

# Dallas Smythe Award Keynote Lecture

## Fighting from the Margins: Neoliberalism, Imperialism, and the Struggle to Democratize the University\*

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*Editor's Note: The following is a slightly modified transcript of Deepa Kumar's keynote lecture at the Union for Democratic Communications 2016 Conference, "Troubled Waters," September 29-October 1 2016, in Detroit. Kumar, Associate Professor of Journalism and Media Studies at Rutgers University, is the recipient of the 2016 Dallas Smythe Award, awarded by the Union for Democratic Communications to an outstanding and influential scholar working in the critical political economic tradition of Dallas Smythe. In this talk, Kumar discusses the prospects and pitfalls for critical left-intellectuals today and the necessity of carrying on the struggle to democratize the university.*

**Keywords:** University; Democratization; Activism; Neoliberalism; Imperialism

What does it mean to be a left intellectual in these troubling times? What does it mean to live with a sense of hope in the midst of horror? We are witnessing the ongoing crisis of neoliberalism, the immense poverty and suffering that it has created, and the failure of the political system to offer viable solutions. We live with the effects of environmental devastation, the ruthless assault on protest from Turkey to the US, the escalation of the war on terror, and the entrenchment of the US national security state and the carceral state. Brexit and the election of Donald Trump are two instances of a misguided rebellion against neoliberal globalization led by the far right with its appeals to xenophobic nationalism. But we have also lived through a period of progressive resistance, as seen in the Wisconsin Uprising, Occupy Wall Street, the Arab Spring, the Movement for Black Lives, the Standing Rock protests, the support for Sanders' socialist program, the demand for left political alternatives in Spain, Greece and Britain, and the growth of international solidarity. Since Trump's inauguration, the levels of protest in the US are the highest that I have seen in over two decades of being an activist. This should give us hope. But it also demands that we develop the intellectual and analytical capacity to forge a way forward.

Today, I want to make an argument about why media and communication scholars, particularly those of us who think of ourselves as left intellectuals, need to take up the struggle to democratize the university. I will offer an analysis of the attack on the university and on academic freedom in the neoliberal era and argue that we need to fight against these attacks. There is a long tradition within the UDC of scholars actively trying to democratize the media. Many of the past recipients of the Dallas Smythe Award, including Smythe himself, were involved in media reform. The struggle for democratic communication is central to the UDC. I would challenge us to take on the struggle to democratize the university as well and to view it as a priority that is just as important. This is not least because the very conditions of production of our intellectual labor are under threat.

I realize, of course, that when we set out to democratize the neoliberal university, we will be fighting from the margins. I chose the word "margins" to be part of the title for my lecture for a few reasons. First, five people have been on my mind of late: Edward Said, Karl Marx, W. E. B. Du Bois, Steven Salaita and Sara Ahmed. Each of them in their own ways were or are on the margins, in exile, or have been outsiders of one sort or another, but have fought from those places because they saw or see marginality – the position of being an outsider – as having given them, as Du Bois put it "second sight," or intellectual freedom for Said, or the capacity to be a "feminist killjoy" for Ahmed, or for Salaita to be "uncivil" as a way to challenge the establishment. I included Marx in this list because I am reading Kevin Anderson's *Marx at the Margins*, where he discusses Marx's exile in London from 1849 to the end of his life. Marx was a political refugee in the heart of empire, and thus obviously marginal, but he was also marginal to the broader Western intellectual tradition. Yet from this space, and while struggling with ill health, Marx not only completed *Capital*, which would change the world and usher in critical political economy, but he also, and this is the subject of Anderson's book, produced work on various non-Western societies and their relationship to capitalism and colonialism (work on "marginal societies" if you like). If you haven't read this book, please do so, not least because it offers an excellent counterargument to the charge that Marxism is Eurocentric.

The second reason I chose the word margin is because of the high degree of alienation in the academic world. Being involved in my union, I am aware on a daily basis of the struggles that people encounter: adjunct professors who do the bulk of teaching but who are paid throwaway wages and live on the margins of the university; women and people of color who are still fighting to be taken seriously and treated equitably at the university; and tenured professors who work around the clock and are forced to “do more with less,” as Michelle Rodino put it yesterday, and who are increasingly alienated from the corporate university and its values. Is it any wonder that many take to alcohol and drugs to numb the pain or simply as a means to cope with the uneasiness of living in this world and of working at universities that are daily destroying all that we love about being intellectuals and teachers. And finally, I chose this title because I thought you all could relate to it. Those of us who are here at the UDC don’t quite fit into the neoliberal university, we are all critical scholars of one sort or another, and we tend not to seek out or celebrate the big grants from corporations or the state because we are committed to working against their priorities, and working in the interests of the marginalized and the exploited.

I want to argue that occupying a marginal space, while difficult, is actually a good thing. Not fitting in, not being at home in the neoliberal university, is a condition that no doubt produces anxiety, but not fitting in is also productive in that it helps us to see more critically and to fight back. And in fighting back, we liberate ourselves, we make ourselves and our lives more relevant and we reduce our alienation, even if sometimes only by a little.

However, this comes with a price. If you have written, spoken, or taken to social media to discuss social issues or denounce capitalism, imperialism, racism, sexism and other forms of oppression, it is very likely that you have been attacked in small and big ways. You have been trolled on social media, you have been placed on a McCarthyite hit list, you may have received death threats and other threats of violence, the rightwing corporate media may have targeted you, or you may have been denied tenure, promotion, or just made to feel unwelcome.

If you have faced no such measures, perhaps it is time to ask yourself if your work—your teaching, your scholarship and your service—is actually making an impact on the world. As Nobel prize winner Santiago Ramon y Cajal put it: “You have no enemies? How can that be? Did you never tell the truth or stand up for justice?”

