

## Book Review

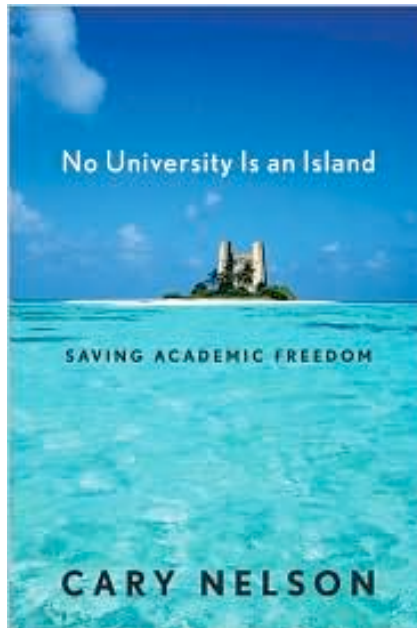
***No University is an Island: Saving Academic Freedom*, by Cary Nelson, New York University Press, \$27.95**

*By Dean J. Saitta, University of Denver*

This is a very timely and inspiring book. Academic freedom in America is under siege in new and unprecedented ways, and the outcome is very much in doubt. Cary Nelson—Jubilee Professor of Liberal Arts and Sciences at the University of Illinois and President of the American Association of University Professors (AAUP)—looks to shake the professorate out of its complacency with a hard-hitting, honest look at this state of affairs. This includes a penetrating, “warts and all” analysis of the AAUP itself.

There is something in this book for anyone who’s interested in the state of the American university. Individual chapters are devoted to (1) relationships between academic freedom, shared governance and tenure, or what Nelson describes as higher education’s “three legged stool”, (2) Current threats to academic freedom—16 of them—including instrumentalization (e.g., “outcomes based” education), inadequate faculty grievance procedures, and dubious administrative claims of imminent financial crisis, (3) the expanding use of non-tenure line or “contingent” faculty, (4) political speech on campus, (5) faculty unionization, (6) graduate employee unionization, (7) classroom pedagogy and political

advocacy, (8) Nelson’s personal reflections on the AAUP presidency, and (9) the status and future of AAUP’s Committee A on Academic Freedom and Tenure. The book contains excellent sections on how corporate or “neoliberal” economic philosophies and structures are changing universities for the worse. Indeed, neoliberalism qualifies as the umbrella term under which all 16 of the threats discussed in chapter 2 can be grouped. Nelson advances sound arguments about why, for example, neoliberal alternatives to the tenure system won’t work.



Throughout the book are good discussions of the tactics used by the American professorate’s most vocal right wing critics to convince the public that change is needed (e.g., David Horowitz, Anne Neal of the American Council of Trustees and Alumni, and Peter Wood and Steven Balch of the National Association of Scholars). A long section in chapter 7 is devoted to an engagement with the more

moderate and arguably more progressive criticisms of Stanley Fish. These are passionate and riveting interventions that put the issues into very clear focus. First-hand anecdotes and real world examples usefully illustrate the arguments.

Nelson provides a compelling brief for seeing shared governance as the primary flashpoint of struggle within higher education for at least the next decade. The book makes three especially important contributions to the governance discourse. I focus on these three because they resonate with my experience as a former Faculty Senate President and as current Co-President of the Colorado Conference of the AAUP.

First, Nelson argues that we need institutional structures other than faculty senates to effectively meet today’s governance challenges. Faculty senates are often very limited in what they can accomplish. They too often develop cozy relationships with administrations or become beholden to them in other ways. They can be ignored or end-run. Some have even been abolished by administrative fiat. In Nelson’s view faculty senates too often make peace with power instead of speaking truth to power. Alternatively, Nelson argues that what we need are more independent faculty voices like campus AAUP chapters. This was precisely the thinking of the faculty group that revived a dormant chapter on my own campus in 2007. Predictably, it has been a struggle to gain respect. Only one academic administrator acknowledged the revival and commended the rationale behind it: to work with the Faculty Senate and the

Administration to “advance the standards of the institution” (interestingly, that administrator has since resigned after a very short term in office). Other administrators wondered why we needed another faculty voice on campus, and suggested that AAUP is irrelevant because it has no explicit, formal role in any of our existing governance processes. Most administrators said nothing. AAUP is, however, the 800 pound gorilla in the room. Our faculty handbook reverberates with AAUP policy language. So do the policy documents of many other universities, including those recognized as having especially good governance practices. However, more can be done to strengthen the faculty’s hand in shared governance. For example, we can craft more robust definitions of academic freedom that better protect the faculty’s “fundamental right and responsibility to be engaged with and critique administrative policy without being punished for doing so.” This right is currently jeopardized by legal actions such as *Garcetti v. Ceballos*, a 2006 Supreme Court decision establishing that a public employee’s statements about their official responsibilities are not shielded from disciplinary actions by employers. It behooves public and private institutions alike to ensure that faculty are free to comment on all matters related to the functioning of the university without institutional restraint or fear of retaliation. As Nelson notes, our campuses need more, not less, open debate.

