

# SCTIW Review

Journal of the Society for Contemporary Thought and the Islamicate World

ISSN: 2374-9288

January 21, 2016

*Protecting the Intellectual Mission in the Age of Neoliberal Expansion*

Akeel Bilgrami and Jonathan R. Cole, eds., *Who's Afraid of Academic Freedom?*, Columbia University Press, 2014, 428 pp., \$35.00 US (hbk), ISBN 9780231168809.

Jeffrey Williams, *How To Be An Intellectual: Essays on Criticism, Culture, & the University*, Fordham University Press, 2014, 216 pp., \$27.00 US (pbk), ISBN 9780823263813.

## *Introduction*

On first glance, the place of the intellectual in society and the protection of academic freedom may appear to be tangentially, but not directly, related. However, when academics speak on issues of public concern outside of academic forums, issuing extramural utterances, they are seeking to speak as public intellectuals. Extramural utterances become objects of contention in controversial cases because they are most likely to come to the attention of administrators, trustees, donors, students, parents, and special interest groups. Examples abound. It is also in the moment of extramural utterance that academics test the dividing line between the inside and the outside of the academy, that separation between the university and the public space. Such utterances become controversial precisely because of the nature of their circulation and the academy's location in the political-economic structure of society.

It is in this context that Akeel Bilgrami and Jonathan Cole's collection, *Who's Afraid of Academic Freedom?*, and Jeffrey Williams's *How To Be An Intellectual* come into sharp focus. While these two books have fundamentally different purposes with respect to the specific topics they cover, they converge around the question of how to best preserve the conditions of possibility for the life of the mind. As the contributors to *Who's Afraid of Academic Freedom?* and Williams make clear, these conditions should never be taken for granted, necessitating a proper historical accounting of their origins, as well as a robust defense in times of cultural and economic crisis. In the first part of this review essay, I will cover the contents of *Who's Afraid of Academic Freedom?*, and in the second part, address *How To Be An Intellectual*.

## *Academic Freedom: An Unsustainable Principle?*

To whom does academic freedom actually belong? Does the university possess academic freedom, or do individual professors? Courts recognize that academic freedom rights inhere within institutions—that is academic institutions have the right to decide who may teach,

what may be taught, and who may be admitted for study. In this view, the individual right to academic freedom is attenuated if not non-existent. An argument that Stanley Fish makes in his *Versions of Academic Freedom*,<sup>1</sup> one that is reproduced in the essay for the collection, is that one can trace various schools of academic freedom, from the most restrictive to the most expansive, in the following way—by noting how, as claims to freedom in the phrase “academic freedom” expand, the identifiable academic task associated with the professed freedom becomes less recognizable:

1. The “It’s a Job School”—this school views academics as paid professionals, who perform a specific professional task. They are not paid to participate in movements, to engage in advocacy, and to foment revolution. According to this view, academics who shirk their professional duties and embrace activities for which they are not being paid are harming the academic vocation and undermining the very basis of academic freedom; in no sense are they using academic freedom, or testing its outer limits;
2. The “For the Common Good” School—this school views academic freedom as necessary to advance the public good;
3. The “Uncommon Being” School—according to this school, academics are special human beings who need the protections associated with academic freedom to say and do things other mere mortals cannot, especially given the tyranny of public opinion that expert knowledge works to counteract;
4. The “It’s For Critique” School—academic freedom, for this school, is absolutely necessary to conduct the cultural and institutional critiques associated with “norms” and “standards”;
5. The “It’s For Revolution” School—according to this school, academic freedom should be used to overthrow the corrupt neoliberal institutions run by the corrupt managers who create and maintain academic norms.

Like Fish, Robert Post and Matthew Finkin in their *For the Common Good* have advanced a seemingly conservative definition of academic freedom, insisting it is the freedom to pursue the academic profession within the bounds set by the profession.<sup>2</sup> These norms are necessary for the operation and maintenance of the academy, and without them, the protections afforded by academic freedom become meaningless. As this argument goes, the functioning of the academy depends upon disciplinary judgments issued by an authorized discourse community—this is all that academic freedom allows for. In his contribution to the collection, “Academic Freedom and Its Opponents,” David Bromwich views this licensed expert approach to academic freedom as an “administrative solution” harmful to the academy. This version of academic freedom argues that those who advocate for an inflationary conception of the concept are in actuality doing great harm to the academic enterprise by trying to use a safeguard geared for the protection of professional speech as a license for, what is properly classified as, outright political speech. This inflationary position insists that the disciplinary norms so confidently asserted by Post and others do not in fact exist, especially in the humanities and social sciences, the precincts most likely to come

---

<sup>1</sup> Stanley Fish, *Versions of Academic Freedom: From Professionalism to Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014).

