In Defense of Academic Freedom: A Symposium at the University of Chicago

Report from John Wilson, College Freedom website

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UPDATE: Audio of the event now available.

The University of Chicago on October 12 was the locale of a major symposium on academic freedom sponsored by the DePaul Academic Freedom Committee, Verso Books, Diskord magazine, Jewish Voice for Peace, and various other groups. A crowd of nearly 2,000 people came to the event, which lasted over four hours.

Moderator Tariq Ali began by noting that the event was inspired by the denial of tenure to Norman Finkelstein, and declared that the event was meant to say, “There is where we stand, and this is what are going to defend.”

Noam Chomsky spoke first, via video due to his wife’s illness. Chomsky called Finkelstein a scholar “whose work has received the highest praise by some of the most distinguished scholars in the field where he has worked.” Chomsky noted, “I’m not going to review this sordid affair.”

Instead, he quoted Hans Morgenthau on “conformist subservience to power” and argued that universities should be as “untainted as possible by conformist subservience to power.” Instead, a right-wing attack on academia “has specifically targeted Middle East studies and Peace Studies program.” Chomsky also noted “The attack by statist reactionaries who are outraged by the ‘liberal bias’” in colleges, which Chomsky considered a notion that “scarcely merits ridicule in light of the realities of the academic world.”

Much of Chomsky’s speech focused on Iran and the plans to invade it. He also commented on the reacted to the recent speech by Mahmoud Ahmadinejad at Columbia. Chomsky noted “Columbia’s delicate taste with regard to dictators.” While Ahmadinejad received harsh criticism, Pakistan’s dictator Pervez Musharraf got Bollinger’s “fulsome welcome” as Bollinger welcomed him “with great gratitude and excitement.”

Chomsky argued that “truth poses a serious barrier to the policies carried out by state power.” For that reason, “The assault on academic freedom has deep roots and ominous portent.”
Akeel Bilgrami, philosophy professor at Columbia, was next. Bilgrami noted that Finkelstein’s “academic career has been completely ruined...unless some university decides to make its reputation in the most honorable way” by hiring him. He declared that Finkelstein “has produced brilliant and painstaking research.”

Bilgrami argued, “It is absurd to think that it requires a special form of heroism for administrators to stand up for academic freedom.” He claimed about the attacks on academic freedom, “this is a new development at Columbia” (at least in 24 years he’s been at Columbia). He noted that it didn’t happen when Edward Said was alive, and asked: “Why couldn’t these students touch him for all the years he was at Columbia?” Did he have “more charm, more style, he was more handsome, he had better manners”? No, and “Said was much harder on students than any of the faculty being attacked” now. Said was attacked just the same, even some faculty demanded that he be fired. Bilgrami wondered, “Why then did he get away with it?”

Tony Judd of NYU followed, noting that he was tenured, and therefore in a “peculiarly privileged and advantageous position” For Norman Finkelstein, without tenure, “the act of speaking out...took very significant courage and has exacted a very significant price.” Judd argued that academic freedom is “more important today than it used to be.” The reason? For the past century there was in print media “the world of public intellectual debate and written dissent” and “most of the writers and polemicists were not academics, they were not professors.” According to Judd, “We are moving out of that era. There are very few public intellectuals today who have a private income that can let them say what they want and be damned.” As a result, “the university becomes a much more important space as a place where you can say dissenting things.” This is why he is so alarmed by “the nature of university cowardice in our time.”

Judd himself was invited to give a talk on the Holocaust at a small Catholic college in New York. After the college was pressured to disinvite him by Jewish groups, Judd was advised “that I should not make any reference to Israel in the course of the talk” and not even mention Israel. Judd noted, “I declined the opportunity.” Then, in Pennsylvania, at a small liberal arts college, he was invited to give a lecture on Europe, but the professor who invited him was told, “the president of the university would be under very strong pressure not to tenure him” if the lecture went ahead. He asked Judd not to come, and that he agree to say that he chose not to come. According to Judd, “universities are very vulnerable” to “political pressure” and “pressure from donors,” and he worried most of all about the “self-censorship which ensues.” Judd argued that
Judd declared, “The Israel Lobby is a very distinctive lobby” because “All lobbies seek to get what they want, but only the Israel Lobby has a second and third agenda: to deny its own existence, and to ensure silence on the subject of its lobbying.” Judd said, “It’s a lobby that exists in part to silence as well as voice.” These people used the “moral leverage of accusing someone of anti-Semitism” because “If you can label someone as antisemitic, you can avoid having to engage their argument.”

