to be critical thinkers, fair and impartial, just, and pluralist, not Machiavellian or Mafioso! This was politics, not philosophy, but a power play, pure and simple, and a classic case of academic repression. Unlike his "colleagues," however, Steve is someone who believes that a thinker ought to develop his or her own original insights, not endlessly debate and rehash interpretation-upon-interpretation of other theorists, be it Aristotle, Kant, Arendt, Marx, or Foucault; he also believes that in our current time of severe social and ecological crisis, philosophy ought to say something relevant to promoting social change, or have the dignity to remain silent. All I can think of is that his department could learn a thing from Voltaire who said, "I may not agree with what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it."

Around the same time Steve was under fire from his department (as well as being pressured to testify before a Congressional "eco-terrorist" hearing and getting banned from the UK), Peter McLaren was targeted by right-wing students (serving under the tutelage of David Horowitz and well-financed by a number of right-wing organizations) who created a hit list of the "Dirty Thirty" "radical" professors at UCLA, and listed Peter as Number 1 dangerous demagogue.

But it was obvious that what happened to Steve and Peter was not the exception, but rather the rule: the new norm of academic repression as universities increasingly succumb to the control of neoliberalism, become more and more corporatized, and financially back by or tied to a diversity of industries such as the military, medical, agriculture, and security industrial complex. (As Steve, Richard Kahn, and I will point out in an upcoming book, there are numerous such industrial complexes operating on a global scale and existing symbiotically with one another). Pressured by their right-wing financial backers and a rising storm of conservative reaction against "tenured radicals" and the "left academy," University of Colorado-Boulder fired Ward Churchill, a tenured professor, as anarchist anthropologist, David Graeber, a first-rate scholar, was denied tenure at Yale, for obvious political reasons. In the post 9/11 era, a slew of other important dissenting voices have fallen to the ax of political repression and countless others have been intimidated into silence and conformity.

With all these events erupting, all I could think is how important it is that these voices of critical academics must be heard, defended, and supported. One could speak only in relative safety if a large number of other respected critical scholars were also willing to write and speak out.

But it was also imperative to understand the big picture, the dynamics that for at least two decades have been aggressively transforming universities and colleges from institutions of "higher learning" into corporate industries, sites of social reproduction and capitalist/individualist ideologies, and factories to churn out the normalized, narcissistic, unreflective, and homogenized workforce needed for global capitalism to advance.

Richard: Why did you decide to publish the book with AK Press?

Anthony: We thought that if we went with a university press they would without a doubt tell us to tone it down, and a corporate press is one of the main institutions implementing and supporting academic repression. So we asked which press will allow us to speak truth to power without forcing us to muffle the voices we wanted people to hear loud and clear. We wanted a publisher that was very supportive of our politics, that would promote and not just publish the book, and that also was respected by activists, because this book is written by and for activists as well as academics. But we didn't have too look far, for we knew that AK Press fit the bill, and we had already established an excellent working relationship with them in the last book I edited with Steve, *Igniting a Revolution: Voices in Defense of the Earth* (2006). It was also very important to us that AK is an anarchist run press and puts these principles into action through its collective and daily operations.

Richard: I must ask you Anthony how did you get all of these diverse and amazing scholars to commit the book?

Anthony: We knew how important this book could be, and so it was a matter first of us believing strongly in the project and then persuading others to contribute. Because we have an excellent publication track record, because we had AK in our corner, and

because the topic was obviously important and crucial for social change, it actually was not hard to convince well-known and respected people to write for us. And so we lined up outstanding critical scholars such as Cary Nelson, Doug Kellner, Joy James, Emma Perez, Rik Scarce, Carl Boggs, Henry Giroux, and Michael Berube. I always thought that most academics were dry, esoteric, aloof, and only interested in their own careers, but this book has proven that some of the biggest names in academia are seriously willing to engage in controversial debates and issues. The people in this book all took on the challenge and no one backed down. We all realize the urgent issues at stake, and that we confront a potential historical crossroads where academics either fight for the most important values and freedoms of the education system or suffer a knock-out blow by corporatization, conservative reaction, and administrative domination.

Richard: What was the best experience in putting this book together?

Anthony: Corresponding with all these amazing academics as a young scholar still working on my Ph.D. was an amazing and humbling experience. Better still was the process of writing, revising, and exchanging ideas along the way, watching how the book grew, matured, and evolved. But perhaps most important was breaking down the walls of separation and linking people who have never worked together, yet now have common bonds as they are all part of the same path-breaking project. That is something I love to do and am happily known for.