<sup>2</sup> Matthew W. Finkin and Robert C. Post, *For the Common Good: Principles of American Academic Freedom* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011).

under scrutiny by outside interest groups who seek to regulate certain types of political advocacy.

Post suggests that continual interrogation and revision undermine these norms, damaging the project of academic freedom, as the public loses confidence that these areas of study are engaging in knowledge production, as opposed to simply issuing political or moral judgments. On the other hand, Judith Butler has argued that such norms should continually be subjected to interrogation and revision because norms *qua* norms are the result of a disciplinary consensus about what constitutes the relevant questions and subject matter within a field of study. Fish, Post, and Finkin find value in these norms: by placing certain questions and subject matter out of bounds, outside a discipline's purview, certain ways of seeing and doing are enabled so practitioners can concentrate on a disciplinary question. According to this perspective, academic freedom protections emerge for licensed experts as they adhere to disciplinary ways of seeing and doing.

In his chapter for the collection, "Academic Freedom and the Constitution," Post explores whether there is a constitutional basis for academic freedom. He draws the distinction between democratic legitimation and democratic competence, arguing that, if the project of academic freedom is to remain viable, academic work will have to rely on recognizable disciplinary frameworks for the protection granted to experts. Paraphrasing John Dewey, Post declares that real universities "discipline," institutions without academic freedom "disciple" (125).

The First Amendment protects democratic legitimation and academic freedom protects democratic competence. Post shows how the constitutional basis for academic freedom is weak because the very disciplinary authority that is necessary to protect academic freedom is in direct conflict with the "marketplace of ideas" concept behind the protection of speech backed by the First Amendment. Post resolves this tension by distinguishing between *democratic legitimation*, which is what the First Amendment protects, and *democratic competence*, which supports the necessity of providing academics with academic freedom to generate the expert knowledge the public needs and expects. Post notes the effects of the Pickering-Connick-Churchill line of cases, which established that academics could seek First Amendment protection if their extramural utterances dealt with issues of public concern. In *Garcetti v. Ceballos* (2006), the Supreme Court found that, if public employees are seeking to address issues of public concern pursuant to their official duties as a scholar as they might in issuing extramural utterances, they will have no First Amendment claim if they are retaliated against for this speech by a supervisor. *Garcetti* left open the question about how to resolve this issue with respect to scholarship and teaching.

### *The Crisis Around Academic Freedom*

When scholars seek to bring their opinions to bear on questions of public concern, they risk drawing the attention of groups committed to monopolizing public discussion of a particular issue. The infringement of the academic freedom rights of scholars speaking out on issues of contemporary concern has been especially prevalent in the post-9/11 world, where scholars questioning the wisdom of U.S. foreign policy have faced numerous pitfalls. Wading into the hazardous waters of American political space about matters having to do with national security and the reasons the U.S. faces a terrorism problem is a risky proposition for intellectuals seeking to contest popular wisdom on these issues. Far too often, universities short-circuit any semblance of due process for scholars accused of malfeasance in the name of expediency and public appeasement.

The crisis around academic freedom emerged in a distinctly new and urgent way shortly after 9/11, when efforts were introduced through legislation at the national and local levels to restrict funding for area studies programs that were viewed as contributing to anti-American sentiment by seemingly blaming U.S. foreign policy for terrorist attacks against the U.S. and its allies such as Israel. These sorts of moral panics inevitably accompany political and economic turmoil. The campaigns launched after 9/11 by culture warriors such as Daniel Pipes and David Horowitz portrayed the college campus as harboring a treasonous fifth column seeking to undermine the war efforts in Afghanistan, Iraq, and everywhere else the U.S. sought to pursue the War on Terror. Academics who questioned the justifications for the expansive nature of the War on Terror often found themselves spotlighted by campus and media watchdogs bent on controlling public discourse and the conclusions one could safely draw and broadcast about American war aims. Book reading programs for entering first-year students at the University of North Carolina and elsewhere faced challenges from advocacy groups insisting that asking impressionable students to read a book about the Qur'an violated the constitutional separation between church and state. The cases of Sami Al-Arian and Ward Churchill gained traction on Fox News in this context, as organizations such as Campus Watch orchestrated public witch-hunts as part of the effort to supposedly support the troops by quashing heretics at home.