### **Academic Freedom**

In discussing the struggle to democratize the neoliberal university, I will focus on academic freedom. In recent years, there have been many books, journal articles, and whole issues of journals devoted to the question of academic freedom. As Jonathan Cole, one of the editors of the book *Who’s Afraid of Academic Freedom* notes, “a half century after the 1954 House Un-American Activities Committee held congressional hearings on Communists in American universities, faculty members are witnessing once again a rising tide of anti-intellectualism and threats to academic freedom.” He warns that we are entering “another era of intolerance and repression.”<sup>1</sup> If this was true of the Obama era, when this book was published, the Trump era only portends greater levels of repression. The context for this rise of repression is the

consolidation of neoliberalism and the endless war on terror. If HUAC was the instrument used to squash dissent during the Cold War, today a whole host of private entities supported by politicians, think tanks, and wealthy foundations, have started to emulate McCarthyite methods as a way to intimidate the academic left as well as activists. There are several watch lists like the one by Canary mission, which targets the pro-Palestinian left, and the Professors Watchlist which goes after the left more broadly. Additionally, the Obama administration's escalation of attacks on whistleblowers, as well as on journalists who would dare to talk to whistleblowers, has laid the foundation for potentially even more aggressive attacks from the Trump administration.<sup>2</sup>

I want to lay out a picture of the attack on academic freedom by locating this attack within the broader political economy. I will do so by using the dialectic of resistance and recuperation. In a nutshell, all societies where there are disparities in wealth, power and privilege, that is, in all class societies, ideas that might disrupt the social order have always been seen as threatening by the elite. In this sense, as Geoffrey Stone argues, the suppression of academic freedom goes all the way back to ancient Greece.<sup>3</sup>

I want to emphasize, however, that the mere existence of ideas in a book is by itself unthreatening. It is when these ideas are tied to social mobilizations that threaten the status-quo that the ideas and the people who espouse them become dangerous.

For instance, take the case of the Haitian revolution. The slave rebellion in that country went far beyond where liberal Enlightenment thought was willing to go. Liberty, equality, fraternity may have been the slogans of the American and French revolutions, but it was not intended to be applied to slaves, women and other marginalized groups. France therefore sent an army to crush the revolution. More broadly, given how important plantation slavery was to the societies and the economies of the Americas, the slave revolt in Haiti was seen as a profound threat to that system and a model of what could not be allowed to happen elsewhere in the region. The ideas that animated that revolution had to be contained lest they inspire slaves elsewhere in the Americas to do the same as their Haitian counterparts.

Since then, historians have continued metaphorically to crush the Haitian revolution by ignoring – or marginalizing – it. As Robin Blackburn writes, in “the sequence of revolutions that remade the Atlantic world between 1776 and 1825, the Haitian Revolution is rarely given its due; yet without it there is much that cannot be accounted for. . . .”<sup>4</sup> Blackburn argues that the American, French, Haitian and Spanish American revolutions, during “age of revolution” of the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, profoundly influenced one other. As C. L. R. James asserts in *The Black Jacobins*, the revolutionary upheavals in France and Haiti were deeply interconnected and the politics of social transformation travelled in both directions. Yet this story tends to be ignored. I might add that James theorized not just a “Black Atlantic” (as in Paul Gilroy’s book of the same name), but a revolutionary multiracial Atlantic. I will come back to this point, when I discuss the importance of bringing together the struggles against racial and class exploitation.

For now, the point I am trying to make here is a simple one: where there is repression there is resistance and where there is resistance there is repression and co-optation.

This is not just true of the era of modernity. Christianity represented a threat to imperial Rome, and so Jesus Christ had to be put to death. However, imperial Rome would also adopt Christianity as a way to consolidate its power. Repression and co-optation have been twin mechanisms that the ruling class has employed throughout history.

When we think of academic freedom, many of us recall intellectual persecution in the early modern era. For instance, the Inquisition set out to persecute and silence all who critiqued Catholic orthodoxy. Giordano Bruno was put to death, while Galileo recanted and was put under house arrest. Today, it is the secular religion of national security that has imprisoned Leonard Peltier, Mumia Abu Jamal and Chelsea Manning and forced Edward Snowden into exile.

### **Neoliberalism and the Attack on Democracy**

One could start a discussion of the current attack on academic freedom in a variety of places, but I want to begin in 1975 with a report that was submitted to the Trilateral commission titled “The Crisis of Democracy: On the Governability of Democracies.” Its focus, coming after the mass social movements of the 1960s and early 70s, was on how governments were going to manage what the authors suggest was an “excess of democracy,” as seen in Western Europe, the United States and Japan. None other than Samuel Huntington, author of the infamous *The Clash of Civilizations*, wrote the section on the US. In the essay, Huntington outlines protest movements in the US from the anti-war movement to the civil rights movement and notes the active participation of citizens in the politics in the US. But for Huntington this was not something to be celebrated, but a problem to be managed. Here is how he put it:

The implications for these potential consequences of the democratic distemper extend far beyond the United States. For a quarter century the United States was the hegemonic power in a system of world order. The manifestations of the democratic distemper, however, have already stimulated uncertainty among allies and could well stimulate adventurism among enemies. If American citizens don't trust their government, why should foreigners? If American citizens challenge the authority of the American government, why shouldn't unfriendly governments? The turning inward of American attention and the decline in the authority of American governing institutions are closely related, as both cause and effect, to the relative downturn in American power and influence in world affairs. A decline in the governability of democracy at home means a decline in the influence of democracy abroad.<sup>5</sup>

This quote is a remarkably clear articulation of how American imperialism is not simply about foreign policy, but about an imperial order that is both domestic and foreign at the same time. Huntington's solution to the “excess of democracy” is to curtail it, and to create as he puts it, “moderation in democracy.”<sup>6</sup>

This report was published in the midst of a crisis in the US and global economy that put an end to Bretton Woods and inaugurated a transition from the earlier Keynesian model to the neoliberal model. And while Keynesianism allowed for unprecedented demands on the capitalist economy and the state, neoliberalism would seek to dismantle that and to lower the wages of the working class in order restore profitability. Huntington's proposition regarding the “moderation” of

democracy is reflected in neoliberal thinking and in its most extreme version would take the form of brutal authoritarian governments such as the Pinochet regime in Chile, which had just launched its neoliberal order. As we know from David Harvey's work as well as others, neoliberalism was initially introduced in the US in the late 1970s under Carter, but was consolidated by Reagan and across the Atlantic by Thatcher.