When we are all under attack, it is crucial to form connections, build bridges, and unite, and this book is a modest beginning of bringing critical theorists together in a united front against academic repression and the neoliberal corporatization of the university. Also, whereas the academy prizes individualism, independence, and isolated research, these kinds of collaborations are inherently subversive as they bring people together to learn, support, challenge, and care for one another in a collaborative and interdependent fashion, which is truly a stimulating and empowering process.

Richard: So what is the goal of the book?

Anthony: We want to expose the current farce of "higher education" and the pervasive myth of "academic freedom." If we focused on higher education on a global scale it would be too difficult to analyze and to make sure we had a diversity of voices, thus we only focused on academic repression and the academic-industrial complex within the US, but this model is being universalized globally and academic repression exists virtually everywhere in the world.

We want to show how being a critical thinker or politically active professor-citizen is enough to provoke punitive measures or even termination. We want to demonstrate how extreme right-wing lobbies and reactionary corporate donors are dictating education policy today. We want to clarify how the neoliberal restructuring of the entire globe is also reshaping the academy, and with the same disastrous consequences everywhere.

Forget your idealistic visions of "higher learning"; today, more than ever before, the university is a corporate-controlled, profit-oriented, top-down management system, with the tenure system (and the autonomy and protections it always offered) in the process of being dismantled and academic freedom ever-more imperiled.

Some books talk about academic freedom in the abstract, as a body of formal rules and procedures as if they existed in Platonic form. This book, to be sure, defends academic freedoms, but it focuses on academic repression, on the concrete ways in which these abstract freedoms are concretely and routinely violated. We want to give a broad social, historical, and economic context for what is happening in academia; to provide numerous chilling case studies of academic repression; to relate the dynamics in theory as well as personal experience; and finally to suggest ways to take back the universities and to prevent education from becoming purely utilitarian, completely commodified, and insanely indifferent to professors, staff, and students alike. Further, we wanted to show how academic repression is different than state repression, political repression, and social repression, while there are nonetheless general similarities among them all.

Further, I would emphasize that this book is a important because it is a collection of diverse voices that include or discuss queers, people of color, feminists, people with disabilities, Arab-Americans and foreign nationals, animal and Earth liberationists, and students, staff, professors, and teachers of various status positions (from tenured faculty to adjuncts, part-time instructors). This book was supposed to have only about fifteen authors, but as we came to become aware of what academic repression was, which is not merely about politics, but about scholarship and teaching, but also numerous other issues such as the marginalized status of being a student, adjunct, or staff member; as well as your appearance, gender, sexual orientation, race, religious beliefs, and political commitments and activities, we became aware of what a broad scope of issues that really needed to be addressed.

This book would never have been possible if not for the courage of so many willing to speak frankly and truthfully about academic repression in a garrison-like environment that punishes dissent, criticism, non-conformity, engaged intellectuals, and deviations from the regnant theory-for-theory's sake research paradigm. This book is certainly not the last word on these important topics, and there are many voices that have not been featured but that should and must be heard. I hope this book gives them courage to speak out against academic repression.

Richard: Who do you think should read this book?

Anthony: Everyone. Professors who feel they are alone in the alienation and repression they endure on a daily basis. Those who want to pursue an academic career and may have romantic ideals of a free and autonomous life, but should know the economic and political realities for securing and advancing in a teaching position. Students who seek a diversity of viewpoints in college, but must be aware that critical perspectives and diversity, while they still exist, are increasing giving way to ideological homogeneity. Those who want a rich background in liberal arts who need to realize how philosophy, humanities, and the liberal arts are viewed as irrelevant in the growing domination of utilitarian imperatives favoring business, science, and technology. Activists who ought to know that being a student, faculty, and staff member on a university might not be facing political repression on the streets, but are

doing so head-on on campuses and who ought to stand in solidarity with academics rather than denounce them as pampered elitists. And the public who needs to know that one of the largest domestic industries in the US is now the academic industrial complex, and that the boundaries among universities, corporations, wealthy conservative donors, right-wing think tanks, and military institutions are increasingly blurring.

Richard: What is the most important lesson you learned in publishing this book?

Anthony: That when the universities are endangered, so is society as a whole, for universities traditionally have been the site of critical thinking, rich human development, and progressive political change. There are systemic, global forces reshaping our world in every facet, reducing everything to market imperatives and hierarchical control, and the university has lost much of the autonomy and freedom it had (never perfectly, but far more so in past decades). If we lose one of the most important spaces for fostering enlightenment, well-rounded people, and critical knowledge, the consequences for society will be incredibly grim, and dramatically advance what the Frankfurt School once referred to as the "completely administered" or "one-dimensional" society.

Richard: Any final comments?

Anthony: The book was published in March 2010, so make sure to check it out and tell everyone! Also please look at and help us network our MySpace page for the book at: www.myspace.com/academicrepression