Academic Freedom, Professional Transparency, and Intellectualism in the Era of Globalization

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Among the many changes that emerged after September 11, 2001, was a renewed interest in surveillance and professional transparency, with a particular spotlight on higher education. Revelatory of this trend are the two infamous lists of faculty members who purportedly are ruining the minds of youth on campuses nationwide. First there was the November 2001 American Council of Trustees and Alumni (ACTA) report, written by Jerry L. Martin and Anne D. Neal, that listed 117 university professors by name and institution along with such “uncivilized” responses to the terrorist attacks on the Twin Towers and the Pentagon as “we need to hear more than one perspective on how we can make the world a safer place” (21). More recently, David Horowitz published his list of the United States’101 most dangerous professors, claiming that his study is a highly researched collective profile of the biased professoriate and not a McCarthy-era “list.” Regardless of what we call these texts, I was anxious to see who made the lists and only mildly surprised to discover that there was no significant presence from composition scholars, and only scant attention paid to rhetoricians. Given that composition is one of the few required courses
for students across the country, given the field's history in what Lester Faigley, in his 1996 CCCC Chair's Address, labeled "literacy after the revolution," given James Berlin's call to situate our work in larger social and political contexts, why does composition remain such a safe space? Beyond these primarily technological and class-based discussions, compositionists inquire into racial, gender, and sexual oppression. Contemporary scholarship asks us to explore public discourse, to give students a right to their own language, and to practice institutional critique. Is none of this a threat to the conservative agenda? Are all writing courses, and not just first-year composition, hopelessly limited to reproducing the bourgeois subject, as Sharon Crowley says?

One response to these questions might be to admit that much of the work we do in the university gets circumscribed by a liberal agenda of educating students for the changing social, political, and cultural landscape of the workplace. However, I think this is true of all university curricula; thus, the conspicuous absence of composition theorists from attacks by the neoconservative witch-hunt must be attributed to something else. Beshara Doumani's edited collection, Academic Freedom after September 11, with essays contributing both theoretical and historical context to the contemporary squeeze on academic freedom, helps clarify that other cause—shifting geopolitical and military interests in the Middle East and the attendant need to clamp down on those faculty whose disciplinary research focuses on this area or whose criticism of U.S. international policy is prominent. Composition tends not to explore globalization and likely addresses the Israeli-Palestinian conflict even less. Indeed, when composition scholars do bring global politics into the classroom, they do so as a theme around which each student builds his or her personal oeuvre. Students learn to research, make arguments, come to voice, and communicate opinions primarily through rhetorical and neo-expressivist approaches to writing. Alternative approaches, such as critical/cultural studies pedagogies that highlight global oppression and institutional relations, traditionally have been the most contentious practices in composition, and today is no exception. A spectrum of
theorists from Victor Vitanza to Richard Fulkerson to Matthew A. Levy has argued against critical/cultural studies approaches because they lead to cynicism rather than the construction of a better world, because they fail to teach the writing process fully, and because they show contempt for student belief systems, suggesting rhetoric and composition's long-standing desire to privilege style over content, the individual over the political, and the local over the global. And yet, as the essays in Academic Freedom after September 11 imply, the struggle over writing our world takes place to a great extent through institutional power exerted within the geopolitical context of our global landscape.

For those dinosaurs among us who are still interested in institutional critique and critical/cultural studies approaches to the teaching of writing, Academic Freedom after September 11 might help shape the content, heuristics, and assignments of our classrooms. Like many other important cultural studies collections, this book began as a conference themed around the traditionally vexed notion of academic freedom. While all the essays in the collection help illuminate the many matrices that converge around this theme, the first three essays are especially noteworthy. Doumani's introductory chapter sets a strong tone by outlining the legal, philosophical, political, and historical threads of the academic freedom debates. Quite simply, he claims that the polemics against supposedly biased (read "critical") faculty should be seen as part of a sustained effort to shift public discourse in favor of four major agendas in foreign and domestic policies: dominating the globe through the doctrine of preemptive military intervention with special focus on the Middle East, dismantling the New Deal society, reversing the gains of the various civil-rights and environmental movements, and blurring the line between church and state. (16)

The monitoring of universities to ensure these agendas was bolstered by the events of September 11; however, Doumani argues that such designs are "rooted in a four-decade-long, massive investment by right-wing groups in a national network of
institutions: think tanks, policy institutes, grassroots faith-based organizations, law firms, social advocacy groups, corporate lobbying outfits, media outlets (radio, television, newspapers, the Internet), tracking organizations, and pressure groups of various kinds" (25). This loose coalition has all the markings of what Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri call "Empire," making it difficult to organize a unified countermovement. Nevertheless, the collection offers concrete discussion about how to construct a notion of academic freedom flexible enough to protect faculty in their diverse pursuits of knowledge and rigid enough to uphold professionally sanctioned standards.