*Dogmatism, Censorship, and Institutional Neutrality*

In his chapter entitled “Truth, Balance, and Freedom,” Akeel Bilgrami exposes “the appeal of a certain fallibilist epistemology that widely underlies the classical and orthodox liberal mentality” (12) behind John Stuart Mill’s famous meta-induction in *On Liberty*:

1. Many of our past opinions, which we held with great conviction, have turned out to be false;
2. So, some of our current opinions that we hold with great conviction may also turn out to be false.
3. Conclusion: therefore, let us tolerate dissenting opinions just in case our current opinions are wrong and the dissenting opinions are right.

Bilgrami points out that Mill’s meta-induction “goes from an observation about our past beliefs about the world to a conclusion about our present and future beliefs” (13). Bilgrami targets the “marketplace of ideas” metaphor so prominent in Oliver Wendell Holmes’s and Mill’s thinking, ultimately finding it untenable and unworthy of defense. Bilgrami identifies four phenomena Mill’s meta-induction does not help us confront: academic dishonesty, intellectual obtuseness (an unwillingness to examine evidence), suppression of those who present counterevidence and counterargument that one has recognized to be so and one has dishonestly evaded, and finally, dogmatism, which is often about upholding a disciplinary faith out of a desire for professional advancement. These forms of academic “unfreedom” are rarely discussed and analyzed, but Bilgrami insists they must be.

While the essays in *Who’s Afraid of Academic Freedom?* do concern themselves with the academic freedom issues informing recent high profile cases, they also take up a range of philosophical concerns and issues that undergird the conditions of possibility surrounding the practice of academic freedom in the contemporary university. There is a definite sense among the contributors that the conventional understanding of academic freedom (the right to teach, publish, and engage in extramural utterance in the absence of institutional

constraints) is in real trouble. Whether speaking of repressive administrative structures seeking to control what faculty write and talk about, or restrictive internal review boards that mandate the licensing of speech (a clear violation of the First Amendment), one senses a growing cynicism around the protection of academic freedom. As Philip Hamburger and Richard Shweder lament in their respective chapters, these review boards exercise total control over university research, receiving their mandate from the federal government to protect human subjects, but ultimately licensing the production of speech in the form of printed research. This is a tremendous threat to academic freedom that most professors feel helpless to resist or counteract.

Hamburger demonstrates that IRBs (institutional review boards) license speech by creating preconditions to the publication of what one knows or conducted research to learn. IRBs supposedly exist to protect human subjects from potentially damaging research, but how often do they play this role? Hamburger persuasively argues that far more harm arises through IRB suppression than through the supposed protection of human subjects. His example of the famous hand washing protocol prior to catheter insertion at the University of Michigan is especially compelling. A study revealed that infections in patients receiving such catheters could be substantially reduced if physicians washed their hands prior to catheter-insertion. However, researchers made this discovery prior to securing IRB approval for their study. Luckily, the IRB censors were only able to limit some of the study's results after learning that researchers were going forward with the developed protocol. Hamburger's argument seems to be that academics should not so readily accept IRB hegemony, as it limits meaningful and societally beneficial research.

During the seventeenth century the state created a licensing system around what could be printed. The harm in this is easily recognizable, as Milton recognized in *Areopagitica*. The licensing of words is what the First Amendment expressly prohibits, but IRB apologists claims that it is conduct not speech that is being checked. However, all of the activities one does prior to actual publication constitute speech (note taking, conversations with colleagues, etc.). The process of discovery itself has fallen under IRB regulation out of a supposed concern about the welfare of human subjects. Yes, the most egregious examples of human subjects being subjected to unethical research came in the context of research conducted by government agencies. Hamburger argues this is understandable given the power and anonymity of government workers in such infamous cases as the Tuskegee syphilis experiment. Hamburger asserts that Health and Human Services (HHS) engaged in a form of projection after the details of the Tuskegee experiment became public in the 1970s, resulting in the publication of the Belmont Report. Instead of limiting IRB oversight to government-sponsored research, HHS extended the oversight to *all* sponsored research as part of an effort to limit the government's exposure in Tuskegee. The reign of censorship that has followed in its wake is obvious.