This is the broader context for Huntington's proposition that democracy must be moderated. More specifically, Huntington pointed to "two major areas" where democracy could be curtailed. One was the university (I will come to that shortly), and the other relates to keeping "marginal groups" marginal. Huntington argued that in "the past, every democratic society has had a marginal population, of greater or lesser size, which has not actively participated in politics. In itself, this marginality on the part of some groups is inherently undemocratic, but has also been one of the factors which has enabled democracy to function effectively."<sup>7</sup>

Huntington names African Americans in particular as one of these marginal groups. I will return to how the neoliberal state sought to isolate African Americans but first I want to point out that one of the key goals of neoliberalism was to crush working class resistance. In the early 1970s, we saw a rise in wild cat strikes, the formation of various rank and file caucuses in unions, and other labor militancy, including by black workers, in Detroit. It was essential for neoliberalism to crush class struggle as a way to restore profitability. Capital also co-opted the leadership of the trade union movement, and starting with the Chrysler bailout we have seen a trend of concessionary bargaining that has aided the massive class polarization that we have today.

But Huntington in this essay talks about African Americans who he says have become "full participants in the political system." And this enfranchisement presents a "danger," the danger "of overloading the political system with demands which extend its functions and undermines its authority."<sup>8</sup>

While Huntington uses somewhat coded language to argue for black disenfranchisement, John Ehrlichman, Richard Nixon's domestic policy advisor and Watergate co-conspirator, put it more bluntly. When asked decades later to explain what Nixon's war on drugs was about, Ehrlichman stated:

You want to know what this was really all about? The Nixon campaign in 1968, and the Nixon White House after that, had two enemies: the antiwar left and black people. You understand what I'm saying? We knew we couldn't make it illegal to be either against the war or black, but by getting the public to associate the hippies with marijuana and blacks with heroin, and then criminalizing both heavily, we could disrupt those communities. We could arrest their leaders, raid their homes, break up their meetings, and vilify them night after night on the evening news. Did we know we were lying about the drugs? Of course we did.<sup>9</sup>

Nixon's war on drugs would put into place a system which would give birth to the massive carceral state that we have today. As is now well known, the US incarcerates more people as a percentage of its population than any other country in the world. In the late 1960s, the prison population was in the two hundred thousand range. By the 2000s it was 2.4 million. Mass

incarceration has disproportionately targeted people of color precipitating a racial shift in prison populations from a majority white to almost 70% people of color.<sup>10</sup> Michelle Alexander has referred to this system of mass incarceration as the “new Jim Crow,” highlighting the manner in which it has effectively disenfranchised large numbers of African Americans.<sup>11</sup> In short, the carceral state became a way to re-marginalize African Americans and to carry out the policy prescriptions of Huntington.

Marginalizing the key demographic that began and inspired the movements of the 1960s was therefore a means to both curtail the “excess of democracy” domestically and to consolidate US hegemony on the global stage. Mass incarceration is therefore directly tied to the project of rehabilitating the US imperial project.

Jordan Camp, in a recent book titled *Incarcerating the Crisis* argues that the neoliberal carceral state is the product of two crises: the economic crisis of the early 1970s and the crisis produced by the race and class struggles of the same period.<sup>12</sup> Although he doesn’t study the consolidation of a national security state in the post-World War Two period, he states that the context for the rise of the neoliberal carceral state isn’t the 1970s alone, but is the product of the dialectical struggle between the long civil rights movement and the national security state from the 1930s to the 1970s.

I think that this is a very productive way to engage the discussion around national security. In the passage I read earlier from Huntington, he expresses a desire to return to a previous era, the 25 years following WWII when the US dominated the global stage and when marginal groups knew their place and posed less of a challenge to the social order. The internationalism of the black power movement, its solidarity with various nations waging anti-colonial struggles and experimenting with social democracy and socialistic ideas (particularly as articulated by Kwame Nkrumah in his influential piece “African Socialism”), represented a kind of subversive politics that had to be squashed. Towards the end of his life, Martin Luther King had started to draw radical conclusions not only in opposition to the war in Vietnam but also in regard to the political economy in the US. Camp summarizes King’s position as follows: “King compelled social movements to see that the United States’ imperialist war in Vietnam, which drew its soldiers from the poor, working class, and people of color, directed resources away from the social wage and toward the militarization of the political economy.”<sup>13</sup>

These were dangerous ideas, and even more so because they were tied to social movements. For the elite, as represented in Huntington’s essay, these ideas had to be crushed and the old order brought back.

This is also why Huntington focuses on the university seeing it as an important institution that might foster radical ideas. In the last paragraph of his report, he states “the vulnerability of democratic government in the United States comes not primarily from external threats, though such threats are real, nor from internal subversion from the left or the right, although both possibilities could exist, but rather from the internal dynamics of democracy itself in a highly educated, mobilized, and participant society.”<sup>14</sup>

In other words, while Huntington is aware of the “threat” posed by the left, he seems to believe that an educated, and more importantly “mobilized and participant,” society was a challenge to elite hegemony. This is why he highlighted the university as a key site where the “excess of democracy” had to be curtailed.

I would add to this, although Huntington himself does not, that the media were another important arena where the “excess of democracy” had to be stamped out and this was accomplished through unprecedented deregulation and the establishment of a conglomerate media system that scholars in this room have written about. But the corporatization of media doesn’t begin in 1970s, it has a much longer history as various scholars have argued.

The neoliberal agenda in relation to these two arenas—education and the media—also illustrate the political and economic dimensions of the neoliberal project. It is about, on the one hand, the restriction of democracy (in key spaces where ideas and ideologies are produced and circulated) and also, on the other, about transforming these institutions into centers of profit generation (that’s obvious in the case of the media, while in education, it is accomplished through the proliferation of charter schools at the K-12 level and the corporatization of the university).