Judd noted that “publishers are very vulnerable to it,” citing the example of a New York publisher who got a letter from Abraham Foxman, pointing out that Norman Finkelstein was part of a collection, and asking her to reconsider publishing the book. Judd reported, “She, of course, wrote back and told him to go to hell.” But another author with a book on Vichy France had it cancelled, for comparing Vichy to Israel.

Judd mocked “The famous demand for balance,” wondering, “How ridiculous this can get?” He recalled a 2003 NYU panel discussion on the Mid-East, with Edward Said on panel. The Provost of the university called up, worried about an “unbalanced meeting.” Judd had an Israel speaker on the panel, but was told “he’s the wrong kind of Israeli.”

Judd called universities “places in which members of them can say things that become increasingly difficult to say outside of them.” He worried about “the culture of self-censorship, and the politics of fear” that “steadily corrodes and undermine the kind of public conversation without which a country erodes.” Judd concluded, “there’s nowhere else we can do it, and that’s why academic freedom matters.”

Moderator Tariq Ali also commented on the “balance” issue, declaring that “the bulk of what is being churned out in this country every day is unbalanced” such as Fox News. According to Ali, “balance only comes up when the dominant ideas are being challenged.”

John Mearshimer of the University of Chicago expressed alarm that “outside forces have intervened in academia in hiring and tenure decisions,” cancelled speeches, and “they have put pressure on university presses not to publish controversial books.” Mearshimer said, “Universities are the one place in the US where Israel tends to get treated like a normal country: it gets criticized for its past and present behavior in ways that never happen inside the Beltway.”

The Finkelstein case shows “how pro-Israel forces interfere in academic life in dangerous ways.” According to Mearshimer, “the case for his tenure was open-and-shut.” He was asked by DePaul to write a tenure letter on Finkelstein, and read most of his writings. Although “we have marked disagreements on a number of important subjects,” Mearshimer said, “I recommended with enthusiasm and without reservation” for tenure. He said, “Finkelstein is clearly a driven
person....scholarship is his life.” He noted, “Finkelstein has written five books and numerous articles....There are few people on any faculty, me included, who have written five books.” Mearshimer called him, “A major scholar whose works are known around the world.” He said, “Finkelstein makes compelling arguments in his writings” and impacts the debate.

He said, “Image and Reality is one of the best books written about the origins of the Israeli/Palestine conflict.” Nation on Trial, co-written by Finkelstein, “is one of the best two or three critiques of the Goldhagen thesis” about the Holocaust. He also praised The Holocaust Industry, and Beyond Chutzpah, which he called an “outstanding work,” a “devastating critique of Alan Dershowitz’s work,” and “guaranteed to have a long shelf life.” Mearshimer concluded, “the quality and the importance of his scholarship are far beyond what should be necessary for tenure at DePaul.” Some scholars dislike him, “but that is true of every major scholar.”

Mearshimer also commented on Finkelstein’s “polemical language” and said, “I believe this is a mistake on his part.” But he added, “This is hardly a fatal flaw, and it does not detract from his scholarly contributions.” He noted, “Finkelstein has been demonized over the years” as an anti-Semite, a Holocaust denier, and and “his scholarship has been villified as well” even though “his writings are held in high regard” by scholars.

Mearshimer mocked DePaul’s claims that they were not influence by outside pressure: “What else are they going to say? They’re certainly not going to admit that they caved into pressured from the Israel Lobby.” But, he said, “There’s no other explanation.” Mearshimer said there is a “strong moral case for Israel’s existence” but argued about the Israel Lobby: “if there was an open and freewheeling discussion of Israel’s history and Israel’s relationship with the US” it would lead to treating Israel like other countries.” And that’s what the lobby is “making sure that Norman Finkelstein does not get tenure at DePaul, or any other school.”

