

Academic Exile and Freedom to Learn
By Pablo Ouziel

Professor Norman Finkelstein is an American political scientist, who amidst a public outcry in June 2007 was denied tenure at DePaul University, where he had been an assistant professor from 2001 to 2007. After being placed on administrative leave for the 2007-2008 academic year, on September 5, 2007, professor Finkelstein announced his resignation. In the official DePaul statement he was described “as a prolific scholar and outstanding teacher.”

Professor Finkelstein’s academic research has focused on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the politics of the Holocaust; his unique insight on these topics is much needed in the current academic debate. With this imposed academic exile, the fundamental freedom to learn of every academic in the democratic world is being denied, and society has yet to notice.

Maybe one day we will come to terms with the importance of the fundamental freedom to learn. Then we will stand together and demand it, because without it a truly free society can never exist. If we realize this, we will bring back outstanding professors like Norman Finkelstein to continue their contribution to the freedom of learning in the universities of our cherished democratic societies.

People paid relative importance to professor Finkelstein’s tenure denial. After a few united outcries of indignation, the collective interest faded and only a few scattered individuals continued their concern for the social implications to our society. Professor Finkelstein gracefully stepped out of his academic career minimizing the conflict with an institution he clearly respected. Although we should all be concerned about his future, our main concern should be with those students and professors, whom will miss out on the knowledge they could have shared with the professor within the academic institution.

Norman Finkelstein will of course keep surprising us with his seminal work in defence of justice and honesty. The relevance of his work is far bigger than the world of academia, and too relevant to be ignored in the times of crisis which humanity is submerged in. Society needs those individuals who are able to think outside of the box and focus on the structural issues, which have eroded our democracy. Sooner or later we are going to have to knock on his door.

On the other hand however, those students and professors who are shaping or will be shaping our societal structures, are being denied their democratic freedom to learn alternative perspectives. Norman Finkelstein’s tenure denial should be taken as a warning of things to come.

Professor Finkelstein did not need to abandon his country. In that sense his exile is not the same as that faced by intellectuals in other countries and other times, but how relevant would that comparison be anyway? What is important is what academic exile means today, in the 21st century in the United States, the country which is on a crusade to

liberate the whole of humanity from the barbaric claws of dictators, the spread of terrorism and the alternative perspectives of political dissenters.

Academic exile in this context is a dangerous concept. It carries with it the most serious injustice applied to a population of students and professors -- no freedom to learn. The fact that the Dean of DePaul University let professor Finkelstein walk away is a sad reality, which speaks volumes about the kind of education that is sought in that institution. It allows a glimpse into the institution's non-commitment to freedom of learning. However, what is more disturbing is the fact that work there is continuing as normal both by professors and students. How can one continue carrying out work in an institution after it is clearly denying its population its most fundamental right, the freedom to learn, the one freedom it is meant to excel in. This seems to me outrageous and frankly, I feel sorry for everyone in that institution who is living without that right.

What is also disturbing, is that the academic population of the democratic world seems to be asleep, obviously too indulged in the indoctrination of the propaganda apparatus set up by their country's elites. Academia has yet to realize that with Finkelstein's departure, freedom to learn was lost by a whole community of scholars.

Academia in democracy is experiencing a paradigm shift in which freedom to learn is losing relevance, recuperating it will entail a difficult task, since most individuals are unaware of having lost it.

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