As an aside, let me point out that I am not saying that Huntington made all this possible; that his essay is somehow responsible for the rise of the carceral state or the attack on academic freedom. Rather, I chose to focus on this essay because it gives us a glimpse of how the ruling elite would go about trying to re-establish control, undo the “excess of democracy,” and restore profitability. We see reflections of this mode of thinking in the 1971 Powell memo as well. In a confidential memo submitted to the US Chamber of Commerce, Lewis Powell outlined what needed to be done to counter the “broad attack” on the US free enterprise economic system and lay the groundwork for the corporate domination of US democracy.<sup>15</sup> Powell argued that the business class should aggressively push back against the assault on the free enterprise system. He wrote that there “should be no hesitation to attack the Naders [Ralph Nader], the Marcuses [Herbert Marcuse] and others who openly seek destruction of the system. There should not be the slightest hesitation to press vigorously in all political arenas for support of the enterprise system. Nor should there be reluctance to penalize politically those who oppose it.” A lengthy section of the memo focuses on the university. Powell urges caution in frontally attacking academic freedom, which he suggests is sacrosanct. He instead argues that the principles of academic freedom should be appropriated to create spaces for pro-corporate voices. All of these prescriptions for how to restore the economic and political order were put into practice in the decades to come. Moreover, this has been a bipartisan project. The Trilateral Commission was a liberal democratic initiative and many of its prominent members would go on to staff the Carter administration, including the office of the President.

At any rate, I am not going to talk about the corporatization of the media. Instead, I’m going to focus on higher education. Many of you are already involved in media struggles of various kinds.

I would like to make a case for activism at the university as I said earlier. The UDC stands for the struggle for democratic communication and I want to argue that we should expand that struggle to include the university.



As we know, the corporatization of the university has had a massive impact on academic freedom and has put into danger our very ability to produce radical scholarship. This is not to say that there ever was a time when it was easy to produce scholarship that challenged the status quo. In fact, Dallas Smythe himself faced enormous challenges. For instance, he had a hard time getting funding for his research and had difficulty publishing his work during the McCarthy era. When he applied for a position at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, he was attacked (Salaita is not the first instance of such a political attack on radical scholars at UIUC). There was an FBI file on Smythe, which J. Edgar Hoover refused to turn over to the university administration. Eventually, the attorney general intervened and Smythe was appointed professor at the University of Illinois, where he taught Communications and Economics until 1963.

I am very proud to stand in the tradition of someone who would risk so much to live by his principles.

Suffice it to say that the struggle for academic freedom is not a new one. We might trace the power of the corporate sector on the university all the way back to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, when the AAUP formulated its statement on Academic Freedom. At the time, many people such as John Dewey, Thorstein Veblin and Upton Sinclair denounced the close ties between corporate America and the university.<sup>16</sup>

If you fast forward to the neoliberal era, you find “new and improved” forms of corporate control. I will give a few examples. First, we have seen the rise of what has been called the “administrative bloat” where large numbers of administrators at the higher levels, who are paid massive six figure salaries, often drawn from the ranks of business, are actively turning the university into a corporation. At my university, we were recently coerced to accept Office 365, which is a cloud based email system run by Microsoft that allows the university to control our communications and our intellectual work. By adopting corporate software, the administration was out to remold Rutgers into a corporation that *owns* intellectual work, inspects it at any time (Office 365 has snooping tools akin to the NSA) and can prevent faculty from having access to their scholarly research and communications on email (if a faculty member leaves Rutgers they can be denied access to years of scholarly communication stored in emails). At the Union we are fighting this, but you can see here how this is a serious violation of academic freedom through the use of corporate technology.

Another “new and improved” method to attack academic freedom is the creation of a tiered work force. If neoliberalism has initiated a tiered workforce across various industries, you see the same taking place at the university. Today, in the United States, out of 1.5 million faculty members, 1 million are, according to Henry Giroux, “adjuncts who are earning, on average, \$20,000 a year gross, with no benefits or healthcare, no unemployment insurance when they are out of work.”<sup>17</sup> Not coincidentally, women and people of color tend to be overrepresented among contingent faculty.

What is the relationship between contingency and academic freedom? Let me use the words of Alan Greenspan, who in his testimony to Congress in 1997, stated that the basis for the economic growth of the 1990s was the creation of “greater worker insecurity.”<sup>18</sup> Worker insecurity Greenspan notes is “healthy” for society. This is because when workers are insecure they won’t

ask for increased wages, they won't go on strike, they won't ask for benefits, they'll simply be glad that they have a job. And this is exactly what we have seen at universities as well. Creating "greater worker insecurity" has meant the rapid expansion of a contingent and precarious work force and the steady decline of permanent tenured and tenure track positions. In this sense, precarity is central to the neoliberal university.

This, of course, has an immediate impact on academic freedom. When the bulk of the people teaching courses are in precarious conditions they are less able to speak and teach freely.

There are of course all sorts of ways in which the neoliberal university has destroyed the academic mission of the university and I would refer people to Benjamin Ginsberg's book *The Fall of Faculty*, which lays out not only the attack on academic freedom but a number of other troubling developments.

I want to say a little also about the rightwing and neoconservative attack on the university as well. As you know, the attack on the academic left began in earnest in the 1980s as an attack on "political correctness." In the context of the ascendance of the New Right, the election of Ronald Reagan and the overall backlash against feminist, black power, anti-imperialist and left-wing movements of the 1960s and 1970s, the university became a site that neocons and conservatives targeted as the last bastion of radical and progressive thought.

If we were to return to the "good old days" of the 1950s as Huntington advocated, then women had to return to the home, African Americans had to be kept out of the public arena, and the left had to be driven out of the university.

A network of rightwing groups, think tanks, and various political figures zeroed in on the university in the 1980s and used tactics like sponsoring a network of conservative student newspapers to bring back rightwing ideas to campuses, "exposing" radical professors, harassing them in a variety of ways including by insisting that conservative views be included in syllabi and so forth.