Doumani's provocative introduction is followed by two excellent essays that speak to each other and to the need for a more effective vision of academic freedom. Robert Post argues that we ought to return to the American Association of University Professors' (AAUP) "1915 Declaration of Principles on Academic Freedom and Academic Tenure" as a means of defining academic freedom within professional norms that apply only to credentialed faculty, rather than through first amendment rights that protect all citizens. A university education, he contends, is not about the transmission of facts, but about professional methods of research, inquiry, and interpretation that faculty members must model through critical, independent thinking. In short, Post believes that academic freedom should be situated in "professional expertise and self-regulation" (88). Judith Butler counters Post's well-developed argument by questioning the easy self-regulation of academic boundaries. Without disputing the relevance of professional norms, Butler emphasizes that professions are not self-contained; rather, they are influenced by governmental, corporate, and non-profit organizations. Professions, she says, need to be understood historically such that "innovation in academic life depends in part on invoking and elaborating new norms over and against established fields of knowledge" (115). Policing acceptable disciplinary boundaries is made no easier, nor any cleaner, by placing that responsibility within professional hands rather than legislative or public restrictions. Those of us who have witnessed unqualified
faculty make tenure while other more qualified faculty are denied that professional security know the messiness of professional self-regulation all too well. Professionalism and its homogenizing organizations cannot be the answer to complicated, heterogeneous questions. Taking a cue from Butler's critique of standardizing professionalization, composition scholars would benefit, I think, from exploring the institutional and pedagogical debates over neo-expressivism, social construction, and rhetorical conventions through a miscegenation of professional norms that might lead to the production of new knowledges so critical to the contemporary political climate. Although we are certainly situated within professional norms, we are not limited to the reproduction of narrowly established standards that attacks on academic freedom hope to enforce. As Butler says, we need to work against such disciplinary purity and against our faith in "a single norm that corresponds to a given discipline or field [; instead] we must, in contemporary circumstances, identify major points of contention, rifts, debate, and dissonance" (120).

Apropos to Butler's point is ACTA's most recent publication, *How Many Ward Churchills?* This study argues that "indoctrination is replacing education" because regardless of discipline, "the focus is consistently on a set list of topics: race, class, gender, sexuality, and the 'social construction of identity'; globalization, capitalism, and U.S. 'hegemony'; the ubiquity of oppression and the destruction of the environment" (2). The intermingling of disciplinary inquiry apparently implies not only unprofessionalism but also faculty bias against conservative students, even though several recent studies suggest a grading edge for conservative students and reveal students as more likely than faculty to be biased against those whom they believe hold different political views than their own (Jaschik). Besides its illogical leaps, this third "list" (the document primarily consists of excerpts from publicly available, online syllabi) shows how academic freedom based on restricted professional norms suppresses interpretive spaces, short circuits deliberation, and strengthens the academy's historical role within the corporate-government-university nexus, what Henry Etzkowitz
and Loet Leydesdorff call the triple helix of educational research. In one interesting section, ACTA (like Post) points to AAUP’s “1915 Declarations of Principles” as the document to which we must return. For Post, this text protects faculty (63); for ACTA, it protects students (20). Not surprisingly, Post probably read the text more carefully and applied more “professional” methods of interpretation. According to the principles, “the term ‘academic freedom’ has traditionally had two applications—to the freedom of the teacher and to that of the student, Lehrfreiheit and Lernfreiheit. It need scarcely be pointed out that the freedom which is the subject of this report is that of the teacher” (292). For both interlocutors, however, retreat into the “1915 Declarations” constrains possible intellectual inquiry and classroom pedagogy within pre-established disciplinary norms—norms that work hand-in-hand with economic globalization. Maintaining professional standards, while giving the allusion of disciplinary autonomy, actually reasserts the role of universities within the global landscape by ensuring flexible, but universal, standards worldwide, a major cultural function of contemporary globalization according to Burkart Holzner and Leslie Holzner’s Transparency in Global Change: The Vanguard of the Open Society.