Hamburger argues that researchers are avoiding pressing social science research because of the onerous demands of the IRB. For example, a researcher might resign herself to the following position: It is easier to research the nineteenth century than the present since the people I am researching are dead; i.e., no IRB approval is necessary. As Hamburger notes, "IRBs restrict the getting of knowledge chiefly in order to limit the sharing of knowledge" (171). The licensing of speech constitutes a form of content discrimination because only academics are subjected to IRB regulations. As Hamburger repeatedly points out, it is easy to see how egregious the IRB regime is when one thinks of a similar situation involving a NRB, a newspaper review board, that would have to clear stories before journalists could conduct interviews and print their stories. In this instance the clear attempts to suppress speech are

evident. Hamburger insists the IRB is no different in the chilling effects it has on academic speech, i.e. publication.

Although IRBs are unconstitutional, they now exercise such a hegemonic hold on researcher speech that no one questions them. One demonstration of the degree of an IRB's coercion and control: it limits who researchers can talk to, what results can be published, what kinds of questions can be asked, and how long data from research can be preserved. For historical context, Hamburger points out that Galileo received a license after being warned, but then paid the price after he published his results. On the other hand, Socrates never received a license, preferring to drink hemlock when asked to get one.

In his essay entitled, "To Follow the Argument Where It Leads," Shweder takes on the problem of political correctness head on, arguing that it prevents academics from following arguments to where they might lead for fear of upsetting political orthodoxies around race and gender. As an example Shweder offers up the case of Harvard President Larry Summers, who wondered out loud during a conference presentation, whether there is a genetic basis through which to understand why women are supposedly not as good as men at math and science. Academic freedom, argues Shweder, should have protected Summers because he was speaking as a faculty member and not as Harvard's President. Summers may very well have had reliable data to back up his point. Political correctness, however, made evidence beside the point. This represents a serious problem, according to Shweder.

Jon Elster in his essay, "Obscurantism and Academic Freedom," examines how obscurantism, both soft and hard, has corrupted scholarship in the humanities, particularly within the area of high theory. Nearly illogical, albeit high sounding, arguments by theorists pass with a nod and a wink precisely because there seems to be an implicit agreement to go along with the game of pretending the arguments make sense. Elster identifies this pretense, of appearing sophisticated while making nonsensical assertions, as one of the biggest threats to academic freedom because of the unwillingness of even established scholars to announce that the emperor has no clothes. Elster labels this tendency "pluralistic ignorance" (93). The Sokal Hoax was a unique example of exposing pluralistic ignorance.

Essays by Noam Chomsky and John Mearsheimer highlight the importance of the Finkelstein tenure denial at DePaul University in 2007, which I have written about at length elsewhere.<sup>3</sup> Additionally, Chomsky's chapter forces a sober reflection on the general intellectual subservience that typifies the American academy. In this context, Judith Butler takes up the issue of academic boycotts of Israeli universities, seeking to argue that certain conditions must obtain to secure basic academic freedom protections. According to Butler, since many Palestinians are excluded from the prospect of securing the infrastructure needed to pursue education, the potential that exists to violate Israeli academic freedom is worth the risk. Stanley Fish, who opposes the boycott, argues that boycott supporters are willing to violate the academic freedom of Israeli researchers if doing so will bring justice to the Palestinians.