This is the context for Allan Bloom's best-selling book *The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education has failed Democracy and impoverished the souls of today's students*. The crux of Bloom's argument, at least what got taken up by the right, was that professors influenced by postmodernism and poststructuralism, who questioned the "Western canon," were denying students a good education. There are those who have argued that Bloom himself was not a conservative, and that he was instead an eccentric interpreter of the Enlightenment, but the book nevertheless became the manual of the neoconservative and rightwing attack on the university. The right, beating its patriotic white male chest, would insist that the "great literature" of "Western civilization" was being dumped in favor of literature by women and people of color, and that "political correctness" was responsible for this. Amy Tan was replacing Herman Melville went the rant. English professors, it was argued, were politicizing literature and in the process robbing students of a decent education.<sup>19</sup>

And while this was how the PC wars played out, there was a corresponding decline and implosion of the radical left, a “retreat from class” as Ellen Meiksins Wood put it, and the rise of identity politics.

A decade after Bloom’s book, Dinesh D’Souza’s *Illiberal Education: The Politics of Race and Sex on Campus*, outlined the neoconservative case against a liberal arts education.

But the existence of someone like Dinesh D’Souza, an Indian immigrant to the US, and his ability to become a best-selling author peddling the ideas of the right, speaks to another shift in the neoliberal era: the incorporation of multiculturalism into the structure of neoliberal imperialism.

### **Co-opting Feminism and Multiculturalism**

The curtailment of democracy through repression was one response to the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s. The other was co-optation. As Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello argue, capitalism constantly remakes itself in moments of crisis in order to recuperate critiques directed against it. They show how neoliberal management theorists, inspired by the movements of the 1960s, would reject the rigid organizational structures of the previous era and introduce horizontal teams and flexible networks.<sup>20</sup> This is reflected in Silicon Valley and in companies like Google. Google would also go on to adopt meditation and yoga as way to increase worker productivity, a trend that is now widespread in Silicon Valley.<sup>21</sup> “Progressive” neoliberalism has also co-opted, as will be discussed below, feminist, anti-racist and pro-LGBTQ politics as well.

Crucially for the US, if it was to recover from the damage to its image on the global stage brought about by the movements of the 1960s, it was necessary to recreate itself as an exceptional state. Carter’s Secretary of State, Zbigniew Brzezinski, underscored the importance of image making, stating that “[c]ultural domination has always been an underappreciated facet of American global power” and emphasizing how soft power and cultural hegemony were central to winning the Cold War.<sup>22</sup> Soft power was to be applied both domestically and internationally. Echoing his mentor Huntington, Brzezinski wrote:

A genuinely populist democracy has never before attained international supremacy. The pursuit of power and especially the economic costs and the human sacrifice that such exercise of power often requires are not generally congenial to democratic instincts. Democratization is inimical to imperial mobilization.”<sup>23</sup>

To win the US public to endure the “economic costs and the human sacrifice” required by empire, various institutions were called upon. In addition to the corporate media and think tanks, foundations played a central role in winning public consent for “imperial mobilization.” In *Philanthropy and Cultural Imperialism: The Foundations at Home and Abroad*, various scholars show that the Carnegie, Rockefeller, Ford and other foundations have worked to weaken democracy and to use their wealth and power to set a social agenda in the interests of the elite.<sup>24</sup> While these foundations do act to address social problems such as poverty, economic insecurity and lack of investment, they do so in market friendly ways. Joan Roelofs shows that foundations have not only played key roles in setting policy at all levels of government and devised ways to

address social problems; they have also neutralized dissenting voices, particularly groups and movements that are critical of capitalism.<sup>25</sup> Activists, writing in the anthology *The Revolution Will Not be Funded* confirm this argument based on their own experiences.

Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) are also a part of this process, and constitute a specifically neoliberal form of co-opting resistance. The withdrawal of state and public resources from the processes of social reproduction under neoliberalism has created a gap that NGOs have been able to fill over the last few decades. The result has been a massive growth in NGOs from the 1980s to the present. In the 1990s, NGOs become a force to be reckoned with, and half of all international NGOs were focused on three issues—women’s rights, human rights, and the environment. While NGOs aren’t a monolith, and some NGOs provide much needed services, many scholars have argued they have also sucked up the best activists and channeled them into institutions that offer capitalist and free market oriented solutions to social problems.<sup>26</sup>

Thus, if feminist, anti-war, and anti-racist politics animated the struggles of the 1960s and 70s, and if the New Right sought to re-assert a white supremacist patriotic patriarchy starting in the 1980s, the system also enacted a process of co-opting resistance, particularly feminism and anti-racism. We might say that Donald Trump is the manifestation of the first process representing the tactics of the right, and Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton the second.

In addition to foundations and NGOs, the corporate sector and the Pentagon have also played a part in co-opting multiculturalism and feminism.

Since the early 1990s, as Melani McAlister argues, the US military has presented itself as a meritocratic institution in which women and people of color can thrive. She points to Colin Powell as an early embodiment of this multicultural trend. She puts it this way:

After the Gulf War, politicians and the press alike expected that the United States would now be able to intervene whenever and wherever its leaders felt necessary. The representations of the military provided the mandate for that power: the diversity of its armed forces made the United States a world citizen, with all the races and nations of the globe represented in its population. As the military would represent the diversity of the United States, the United States, as represented in its military, would contain the world.<sup>27</sup>

During the Obama era, this diversity would be expanded to include LGBTQ people. In 2010, “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” was repealed and shortly after, Hillary Clinton gave what is considered to be a landmark speech in Geneva declaring that the US would be a global defender of LGBTQ rights. In so doing, Clinton deepened the logic of what Jasbir Puar refers to as “homonationalism”—an ideological system wherein the nation-state, which has historically relied on heteronormativity, comes to adopt homonormativity in the production of its national story. This move, as Puar argues, serves to bolster imperial projects.<sup>28</sup>