Mearshimer said, “in the halls of academia, where free speech and open discourse are considered essential rights....the situation will get worse” and supporters of Israel will “do everything possible to silence Israel’s critics” because “it cannot afford to allow an open discourse in the US about Israel without putting the current relationship at risk.” As a result, he feared it would “do serious harm to the academy.”

During the discussion time, Bilgrami said, “Some of the people who write polemically have been attacked for years...the fact that they get polemical and angry is understandable”

One questioner asked, “why isn’t there greater organization among university professors to take on the fight that’s inevitably going to happen.” Tony Judd noted that in the United States, professors are “chronically lacking in collective identification” In England, a firing like this would lead to moves for a collective strike. Judd observed that “Pressures can be applied more effectively at a relatively small and relatively less endowed university” such as DePaul. He
suggested as a response that professors “invite Norman Finkelstein to their universities.” Mearshimer said, “I cannot tell you how many times I have been warned not to get too close to Norman Finkelstein.” He was even warned against doing this event.

Another questioner, who came all the way from Los Angeles for the event, called for building a national project to defend dissent, as a launching point for a national organization against this “tremendous effort to stifle critical thinking in the academy.”

In the second panel, Evan Lorendo, DePaul student and vice-president of the DePaul Academic Freedom Committee, called the student protests a “transformative experience.” He noted, “I am not an activist” and “I was somebody who believed fully in DePaul.” Now, he said, “I felt tricked and fooled by DePaul itself for making me believe it was on a higher ground.” After holding a sit-in at DePaul, they were threatened with being expelled and arrested if not out by 5pm, and any graduating seniors would not be able to walk. He noted, “It was quite Vincentian of them.” Lorendo noted, “We run the risk of a self-censoring faculty who are not publishing or saying what they believe....What kind of environment is this?” He said a faculty member came up to them and said, “After seeing what they did to Mehrene, the fear is rising.”

He was particularly upset at the early firing of Finkelstein because “the University did this in an extremely cowardly manner.” He wondered, “When was the concern with the students brought into the equation?” and added, “We as students were forgotten about.” According to Lorendo, “DePaul has effectively said, ‘the students do not matter, we run roughshod over everyone.’”

Lorendo noted, “We see it as a matter of money....There is no devotion to education, only to the increase of wealth.” He argued, “Education is becoming consumerized” and compared it to a machine: “The modern academic has become a rational institution, and unfortunately education is not rational.”

Lorendo said, “Norman Finkelstein is not replaceable. Mehrene Larudee is not replaceable.” He concluded, “I’m not trying to bring down DePaul. I think the idea of my institution is bigger than all of the people trying to ruin it.” The student group will hold a conference on academic freedom at DePaul, February 2-4.

Mehrene Larudee spoke next, and said, “Those of us who care most about academic freedom are those who believe there is some specific truth that will be snuffed out. Most often, it is some kind of truth about injustice.” She added, “If the truth about the Israel/Palestine conflict is lost, there will never be peace and justice.” According to Larudee, “If we only defend the academic freedom of those with whom we agree, it may not be there for us.” She noted, “The appropriate response to free speech is more free speech.”

Larudee also said, “we should not only raise the alarm, we should study the phenomenon: Who are the people trying to suppress free speech?...We need to shine a light on their activities.” Larudee worried the state of academia: “If I think about the most enlightening things I have read,
most of them have not been written by professors.” She added, “There are many pressures in academic life to conform. It’s not just the tenure process.” According to Larudee, “Even when we have the formal right to AF, we don’t fully realize its benefits if we don’t stand up to defend it.” She feared that there is “not enough debate” at DePaul and noted the “pall of debate” after 9/11. She said, “We should set more of an example to students about public debate” and instead, “students are setting an example to us.”

Larudee noted some of the problems with DePaul’s denial of her tenure. After getting unanimous support at the early stages, “There was nothing at all to indicate there might be a problem at the next step.” The decision was made to deny her tenure on May 11, 2007, but she was not informed until June 8, when Finkelstein also received his elaborate notification of tenure denial. Larudee’s tenure denial letter included “hardly any explanation at all” and “nothing about criteria, nothing about the reasons for the decision.” She filed a grievance asking for documents about her case, but “so far I have found out absolutely nothing, nothing of substance about why I was denied tenure.” She wondered, “Was it my friendship and defense with Norman Finkelstein?” Or, “Was it at a public event when I asked a critical question” to an Israeli speaker. According to Larudee, “Something strange and disturbing was going on.”