In addressing critics of the effort to boycott Israeli universities, who claim that such boycotts violate the academic freedom rights of Israeli researchers, Judith Butler argues that academic freedom must be understood in two senses. In the first sense, it is as an abstract right, which is either protected or violated by some entity such as a trustee or special interest group. In this instance, the scholar enjoys academic freedom as an employment right, only to see that right challenged when some external party seeks to stifle the scholar's scholarship or extramural expression. In the second sense, academic freedom must be understood in

---

<sup>3</sup> Matthew Abraham, *Out of Bounds: Academic Freedom and the Question of Palestine* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014).

relation to the right to enter into, be housed within, and enjoy the protections of an academic institution; it is a privative right. If this right is frustrated or unrealizable because one cannot reach the university due to checkpoints, road closures, curfews, and administrative detention, the very ability to establish a relationship with an academic institution, to even claim the protections of academic freedom, has been foreclosed.

Butler argues that the academic boycott of Israeli universities strives to target and frustrate the ties between Israeli universities that support the Israeli occupation with research possessing clear military applications (demographic studies, surveillance technology, and munitions testing). The individual researcher is not being targeted on this basis of her Israeli nationality; instead, Israeli institutions are being targeted because of their complicity in the occupation. For many, to bemoan the infringement of Israeli academic freedom rights as a result of the boycott, while being willfully blind to the very conditions the Israeli occupation has imposed on the Palestinians, is outright hypocritical. While Israeli researchers might be inconvenienced if their university is the object of a boycott, Palestinians face the evisceration of the very conditions of possibility for pursuing an education under Israeli occupation. Butler maintains that the academic boycott movement seeks to bring increased attention to the aspect of academic freedom dealing with the right to receive an education, a right that if deprived, forecloses the possibility of establishing the kinds of institutional and economic relationship that make the pursuit of the abstract version of academic freedom even possible.

In his brief recounting of the history of academic freedom in the United States, Geoffrey Stone emphasizes the importance of universities respecting institutional neutrality as elaborated upon in the Kalven Report. Although he did not recognize as a college student the necessity and importance of universities refusing to take sides on the great issues of the day, he views this neutrality as essential to creating an environment that protects academic freedom.

In her “Knowledge, Power, and Academic Freedom,” Joan Scott demonstrates how the concept of academic responsibility has been used by Boards of Trustees to target dissenting academics. She focuses on the cases of Edward Ross at Stanford, Scott Nearing at the University of Pennsylvania, Leo Koch at the University of Illinois, Angela Davis at the University of California at Los Angeles, and Ward Churchill at the University of Colorado. All five were forced out of their academic positions for transgressing social mores. Ross supported Socialist Eugene Debs, who advocated for the end of Chinese immigration, which put him at odds with the vision of Stanford’s founder, Leland Stanford, who had relied upon Chinese immigration to build his railroad empire. Upon learning of Ross’s views, Dorothy Stanford, Leland’s widow, decided Ross had to go. Scott Nearing attacked the abuses of industrial capitalism, which quickly put him at odds with Penn’s influential alumni. Koch, a biologist, wrote a controversial letter to the editor condoning sexual intercourse among college students, a direct indictment of the Christian code of ethics. Angela Davis, whose contract was not renewed at UCLA in 1970 because she was a member of the Communist Party, used heated rhetoric in her public speeches condemning police racism. Despite her controversial extramural advocacy on behalf of the Black Panthers and the Communist Party, students and faculty colleagues described Davis as the model of equanimity in the classroom. The Colorado state legislature spearheaded an inquiry into Ward Churchill’s scholarship, accusing him of research misconduct, four years after the circulation of Churchill’s infamous “On the Justice of Roosting Chickens” essay, which supposedly compared those who died at the World Trade Center on 9/11 to “Little Eichmanns.” Clearly, the formation of the faculty committee charged with investigating Churchill’s

supposed research misconduct was merely pretextual, as the real reason for Churchill's firing emanated from the outrage around his "On the Justice of Roosting Chickens," which led an obscure existence on the internet for four years before Fox News latched on to it as a rallying point for targeting dissenting academics. In each of these five cases, the concept of "academic responsibility" became a weapon to draw a distinction between legitimate academic tasks and intemperate advocacy. As Scott explains, "Academic responsibility referred to the deportment of a faculty member, his performance as an academic subject; it was no longer attached to the motivation for truth-seeking (that was taken to be a freely-formed activity, not the fulfillment of a responsibility)" (68). In other words, radical substance and radical style were seen as being interchangeable. Although there have been calls for academics to separate knowledge from politics by Stanley Fish and others, such a demarcation is easier in theory than in practice.