Within corporate America, this liberal pluralist vision would be widely accepted during the Obama era. While diversity management literature has existed for a few decades, and has sought to establish the importance of diversity for the corporate sector, this line of argumentation would be widespread only in the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. As part of its “Inclusive Workplace”

survey series, the *Financial Times*, in an article titled “The Evidence is Growing: There Really is a Business Case for Diversity,” announced that inclusion was an idea whose time had come:

The business case for diversity seems intuitive. Teams of mixed gender, ethnicity, physical ability, age and sexual orientation are more representative of customers. They offer a variety of viewpoints and a wide range of experience, which improves decision-making and problem-solving.<sup>29</sup>

The logic is that if all sections of a corporation’s consumer base are included in its decision making process then this will only result in greater profits. The article further states that in a survey of business leaders, it was found that most agree with this approach. This consensus in the business community in 2014 emerged from the larger climate in which Barack Obama had demonstrated that African Americans in power were good for business and where Sheryl Sandberg’s corporate feminist book *Lean In* had become a best seller. Further, imperial feminism had been successfully deployed to justify the invasion of Afghanistan and the occupation of Iraq. Instead of white men rescuing brown women, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, black and brown women and men had stepped into these roles at the helm of empire.

Colin Powell, Madeline Albright, Condoleezza Rice, Hillary Clinton, Carly Fiorina and a host of others had shown that they were just as adept at reproducing and advancing neoliberal imperialism. The pinnacle of a corporate friendly identity politics was on display in the 2016 presidential election. The Clinton campaign had adroitly appropriated feminism, and to a lesser extent multiculturalism, to bolster an unpopular candidate. In fact, as I have argued with Patrick Barrett, corporate feminism became a battering ram to silence those on the left who critiqued Hillary Clinton’s neoliberal agenda.<sup>30</sup>

Clinton’s defeat to a racist, nativist, misogynistic candidate demonstrated the limits of identity politics-based free market principles. Nancy Fraser chastises feminists for acquiescing to a form of cultural politics that eschews a critique of the political economy. She argues that there was a “shift in the center of gravity of feminist politics. Once centered on labor and violence, gender struggles have focused increasingly on identity and representation in recent years. The effect has been to subordinate social struggles to cultural struggles, the politics of redistribution to the politics of recognition.”<sup>31</sup>

Stressing the importance of structural critique, Fraser argues that the separation of class struggle from the struggle against oppression in the 1960s has generated a “collision of these two fronts of struggle” and

produced a new political constellation: *proponents of emancipation joined up with partisans of marketization to double-team social protection*. The fruit of that alliance is a “progressive” neoliberalism, which celebrates “diversity,” meritocracy and “emancipation” while dismantling social protections, expropriating hard-won working-class savings, and entrenching widespread precarity. Hillary Clinton is the very embodiment of this constellation. Is it any wonder that partisans of social protection, who rightly sense themselves outgunned by this new alliance, are hopping mad? Abandoned

by those who have redefined emancipation in truncated, market-friendly terms, they find a voice of sorts through Trump, with accents of *ressentiment* and chauvinism.<sup>32</sup>

What is needed, Fraser argues, is to bring the struggles against economic exploitation together with the struggle against oppression. One might extend Fraser's critique of mainstream feminism to postmodernist and poststructuralist thinking as well. If deconstruction and identity politics served as a means by which to challenge the canon, as noted earlier, and to open spaces for new voices in the 1980s, today its focus on micro-power and on micro-aggressions, on local struggles and micro-narratives, has opened the door to a focus on individuals, very much in line with the capitalist philosophy of liberal individualism, which serves to elide a structural and systemic analysis. The rejection of a systemic analysis of capitalism and its structuring global reality as part of a rejection of metanarratives has hampered critical thinkers. Thus, social theory that was once liberatory has now merged with the logic of "progressive" neoliberalism in its focus on the individual and on small scale struggle.

We need to bring back the importance of class and of class struggle as central to the politics of emancipation. As Erik Olin Wright and others who study class and class structures have shown, white women and people of color are a majority of the US working class (white men are a minority). This working class majority not only bears the brunt of the dismantling of social protections and widespread precarity, as Fraser notes, but also faces further exploitation along lines of race and gender. Rather than pitting race against class, or gender against class, or an identity borne of race, gender and sexual orientation against class as a separate identity, it is important to explain the intersectionality of oppression rooted in the structures of capitalism. What is needed today is a project to rebuild a left that sees the importance combining these struggles. As Fraser puts it, "rather than siding with marketization-cum-emancipation against social protection, we should be focused on forging a new *alliance of emancipation and social protection against runaway marketization*."<sup>33</sup>

What does that mean for us as scholars of media and communication? I think it is time to put to bed the tired debate between cultural studies (which is presumably focused on the emancipation of oppressed groups at the expense of a structural analysis) and political economy (which presumably only looks at capitalist structures and class and ignores gender and race oppression). These are of course caricatures of both traditions, as many in this room have argued. What is essential then, in my view, is for critical media studies scholars to engage with both oppression and exploitation but to do so within the framework of the broader political economy. The UDC is home to scholars who work within the political economy tradition, so I don't think that that is a tough sell with you.

However, last year at the closing plenary of the UDC in Toronto I argued that there were too few panels on racism. I was in Toronto to attend the CESA (Critical Ethnic Studies Association) conference as well as the UDC and what I observed is a dramatic difference between the two. CESA of course had multiple panels on racism, but there was at best a superficial engagement with the political economy, at least on the panels that I attended. There was mention of neoliberalism or settler-colonialism but without a deeper analysis of how they inform various processes of racialization. What I argued at the closing plenary of the UDC was that the two conferences, and their particular foci, need to be brought together if we are to produce

knowledge that is truly dangerous to neoliberal imperialism. This year I see that that is not the case, so I will take full credit for this shift erasing the impact of Black Lives Matter movement that swept through university campuses last year, as well as all the hard work of the conference organizers who made this shift happen. Joking aside, I am very pleased to see this shift in the program this year.

