

The New McCarthyism

On the recent purge of David Graeber

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Anarchist anthropologist David Graeber's recent purge from Yale University—coming hot on the heels of the trial-by-media of Native American radical Ward Churchill—is one of many recent attacks on radical professors that have shaken the supposedly safe zone of the ostensibly liberal academy. Graeber's contract was recently not renewed under highly suspicious circumstances after many years of teaching at the Ivy League school.

“Being an openly anarchist professor would mean challenging the way universities are run,” Graeber has written, “and that, of course, is going to get one in far more trouble than anything one could ever write.” Apparently, his situation has proven these observations true.

Unlike some radical academics, Graeber has distinguished himself as someone who has a very active presence on the ground. In addition to having written several widely-read essays on anarchism and the anti-globalization movement, and the books *Towards an Anthropological Theory of Value: The False Coin of Our Own Dreams* and *Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology*, he was also a member of the NYC Direct Action Network, and a familiar face at demonstrations, benefits, and talks.

In fact, it was several years ago at one of these events that he told me that, while it was great while it lasted, the Ivory Tower (or at least his nook of it) would not tolerate him for long. After he was identified in the mainstream media as a member of the Anti-Capitalist Convergence during the demonstrations against the 2002 World Economic Forum in New York City, right-wing Yale alumni started a campaign to have him dismissed. Two years ago, his department attempted to have him removed, but was barred from doing so for violating their own administrative procedures.

But what's the momentum behind these difficulties that radical academics have? I think it has to do with the ubiquitous presence of progressives of all stripes (from Communist to queer) in the universities, long a thorn in the side of the Right. So, with Bush's election victory, it should come as no surprise that conservatives see this as an opportunity to take out some of the Right's most hated opponents—those damn anti-American radical professors.

This is not to argue that there's some vast conspiracy afoot, with its origins in either a PNAC three-drink lunch or in some cold, dark crevice of Karl Rove's reptilian brain. It's far more likely that the atmosphere is simply conducive, and we are on the defensive. So, the Rightists roll forward with their agenda of abridging the cultural and political freedoms of those who have the audacity to disagree with them. And anarchists are on the forefront of this opposition.

But the anarchist response to these attacks have been mixed. Ward Churchill, for example, has only garnered tepid support from the movement. True, despite being an anarchist-sympathizer, Churchill has previously gone out of his way to alienate fellow radicals with tracts like *Pacifism As Pathology*, and was in the middle of a long-running internecine fight between American Indian Movement factions. He also offended some people by more-or-less condoning the deaths of the elite “technocratic corps” in the September 11 attacks (although not of janitors or temp shit-workers, as he was widely misrepresented as doing). It is also true that Churchill and other radicals are often

well-paid employees of state universities and other public institutions, another reason some anarchists have cited for their lack of support. But while this position is impeccably anarchist, it's also very short-sighted.

I once challenged one of my friends on this once (she is a NEFAC member as well as a city employee), she quipped, "As anarchists we are opposed to both the State and Capital; since we have to work for one or the other, what's the difference?" Additionally, the precedent set by purging a professor at a State university holds for private universities as well, not to mention for the larger society in general.

Depriving political opponents of work is one of the most effective ways to disable a political movement. During the Civil Rights Movement, this was a popular tactic used by Southern reactionaries; South Carolina, for example, made it illegal for school teachers to belong to the NAACP, a law which resulted in widespread purges, as well as resignations from the organization; obviously, it created huge difficulties for recruiting new members as well. Later, the segregationists tried successfully, in Alabama, Louisiana and Texas, to outlaw the civil rights organization altogether.

The details behind Graeber's dismissal are as bland as any bureaucratic procedure. As a non-tenured professor, his first two three-year reviews were approved; after this he started engaging in more high-profile activism (including, most recently, defending a student who was an organizer for the graduate student union). His next contract extension, for four years, was originally a split vote: but on appeal it was ruled that the faculty was guilty of ethical violations for attempting to remove him without prior warnings, and so his contract was renewed for two years (instead of four). This current dismissal comes at the review of point for the last two years.

So, why is this political? Because at Yale these reviews are mere rubber stamps, since you're not "up" for anything (such as tenure, which Graeber would only be considered for if he worked the next two years). Unless you totally screw up, it's a basic automatic renewal. It's tenure that there's only a 3 to 12 percent chance of getting at Yale, according to Graeber. The last pre-tenure renewal was the point at which Graeber, with strong student support and a sterling publishing record, was canned.

Like Churchill, support for Graeber has been stronger from progressives, students, and other professors in general (and, in the latter case, anthropologists in particular) than from anarchists. Not just have his own students mobilized in defense of him and over 3,800 people from around the world signed a public petition of support, but a bill has even been introduced into the European Parliament specifically about his case.

Perhaps the fairly tepid anarchist support stems from an aversion to professors in general, or maybe it's just plain resentment that he secured a position at an Ivy League institution instead of working at a high school or community college, as some anarchists have suggested were more appropriate teaching positions. (Some radical listserves and websites are full of big-picture comments, more-or-less literally like, "Fuck you, serves you right for teaching rich kids and selling out to the Man!") And, more than one person has suggested that, with his extensive publishing record and high powered resume, Graeber will have no trouble landing another job.

But while we can debate these issues, what's missing here is any kind of understanding about the larger issues that are at stake, not to mention what's just plumb fucked-up about radicals losing their jobs solely on the basis of their political beliefs. If controversial and radical professors can be purged for their views, it opens the door to this happening at all levels in society. The last time this happened, in the 1950s, the Right did the same and took the radicals head on, purging them from their then-stronghold, the unions, and in particularly the CIO. This effectively smashed the progressive movement for a decade, until the New Left arose.

The universities are practically the only major sector in our society where radicals have established a serious foothold, and can function openly. (Contrary to popular belief, they are not a majority in academia, although liberals may be).

Unless there is a fundamental transformation of the economic and social relationships of our society, we are all dependent on the present system to get by. If the Right can dislodge radicals in one of our only strongholds, it will have cleared any potential obstacles to sweeping us out of all the workplaces where we are forced to toil, whether they are public or private. Remember, Churchill, as a tenured professor and well-known scholar, is in a position of strength that even Graeber, who taught at an Ivy League school, was not since he did not have tenure.

Nothing makes the reputation of a newcomer like picking a fight with the playground bully, instead of the shy kid in back. The last time this happened, in the 1950s, the Right did the same and took the radicals head on, purging

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Perhaps workplace justice for radical professors, who many see as part of the privileged establishment, is not the most pressing cause facing the anarchist movement. Graeber himself has said that solidarity is most needed for anarchist political prisoners, like Jeffrey "Free" Luers. But, at the very least, anarchists may wish to think of political action in defense of fired radicals as a simple case of enlightened self-interest, for they may be the next in line.

For more info on David Graeber's situation: <http://www.geocities.com/graebersolidarity/>

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