While Holzner and Holzner certainly recognize the secrecy and other informational setbacks that emerged from President Bush’s post-September 11 regime, they nonetheless believe that transparency is increasing and that civil society’s constant pressure for transparency from centers of power will lead the way to a more open and just world. They define transparency as “the social value of open, public and/or individual access to information held and disclosed by centers of authority” (330). Just as professional norms are neither universal nor transhistorical, neither is what these authors call “the transparency syndrome.” This sociological study of the transparency value and its dialectical partner, secrecy, sweeps through the invention of money, the beginnings of state bureaucracies, the birth of the printing press, and the shift toward Internet and computer information systems (and that’s just chapter two). These key turning points must be addressed because without
them the demands for transparency would be meaningless; however, the authors' particular foci are the gestures toward increasing transparency in the current global era. In the global society, as I mention above, transparency values and other "worldwide norms need to be universal and yet linked to the particular cultures where they are applied" (27). Globalization, they argue, brings changes as profound as those of the industrial era and its attendant shifts in higher education. Consequently, the struggle over the future of higher education, currently embroiled around academic freedom issues, signifies the shifting terrain of global capitalism. For instance, policing higher education through established professional norms and enforcing this standard worldwide—a key constellation of the transparency syndrome—will help developing countries "graduate large numbers of competent scientists, mathematicians, and engineers, expanding the professional expertise in these countries" and making outsourcing an increasingly attractive solution to the rising cost of professional labor in the developing world (334). Problems of such outsourcing notwithstanding, Holzner and Holzner welcome this academic standardization because they believe it hastens global transparency, which, in turn, will hasten a more open and democratic society.

While the Holzners offer a plethora of examples to support their claim that transparency is on the rise—watchdog organizations, NGOs, voluntary codes of conduct, new accounting laws, health care rights for patients, increasingly nuanced history books and public memorials to both national glory and national disgrace—their attendant claim that this transparency will lead to more democratic, open societies seems dubious to me. For one, they readily omit that the rise in transparency comes along with an equal rise in corporate corruption, but they suggest that corporate "malfeasance and crimes, once discovered, may actually advance the cause of transparency and accountability" (203). The underlying structure of this hypothesis functions through a binary of power—the center exerts force and the periphery pushes back—that appears outdated in the decentered world of global "Empire." More importantly, however, this transparency thesis rests on the
constant and consistent monitoring of professional norms in much 
the same way that Post and ACTA seek to maintain academic 
boundaries. Each of these authors understands the inextricable 
linkages among universities, nation-states, and corporations, but 
each fails to see that as long as we conceive the future for open 
societies only within professional, disciplinary boundaries, "we 
may hope for nothing better, no greater equality and no more 
substantive democracies than the ones we already have and 
know" (Butler 139). Standardization, even in its flexible, global 
form, reproduces a status quo that cannot hope to be the 
vanguard of the open society.

One point rings clear throughout both Academic Freedom after 
September 11 and Transparency in Global Change: struggles over 
Academic Freedom cannot be discussed outside struggles over 
the direction of globalization, the value of the Washington Consen­
sus, and the costs of U.S. political and military campaigns, espe­
cially in the Middle East. Both texts understand these complex 
interdependencies and attempt to offer solutions to the quagmire 
of professionalism in the era of globalization. Transparency serves 
this purpose for Holzner and Holzner; however, reading the two 
texts together places questions of globalization at the center of 
academic freedom debates and suggests both the values and 
limitations of transparency. Transparency in university work, argu­
ably the most transparent center of power in the contemporary 
world, reveals a strong critique of U.S. global hegemony in its many 
fronts; however, that transparency has led to less, not more, 
freedom for academics. A key problem, aptly illustrated by the two 
opposing assessments of the "1915 Declarations," is that transpar­
ency does not ensure sound interpretations nor honest delibera­
tion. In fact, precisely because professional norms require curricu­
lar transparency, ACTA is able to censure faculty whom they 
accuse of transgressing disciplinary boundaries. The solution 
tentatively put forward by Butler asks us to constantly reinvent 
disciplinary norms, to weigh disciplines against one another, and 
to discuss rather than police disagreement. Far from a radical 
suggestion, this seems entirely appropriate to the global informa-
tion age and its hallmark proliferation of representations as well as its blending of politics and entertainment. Marlia Banning recently argued that the contemporary world, especially television and print news, relies heavily on the rhetorical practice of reflexivity, or the drawing of attention to the constructed nature of representations. This practice, she says, blurs distinctions among genres, purposes, and motives, leaving the average citizen less able to clearly articulate truth from fiction. In such a situation, we cannot abandon professional, disciplinary norms, but neither can we simply live with the limitations of those boundaries. Rather, we need rhetorical approaches that constantly reinvent disciplinary norms in ways compatible with the diverse needs of our socio-cultural experiences. We need an academic freedom that accounts for interdisciplinary methods; we need a political space that allows for intellectual deliberation rather than accusation; and we need writing studies programs that help train young people in these habits of mind. Perhaps then the names of composition scholars will start appearing on neoconservative lists of dangerous faculty.

**Works Cited**