In her chapter entitled "What's So Special About Academic Freedom?" Michele Moody-Adams argues that academic freedom entails:

1. the right to exclude;
2. the right to advocacy; and
3. the right to offend.

At the same time, Moody-Adams argues that one must aim for truth in advertising; take care in choosing potentially offensive material; make every effort to present offensive material in a respectful and *civil* manner (112); and consider whether the potential pedagogical benefits outweigh the potential harms that arise for students when they face offensive ideas or arguments. These risks include the following: a) risks for the well-being of individual students; b) risks for classroom relations for students who disagree; c) risks for classroom relations between students, as a whole, and the instructor (113).

In his chapter, "What is Academic Freedom For?" Robert Zimmer, the President the University of Chicago, extolls the wisdom contained within the Kalven Report. Zimmer notes how the report highlights the following:

1. rigorous and open inquiry by faculty and students;
2. institutional neutrality;
3. a safe environment to enable students and faculty to represent themselves as individuals, but never for the university;
4. protection of academic freedom;
5. recognition of a possible exception.

As Zimmer reminds us, the Kalven Report encourages "a heavy presumption against the university taking collective action or expressing opinions on the social or political values of the day, or modifying its corporate activities to foster social or political values however compelling and appealing they may be" (quoted in Bilgrami and Cole, 244).

In their chapter, "Academic Freedom: Some Considerations," Matthew Goldstein and Frederick Schaffer focus on the emergence of shared governance structures in American universities. According to Goldstein and Schaffer, ideological conflict between faculty and trustees around economic theories necessitated the development of shared governance structures. They focus on the case of shared governance at the City University of New York. As they argue, "Fostering an environment conducive to open dialogue, free from hostility and repercussion, requires administrators to be protectors, they can and should advocate on



behalf of the ideals that bind the academic community” (251). Perhaps this ideal is as far out of reach as ever?

In the concluding chapter of the collection, entitled “Academic Freedom: A Pilot Study of Faculty Views,” Jonathan Cole, Stephen Cole, and Christopher Weiss describe the results of a questionnaire sent out to Columbia University faculty to probe their views on academic freedom. The questionnaire helped to reveal that faculty members are unclear on what academic freedom is and what it protects. Faculty were presented with various scenarios that placed competing values in tension (academic freedom versus the rights of research subjects; academic freedom versus racial/gender sensitivity; academic freedom versus institutional accountability) and asked to recommend an administrative response. Example one: a tenured faculty member downloads obscene material on his work computer. Should the faculty member face any soft or hard sanctions? Most respondents recommended that the administration should do nothing. Example two: A faculty member tells an African American student in his class that the admissions standards at his university were substantially lowered so that she could be admitted, suggesting that she is a beneficiary of affirmative action. Respondents recommended that the faculty member should receive anything ranging from a soft to a hard sanction for the comment. Example three: A student is repeatedly inseminated by donor sperm, becomes pregnant, has the pregnancies aborted, and uses the aborted fetuses for an art exhibit. Most faculty member respondents believed that the administration should intervene to prohibit the exhibit even if it is protected expression. Faculty were presented with fourteen such scenarios, enabling the study to cover a range of tensions between competing values surrounding academic freedom concerns.

If there is a criticism to be made of the collection, it is probably that its contributors represent a narrow band of elite institutions: With the exceptions of Post (Yale), Fish (Cardozo), Butler (Berkeley), Chomsky (MIT), Goldstein and Schaffer (CUNY), and Scott (Institute for Advanced Study), all of the contributors are either from the University of Chicago or Columbia University. That observation might lead one to wonder if an academic’s authority and credibility to weigh in on debates about academic freedom depends upon her educational and institutional pedigree.

### *Addressing the Predicament of the Contemporary Intellectual*

Jeffrey Williams’s *How To Be an Intellectual* brings together a series of short essays to reflect on a number of different themes and concerns for critics and public intellectuals. Williams strives to bridge the genres of journalistic writing and literary criticism. The title gestures at the fact that being an intellectual poses a distinct set of challenges to those aspiring to speak to multiple constituencies, academic and public. The loss of academic authority in the public eye makes this task doubly important. The desire to reach beyond one’s academic peers, and toward a new general audience, represents a distinct attempt to remain relevant. This is perhaps a natural reaction from humanities professors who feel the squeeze associated with public skepticism toward the academy’s purpose. The book is divided into four major parts—“The Politics of Criticism”; “Profiles in Criticism”; “The Predicament of the University”; and “The Personal and the Critical.”