I realize of course that adopting a Socialist, anti-racist, feminist, anti-imperialist perspective is not going to make one popular. It is necessarily going to put one on the margins of the academy and on the margins of society. But this is not something to bemoan; rather, being on margins is an enabling condition that allows us to think, write, speak and organize for universal human liberation. And I want to use the language of Edward Said, W. E. B. Du Bois, Sara Ahmed and Steven Salaita to help make this case.

### **Fighting from the Margins**

In his book, *Representations of Intellectuals*, Edward Said talks about the exilic intellectual as a metaphor. He says,

While it is an actual condition, exile is also for my purposes a metaphorical condition. By that I mean that my diagnosis of the intellectual in exile derives from the social and political history of dislocation and migration. . .but it is not limited to it. Even intellectuals who are lifelong members of a society can, in a manner of speaking, be divided into insiders and outsiders; those on the one hand who belong fully to the society as it is, who flourish in it without an overwhelming sense of dissonance or dissent, those who can be called yea-sayers, and on the other hand, the nay-sayers, the individuals at odd with their society and therefore outsiders and exiles so far as privileges, power, and honors are concerned. The pattern that sets the course for the intellectual as outsider is best exemplified by the condition of exile, the state of never being fully adjusted, always falling outside the chatty, familiar world inhabited by the natives, so to speak, tending to avoid and even dislike the trappings of accommodation and national well-being. Exile for the intellectual is this metaphysical sense of restlessness, movement, constantly being unsettled, and unsettling others. You cannot go back to some earlier and perhaps more stable condition of being at home; and alas, you can never fully arrive, be at one with your new home or situation.<sup>34</sup>

Said here is highlighting a condition of being an outsider as both a philosophical condition as well as an emotional and affective condition. When he talks about the “state of never being fully adjusted, always falling outside the chatty, familiar world inhabited by the natives,” he is speaking to a profound alienation that immigrants, women, people of color and other oppressed groups experience in white and male dominated institutions that are blind to their own racism, sexism, and normativity. But what I think is helpful about the way that Said puts it is that he opens the door to a universal alienation, i.e. one doesn’t have to be an immigrant or a member of an oppressed group to feel like an outsider. One can be a white male and still be an outsider, still be alienated from the university and the broader society. This I think is important in terms of building of solidarity across lines of gender, race, sexual orientation and other markers of difference.

My own experience as an activist in the US over the last two decades has shown me that multiracial coalitions against racism are possible and that men are not just allies in the fight against sexism but can be feminists to the core. I was once on a panel of Asian American women and was asked to speak about how various communities—East Asian Americans, South Asian Americans, etc.—might work together. I argued that I do not see the South Asian American community as my community of people. I cannot identify with the Hindu fundamentalists or elite South Asians who hold class, racial and gender prejudices. To be in a room with people like this would not constitute a “safe space.” My community, I argued, consists of people who are fellow radicals and socialists, people who share my politics and worldview, and who are white, brown, black, gay, straight, male, female and trans. In short, I part company with identity politics because my experience with this community of like-minded activists has demonstrated not just the importance but the reality of what solidarity means.

To get back to Said, here is what he says about how the experience of being an exilic intellectual is liberating. He writes:

For the intellectual an exilic displacement means being liberated from the usual career, in which “doing well” and following in time-honored footsteps are the main milestones. Exile means that you are always going to be marginal, and that what you do as an intellectual has to be made up because you cannot follow a prescribed path. If you can experience that fate not as deprivation and as something to be bewailed, but as a sort of freedom, a process of discovery in which you do things according to your own pattern, as various interests seize your attention, and as a particular goal you set yourself dictates: that is a unique pleasure.<sup>35</sup>

Of course, I realize that it is easier to focus on the pleasure if you are a distinguished professor at Columbia University, than it is if you are an adjunct professor at a small liberal arts college. And I also want to acknowledge that the exilic intellectual can become an affectation, a pose that enables one to become a radical academic superstar who has little or no connection to movements for social change. We certainly know people like this who travel around the world giving radical lectures, churning out books every year, while refusing to speak out or organize against the injustices happening around them. And this is why I have emphasized at various points in the lecture that simply producing critical scholarship is not enough, although that is vital and important. Being engaged is just as important.

As Marx put it: “Philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways, the point, however, is to change it.”

But to build on Said’s emphasis on the pleasure and pain in unsettling those around you, I want to use the words of Sara Ahmed about what it means to be a “Feminist Killjoy.” She writes:

We begin with a table. Around this table, the family gathers, having polite conversations, where only certain things can be brought up. Someone says something you consider problematic. You are becoming tense; it is becoming tense... You respond, carefully, perhaps. You say why you think what they have said is problematic. You might be



speaking quietly, but you are beginning to feel "wound up," recognizing with frustration that you are being wound up by someone who is winding you up. In speaking up or speaking out, you upset the situation. That you have described what was said by another as a problem means you have created a problem. You become the problem you create...Another dinner, ruined. To become alienated from a picture can allow you to see what that picture does not and will not reflect. Becoming a feminist can be an alienation from happiness (though not just that, not only that: oh the joy of being able to leave the place you were given!).<sup>36</sup>

I think that this example of the dining table is just as applicable to a faculty meeting or any other such event at the university. She calls on us to detach ourselves from the familiar, that which is supposed to make us happy, and to unsettle conventions and norms by speaking out. Indeed, radical intellectuals might heed her advice and intervene at the university to highlight and organize against injustices. And rather than alienation, as she puts it, this step becomes a way of reclaiming our humanity.

But what we also know is that being a “killjoy” or being “uncivil” comes with a price. The university will try to get rid of you or put you in a situation where you feel you have no choice but to leave. The former happened to Steven Salaita and the latter to Ahmed. However, both continue the fight. Salaita published *Uncivil Rights* and continues to be a vocal proponent of Palestinian rights. At the university, he makes a case that uncivility, and particularly a critical engagement with the problems of the neoliberal university, is vital, and that this involves unsettling one another. He writes:

To unsettle colleagues isn't to be a bad departmental citizen or an irredeemable asshole, but to engage the possibilities of dissent. And to irritate administrators isn't to be hostile or dastardly, but to maintain a productive tension with management that either prevents or impedes the formation of a neoliberal consensus.