An Academic Freedom Task Force appointed by the college faculty began to meet in early August, and issued a report on Oct. 12 (available only to DePaul people). Larudee has made an appeal, but the president claimed there is no appeal procedure for a tenure denial. Larudee said, “Of all the people I know, Norman Finkelstein is the most remarkably consistent in his pursuit of the truth.” Larudee noted, “It’s not enough to have legal rights, such as the right of academic freedom” because “even that is not enough without a faculty to put those rights front and center.” She said, “Leadership matters. People who are willing to take a stand and speak out.” According to Larudee, “I cannot say how much I appreciate people who stand up for academic freedom at DePaul,” particularly, she said, the students at DePaul, who are “much better organized, articulate, and effective than the faculty.”

Larudee declared, “The faculty at DePaul are not happy with the current situation. They’re not sure what rights they have. They’re not sure the rights they have can be effectively defended.” As a result, “Fear, caution, timidity, uncertainty” prevail. She added, “The terrible thing about fear is that unless we confront it, it silences us forever...“We lose our freedoms if we do not use them.” Larudee concluded, “And so, we who believe in freedom cannot rest until it comes.”

Neve Gordon of Ben-Gurion University in Israel recounted an email he got from the PR person at his university asking him about this panel: “Neve, you know, what you’ve done in the past is not going to compare with what you’re going to do. How could you sit by those people at the same panel?” Gordon replied, “If you’re insinuating that I shouldn’t participate in this panel, you’re totally out of line.” However, Gordon said: “If Norman Finkelstein had a tenure-track position at Ben-Gurion University, he would have received tenure.”
Gordon noted, “As an academic, I see my role as the search for truth. I hope at some point that this search will help.” Gordon said, “There are several cases going on now, and I think Finkelstein is a symbol of those cases,...cases most of you haven’t heard of, there’s a lot of them that don’t get this attention.” Gordon noted, “The academic witchhunt is directed against scholars who criticize Israeli policy” but “Israeli scholars have much more freedom to discuss these issues than their counterparts in the US or Arab countries.”

Gordon offered four reasons why “there is less academic freedom in the US than there is in Israel.”
1) increased intervention of the so-called pro-Israel lobby.
2) the remaking of the university as a corporation.
3) Destruction of faculty governance and the ascendency of administrative rule.
4) the abandonment of academic rules by faculty and administration.

Gordon reported, “My university was flooded with letters when I came up for tenure several years ago” but “the letters demanding my dismissal all came from the US.” The only complaint against him by a student was also from an American. Gordon said, “Student qua spy is not an American invention, but it is a phenomenon encouraged by Campus watch and other groups.” A professor told him “there was a considerable amount of external pressure to have me fired.”

So Gordon asked, “Why are certain strategies more likely to achieve their goals in the US?” The answer: “The university no longer conceives itself as an institution whose primary goal is to reveal truth. Rather, the university conceives itself as an institution that sells product” and “Faculty members themselves are conceived as producers and as products.” Gordon concluded, “Finkelstein was considered a product, one that became a liability rather than an asset.” By contrast, in Israel there is “unionization and standardized salaries.” As a result, “Those at the helm of Amer un are more accountable to” trustees and donors and parents “rather than the true university constituency, the faculty and students.” Administrators “behave more and more like corporate executives” and “they are also not invested in democratic processes.” Most American universities are “ruled without basic checks and balances.”

Gordon said, “There’s always going to be external influences on universities. There’s always going to be faculty and administrators who are complicit with these influences. The question is, what can we do within the university to...take the universities back into our own hands, and make sure administrators are accountable to us.” Gordon noted, “Only then will we be able to stop the external influences.” Gordon concluded, “We have failed them....We have watched them make the university into a corporation, and we have not stood up and said, ‘enough.’”