Williams seeks to help us think through and out of our historical predicament, as intellectuals. The intellectual’s loss of appeal and traction, in comparison to fifty years ago, speaks to a substantial vacuum in the public space, desperately needing to be filled by an authoritative voice. The state of the critical enterprise, the fate of the theory journal, the downturn in the academic job market, the culture wars, the problem of student debt,

indentured servitude in the neoliberal university, and the future of English Studies, all find a place in *How To Be An Intellectual*. Stanley Fish, Harold Bloom, Paul De Man, Richard Rorty, Andrew Ross, Raymond Williams, Francis Mulhern, and *The Minnesota Review* are some of the well-known names that occupy Williams as he surveys the cultural landscape, tracing his own intellectual curiosities and development.

The individual chapters on Stefan Collini, Terry Eagleton, Walter Benn Michaels, M.H. Abrams, Michael Walzer, J. Hillis Miller, Donna Haraway, Gordon Hutner, and Judith Halberstam are first-rate, providing insightful readings of these critics' careers, influence, and their own estimations of their critical corpus. These chapters provide a nice follow up to Williams's *Critics at Work: Interviews 1993-2003*.<sup>4</sup> Williams also explores how academics are portrayed in novels such as J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* and Francine's Prose's *Blue Angel*, as well as in films such as *The Nutty Professor* and *American Pie 2*. The portions of *How To Be an Intellectual* focusing on student debt and the conditions within the U.S. university make for compelling reading, reminding us that the very future of our critical enterprise is in jeopardy if we refuse to break out of staid ways of thinking and doing. Williams's poignant reflections on his late teacher, Michael Sprinker, reveals the extent of the latter's influence as a Marxist critic, committed teacher, and loyal friend.

The urgency to remain relevant and up to date is an intellectual responsibility, one that dovetails with the worsening conditions in higher education. Students need jobs, are demanding they be taught relevant and pragmatic skills in their humanities courses, and are seeking to be rescued from a lifelong struggle with debt tantamount to indentured servitude. Williams leaves us with a sobering assessment of the current academy, using his own biography, which includes working as a prison guard in upstate New York, to illustrate how he has been affected by debt, financial insecurity, and the general discontent associated with the uncertainty of being a middle class academic.

In the chapter entitled "Academic Devolution," Williams works through some recently published books on the fate of the university, such as Frank Donoghue's *The Last Professors*<sup>5</sup> and Bosquet's *How the University Works*,<sup>6</sup> to describe the deteriorating conditions for the employment of humanities professors, tracing how graduate students in fields such as literary studies will face even steeper challenges than previous generations when wandering onto the job market. Of course, there is nothing particularly new about this dire message, but Williams suggests that academics can—in fact—do something about the situation. As he reminds us, "Institutions are, after all, made by people. Though they sometimes seem like monoliths subject to their own implacable logic, they can be made in better or worse ways" (150)—a fitting and sensible way to understand the common themes running between these two seemingly very different books.

Matthew Abraham  
Associate Professor of English  
University of Arizona, Tucson

---

<sup>4</sup> Jeffrey Williams, ed., *Critics at Work: Interviews 1993-2003* (New York: New York University Press, 2004).

<sup>5</sup> Frank Donoghue, *The Last Professors: The Corporate University and the Fate of the Humanities* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008).

<sup>6</sup> Marc Bousquet, *How the University Works: Higher Education and the Low-Wage Nation* (New York: New York University Press, 2008).

© 2016: Matthew Abraham

Authors retain the rights to their review articles, which are published by SCTIW Review with their permission. Any use of these materials other than educational must provide proper citation to the author and SCTIW Review.

Citation Information

Abraham, Matthew, *Protecting the Intellectual Mission in the Age of Neoliberal Expansion*, *SCTIW Review*, January 21, 2016. <http://sctiw.org/sctiwreviewarchives/archives/928>.

ISSN: 2374-9288