Secondly, Nelson identifies the impact that generational change is having on the faculty’s prospects for success. As he describes it, today’s faculty “has one foot in the

cradle and one in the grave.” Senior faculty who remember the days when administrators could be counted upon to deliver eloquent defenses of academic freedom and shared governance are retiring and being replaced by contingent instructors. The loss of these old warhorses means the loss of important institutional memories. It also creates a space for higher education’s new corporate managers to implement their agendas, which can include using “collegiality” as a criterion in tenure and other decisions to punish faculty, stifle debate, and uphold corporate-style conformity. Today’s younger faculty often have no knowledge of the history of academic freedom and thus little capacity to define, defend, or even recognize attacks upon it. They have been professionally socialized to identify with their discipline rather than with the professorate as a whole. Competitive careerism rules the day; interests lie with protecting individual promotion and salary prospects than with doing the kind of collective work that makes the fulfilled individual career possible. Many faculty, both young and old, don’t even notice AAUP until they find their own rights and freedoms being violated. Nelson’s experience jives with mine: 80-90% of faculty who seek advice and guidance from AAUP don’t belong to the organization, and remain non-members even after their personal crisis has passed. In short, the deepening generational divide is every bit as disturbing as the expanding contingent workforce. These trends are reinforcing growing administrative intolerance for dissent and controversy and threatening the status of higher education as a social good.

Thirdly, Nelson demystifies the AAUP’s involvement in the dismissal of Ward Churchill from his tenured position at the University of Colorado-Boulder for alleged research misconduct. Nelson finally clears the air about the AAUP’s involvement in this highly charged, deeply polarizing, and enormously consequential case. He addresses the question asked by some of us here in Colorado when many politicians, pundits, and professors were calling for Churchill’s head: “Where’s the AAUP?”. It turns out that a national AAUP investigation was never conducted because Professor Churchill never asked for one. *Or did he?* Nelson argues that an investigation actually *was* requested, but AAUP staff misled the organization’s investigative arm (Committee A) into thinking otherwise. Nelson is blunt in charging that AAUP mishandled the Churchill case from the very beginning. He describes as a “dumb show” the various AAUP expressions of concern about the well-documented conflicts of interest and procedural irregularities that marred the university’s review of Churchill’s scholarship, because the organization folded when the final report came in. But Nelson also urges that it’s time to move on, building upon the AAUP’s unequaled century of accomplishments in support of academic freedom and shared governance. In chapter 9 he articulates a long and very useful list of due process questions raised by the Churchill case that a special AAUP committee will examine in hopes of offering general advice to the profession. Our Colorado Conference is currently preparing its own critical analysis of the Churchill case, with much the same goal.

Cary Nelson's book is an important wake-up call to the professorate. I got my call four years ago when I was blacklisted by David Horowitz in his book *The Professors: The 101 Most Dangerous Academics in America*. What most impressed me about the reaction to my inclusion on the list was not the predictable condemnations from those on the Right, but rather what I heard from those on the Left. I got a lot of backslaps and "attaboys", and many expressions of list envy from friends, colleagues, and acquaintances. Virtually no one in my university circles saw the list as an ominous sign portending darker days for academic freedom and shared governance on campus. In fact the faculty's reaction seemed to confirm what Horowitz routinely asserts: that universities are populated by a bunch of self-absorbed, echo-chambered, liberal group-thinkers. For many observers Horowitz is a marginal figure today, someone who can be safely ignored. That might be true. However, as a result of his agitations some of us have met another enemy, and it is us. Nelson's book should serve as an antidote to the single-minded careerism and "I got mine" mentality that afflicts too much of today's fragmented American professorate. Hopefully it will promote the kind of serious self-reflection and collective action that's needed to protect the hard-earned rights and freedoms that faculty colleagues around the country are finding increasingly at risk.

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