By unsettling one another, we inject creative and intellectual life into our relationships. We maintain a spirit of inquiry that values debate and analysis over discipline. We compel one another to identify the structures of power that govern our perceptions of bromides such as “pragmatism” and the “common good.”

By irritating administrators, we perform a necessary function of faculty governance: to disturb the ease of decision-making in executive offices. It is a way to interject friction into the smooth ennui of managerial logic. It offers a necessary if unwelcome veneer of discomfort. It prickles at custom. It undermines ceremony. It's a bit of sandpaper on a mahogany table. Or an itch at that unreachable spot on the back.

These practices of unsettlement and irritation allow us to remain human by honoring the messiness of our humanity, a crucial task amid bureaucratic customs that so adeptly produce dehumanization. If we fail to resist the logic of campus corporatization, then we become negligible commodities, automatons of a self-regulated accreditation industry in which critical thinking becomes superfluous, or a threat to the industry altogether.<sup>37</sup>

Du Bois used the term “double consciousness” to explain how racialized others come to see themselves in a society that dehumanizes them and forces them to endure the daily humiliations of being an outsider. But being an outsider for Du Bois was also enabling in that it gave one the ability to stand at the edge of the world, a world that one does not and cannot fully belong to, and, from that vantage point, see beyond its ideology and mystifications. He called this capacity “second sight.” Here is how he put it:

After the Egyptian and Indian, the Greek and Roman, the Teuton and Mongolian, the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second sight in this American world—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of the others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.<sup>38</sup>

As a scholar, Du Bois was not given the importance his work merited. In the book *A Scholar Denied: W E B Dubois and the Birth of Modern Sociology*, Aldon Morris lays out how Dubois’ contemporaries either ignored or disparaged his work. Morris set out to rewrite the history of sociology, giving Dubois his rightful place in the field.

Part of being a radical intellectual then is adjusting in our minds how we see ourselves and our marginality. In a sense, all radical intellectuals have to deal in different ways with “double consciousness.” We have to learn how not to tie our self-worth to the rewards, awards, accolades (and punishments) that the neoliberal university hands out, but to hold ourselves to another set of standards. However, none of us is an island: we want to be seen, to be recognized, and to be appreciated. And this is where an organization like the UDC is very important. I want to thank everyone on the steering committee for all the hard work you do to support radical scholarship, and to bring together a community of scholars who can learn from one another, debate with one another, but also affirm one another.

The last thing I want to say is that it is not easy either living or fighting from the margins, but I think it is worth it. James Baldwin put it this way: “It is a terrible, an inexorable, law that one cannot deny the humanity of another without diminishing one’s own: in the face of one’s victim, one sees oneself.” If that’s true, and I believe it is, then we do damage to ourselves if we sit by and allow injustices to be perpetrated around us. We deny ourselves our own humanity if we don’t make an effort, however small or big to address these injustices. And there are plenty of injustices: rising adjunct labor, sexual harassment, racism, disparities in hiring, tenuring, promotion, and wages, the limited rights of custodial and other staff, etc. If we turn a blind eye to them, I believe we do damage to ourselves. The neoliberal university’s emphasis on individualism, and the mandate to publish, publish, publish and ignore service because it doesn’t advance our careers, actually, in the long run, hurts us by isolating us from our colleagues, our students and our staff. It increases our alienation from the world and from ourselves.

I fight because I believe that struggling for everyone’s liberation and for ending oppression and exploitation of all kinds is a way to liberate oneself. It is a way to feel just a little less alienated from the world. But I couldn’t do this alone. I fight alongside my colleagues, my union, and my comrades who I know will have my back when I need them to. This is why the labor movement has the slogan: Solidarity, the only way to win.

Finally, a huge big thank you to the UDC for giving me this award! I thank you for your solidarity and support—you have added a new gust of wind beneath my wings. This is how I continue to live, fight and thrive in the margins because so many of you do the same. And for those of you who aren’t there yet, I invite you to join us.

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<sup>3</sup> Geoffrey R. Stone. “A Brief History of Academic Freedom,” in *ibid*.

<sup>4</sup> Robin Blackburn, *The American Crucible: Slavery, Emancipation and Human Rights* (New York: Verso, 2013). p. 173.

<sup>5</sup> Samuel P. Huntington, “The United States,” in Michel J. Crozier, Samuel P. Huntington, and Joji Watanuki (eds.) *The Crisis of Democracy: Report on the Governability of Democracies to the Trilateral Commission* (New York: New York University Press, 1975), pp. 59-116. p. 106.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, 113

<sup>7</sup> 114

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<sup>9</sup> <http://harpers.org/archive/2016/04/legalize-it-all/>

<sup>10</sup> Jordan Camp. *Incarcerating the Crisis: Freedom Struggles and the Rise of the Neoliberal State* (California: University of California Press, 2016), p.3.

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<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, 38.

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<sup>15</sup> Lewis F. Powell, Jr, “Confidential Memo: Attack on American Free Enterprise System.” August 23, 1971, online at: <http://www.greenpeace.org/usa/democracy/the-lewis-powell-memo-a-corporate-blueprint-to-dominate-democracy/>

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<sup>17</sup> Henry A. Giroux, “Public Intellectuals against the Neoliberal University,” *Truthout*, online at <http://www.truth-out.org/opinion/item/19654-public-intellectuals-against-the-neoliberal-university#XI>, October 29, 2013.

<sup>18</sup> Alan Greenspan, “Testimony of Chairman Alan Greenspan,” *The Federal Reserve's semiannual monetary policy report*, February 26, 1997. Online at <https://www.federalreserve.gov/boarddocs/hh/1997/february/testimony.htm>

<sup>19</sup> Jim Sleeper. “Allan Bloom and the Conservative Mind,” *The New York Times*, Sept 4, 2005, online at [http://www.nytimes.com/2005/09/04/books/review/allan-bloom-and-the-conservative-mind.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2005/09/04/books/review/allan-bloom-and-the-conservative-mind.html?_r=0)

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