

First they Came for Ward Churchill

In early 2005, because of comments concerning 9/11 made years earlier, University of Colorado professor Ward Churchill became the whipping boy for right-wing vilification of all that was suspect in American universities.

Ron Sakolsky

In “Some People Push Back: On the Justice of Roosting Chickens,” Churchill invoked Malcolm X’s comments immediately following the assassination of president John F. Kennedy as he maintained that American foreign policy provoked the attacks on New York. At root in the controversy was Churchill’s comparison of Americans to the “good Germans” of Nazi Germany and his now famous phrase about “the little Eichmanns inhabiting the sterile sanctuary of the twin towers.”

The San Francisco-based, anarchist publisher, AK Press became embroiled in the controversy for having printed his book, *On the Justice of Roosting Chickens: Reflections on the Consequences of US Imperial Arrogance and Criminality*. Since AK is also the publisher of one of my books, *Seizing The Airwaves: A Free Radio Handbook* (co-edited with Stephen Dunifer), I soon realized that I too was implicated in the Churchill bloodletting by default. It was not just Churchill that was being attacked, but all radical authors, publishers, and distributors as well.

Events took a very strange turn in February 2005 when the contents of a seven year old article I had co-written with Dennis Fox, entitled, “From ‘Radical’ University To Handmaiden of the Corporate State,” (*Radical Teacher* #53, 1998), were appropriated to make the university a target for potshots by every right-wing talk show host and website in the United States.

The connection between Churchill and the article in question was, until recently, a little known chapter in the history of alternative higher education in North America. Sagamon State University (SSU) in Springfield, Illinois, is Ward Churchill’s alma mater, where I once taught during the time he was a student for a Masters Degree.

In an attempt to discredit Churchill for Patriot Act era “thought crimes,” not only were his Malcolmesque remarks being sandbagged and his “Indianness” being questioned; he was being charged with having a “fake degree” from a “fake university.” SSU was suddenly and reluctantly thrust into the limelight. As the saying goes, in Springfield: If you’re conservative you are considered normal, if you’re liberal, you are reviled as a radical, and, if you’re radical, you are dismissed as crazy.

Having now conveniently changed its name to the University of Illinois at Springfield (UIS), and having sanitized its image, the college has clearly been trying to distance itself from any radical residue from its liberal past for years. Whereas once they might have invited Churchill to be the keynote speaker at their “alternative” graduation ceremonies, now the gatekeepers at the former SSU, aghast at having any association with him at all, have had to confront and defend their own history while, at the same time, disassociating themselves from him in no uncertain terms.

In this regard, the university’s spin doctors seem to have decided that the best strategy was to claim that the university was never radical in any way, except for a few crazies like Ward Churchill or...Ron Sakolsky.

Joining the chorus of reactionary voices who pillaged the contents of the *Radical Teacher* article in order to invent a stereotypical straw man to assail in their relentless pursuit of Churchill was the local Copley Press-affiliated

newspaper in Springfield, the *State Journal Register* (SJR). While not wanting to conflate the gravity of the attack on Churchill with my own much more minor skirmishes with a local outlet of the corporate press, the ensuing brouhaha illustrates the ripple effect that attempted purges of well known radical scholars, like Churchill, can have on the political climate of campuses around the country.

The *Radical Teacher* article never claimed that a state institution like SSU was radical, much less anarchist. In fact, in the article's title, we put the word, "Radical," in quotes. Institutional support for radical initiatives was never something that we counted upon, and, even if achieved, it was usually only temporary. However, SSU's once innovative approach to learning allowed for the formation of a radical enclave within its midst. Because its experimental nature was similar to that of the Evergreen State College in Olympia, Washington, it attracted some exciting faculty and students.

As we noted in the article, in explanation of SSU's virtues: "Many students were not graded but received individualized evaluations instead. There were no large classes. No deans or department chairs—in fact, no departments. Interdisciplinary courses were the norm. Faculty were hired for their interest in teaching—without teaching assistants—and had no 'publish-or-perish' requirement. SSU was designated 'the public affairs university of Illinois' at a time when public affairs, for many of the faculty at least, meant opposing the war in Vietnam and devising alternatives to mainstream institutions...Although the faculty as a whole is more mainstream these days, there is still a small and beleaguered core of Marxists and anarchists and environmentalists, anti-racists and feminists among the 157 faculty members, some of whom even take their radical perspectives out of the classroom and into the streets."

Not surprisingly, instead of quoting this description, the SJR mentioned the article by name but parroted the disinformation that was being circulated on the Internet. In their typical yellow journalism style, the paper printed the web-site diatribes against Churchill which characterized SSU as "designed to create a convergence of Marxists and anarchists," "some sort of hippie college," "a complete joke as a school," "organized in the '70s to provide cover for protests against the Vietnam War," "a counter-cultural (no culture) institution (mental?)" and "some sort of hippy-dippy, 'no grades or rules or sellin'-out to the Man' type of experimental college...Evidently somebody from the legislature finally visited the place and that resulted in it being taken over by real professors." The newspaper then proceeded to say that this caricature of SSU was inaccurate, except for a few radical troublemakers like me.

Now, I was being scapegoated along with Churchill as part of an ongoing conservative campaign aimed at the rollback of even the most piddling educational reforms (that were never enough in the first place from a radical perspective). It seems that my part in this sordid soap opera was to be the ghost of SSU's past that had come back to haunt them in spite of their new identity as UIS.

In 1989, I had been arrested for (ironically) "breaching the peace" while involved in a street theater action dressed as Uncle Sam outside of a military recruitment station in Springfield during a day of peace demonstrations protesting against the US military presence in Central America. After dredging up this incident in "oh-my-god" fashion, the SJR then proceeded to make me the fall guy for all the bad publicity that the college was receiving, perhaps thinking that since I had not lived there for two and a half years, I would not hear of it and could not defend myself.

Referring to me, the author of the article, Dave Bakke, concluded, "Bloggers are correct that *there was that element* (italics mine) to the school at the time." Bakke was essentially doing damage control for UIS. His goal was not investigative journalism, but public relations. Nowhere in the article is there any in-depth analysis of Churchill's controversial post-9/11 statements about the World Trade Center and its Eichman-like bureaucratic apparatus or any attempt to examine his own lengthy public defense of himself which can also be found on the Internet along with all of the hysterical rants of right-wing bloggers which Bakke did make sure to include in the article. In the shrill climate of political repression in the US, Churchill was summarily being judged to be a dangerous character, perhaps even a terrorist, a pariah who refuses to get with the new corporate university program.

Perhaps the heat Churchill, and others like me, have drawn as radical professors is related to the fact that we have steadfastly refused to confine our heresies to the classroom, reaching beyond the usual ivory tower academic circles in our writing, and not being afraid to take to the streets to act upon our principles.

FE Note: The above article is the first essay in Ron Sakolsky's new book, *Creating Anarchy*. See our listing of publications on page 54 for ordering information. His is the first to be published by Fifth Estate Books, a new imprint,

a sub-project of this magazine, which will print the works of FE staff and contributors. Look for new titles in the near future.

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