The last speech of the day came from Norman Finkelstein, and it was a fascinating talk. Finkelstein responded to the critiques of his civility and examined “the place of civility in
According to Finkelstein, “The first part of academic freedom is professional autonomy. That means your peers, your colleagues, your fellow professors are the best judge of whether or not you’re a competent professor.” Finkelstein said, “That element of academic freedom is designed to preempt outside interference in academic life.” Finkelstein argued that in “the search for truth, a fundamental prerequisite is liberty” and “Outside the university, outside the classroom, you should be free to speak your mind like any other citizen in our society.” But he added, “For those of us who function in the real world, we know there are real constraints on liberty when it comes to academic freedom.” Finkelstein said, “If you’re in a department, you’re free to say what you want to say so long as they approve...” But, “If you carry on in a fashion which is so egregious, so uncivil, in public life, it may be grounds for denying you a place in the academic world.”

Finkelstein discussed in depth the case of Bertrand Russell, who was banned by court from teaching at City College of New York by a court after critics accused Russell of being an “Erotomaniac” and “bereft of moral fiber” in his writings. Finkelstein noted, “Despite an outpouring of support from his students and the leading lights of academia...the judge ruled against Russell, and he lost his position.” Finkelstein concluded, “An honest look at Russell’s social writings...shows, in fact, that Russell was guilty of many of the accusations leveled against him...His views were very unorthodox, and his views were by the standards of his time, outrageous.”

Finkelstein asked, “What are the proper limits of civility, which any professor has to respect?” He declared, “Inside the classroom, as my students know, I am quite conservative and old-fashioned. It is not a soapbox, it is not a lecturn for indoctrination and toeing the party line. In the classroom, your responsibility as a professor is to stimulate. At a public lecture, it’s quite different. It’s to convince.” He observed, “In my personal case, the issue of my conduct in the classroom never arose.”

Finkelstein then turned to the question of civility in statements outside the classroom: “There are many statements which have the appearance of incivility but which are factual statements” such as a friend who said to Elliot Abrahms, “you’re a war criminal.” According to Finkelstein, “That’s a factual statement. That is not an ad hominem....That’s not uncivil. That’s a factual question.” He added, “If I were to call a professor a plagiarist....These words are not ad hominem. They define academic crimes and misdemeanors, which can be proven true or false.”

Another case is what Finkelstein called statements that were uncivil, “but the circumstances in my view require incivility.” He cited Noam Chomsky calling Jeane Kirkpatrick, “the chief sadist in residence of the Reagan Administration.” He said, “That was considered very uncivil.” But Finkelstein noted that young people “yearn for persons in authority to speak the unvarnished truth” and “there are moments that require breaking out of the constraints of polite discourse, to

academic life.”
sound the alarm that innocent people are being butchered as we speak.” He added, “I see no virtue to polite civility, which can often be more vicious and hurtful.” Finkelstein argued that there are “the ridiculous who are deserving of ridicule” and “a charlatan...deserves to be reduced to ridicule.” He added, “there is a time honored tradition for shouting the emperor is naked.”

Finkelstein also cited numerous professors who have used uncivil terms in denouncing him, and said, “I think that’s legitimate. I don’t have a problem with that. You have to be able to take it. This kind of incivility is permissible. Although it becomes unserious if the ad hominems are not supported by argument.” Finkelstein noted that he wrote a book disputing Alan Dershowitz’s views, while “he wrote 160 pages single spaced correspondence trying to suppress publication of the book.”

Finkelstein asked, “Does my incivility undermine my effectiveness in my scholarship?” He cited Karl Marx’s Kapitol and noted, “this is not written according to University of Chicago style.” In it, Marx dismisses the work of various economists as “dwarf economist” “eclectic professorial twaddle” “miserable work” “absurdity and triviality” and he is “absolutely vicious of John Stuart Mill, ‘on a level plane, simple mounds look like hills’”

Finkelstein said, “In my view, most of this talk about civility is a red herring.” When universities “recruit war criminals” (Kissinger, Kirkpatrick, Rumsfeld) and “professors in our best universities advocate torture and the automatic destruction of villages after a terrorist attack,” civility seems beside the point. Finkelstein concluded, “Emily Post’s rules of etiquette, however real the question, is a meaningless sideshow, or a transparent pretext for denying a professor the right the teach on the basis of his or her political beliefs.”

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