

Witch Hunt at Columbia

Targeting the University

By JOSEPH MASSAD | June 2006

Targeting the university is the latest mission of right-wing forces who have hijacked not only political power and political discourse in the United States but also the very vocabulary that can be used against them. The campaign of the last three years or so to attack US universities as the last bastion where a measure of freedom of thought is still protected is engineered to cancel out such freedom and ensure that scholars will not subvert the received political wisdom of the day.



Columbia University, NYC

Some of the major tactics in this campaign have been the launching of witch hunts against specific professors, calling for their dismissal from their jobs, and, failing that, smear their reputation; target Middle East Studies as a scholarly field more generally and cut federal funding to it and place it under governmental supervision, and promote apologists for Israel in the guise of scholars as the only adequate scholarly alternative. While shutting down the

educational process in favour of religious theories of creationism and the like has been around for a while, the recent attack on scholars who disagree with US foreign policy and the policies of the state of Israel are the main mobilisational issues of the current campaign.

What is at stake in this assault is not only academic freedom, but scholarship per se, and specifically scholarship on Palestine and Israel, which is the primary target of the witch-hunters.

What makes these anti-scholarship attacks possible and popular is the existence of a major discrepancy, even a radical disconnect, between popular knowledge and media

coverage about the Palestine/Israel conundrum and established scholarly knowledge about the topic. It is this disconnect that the witch hunters mobilise against scholarship as proof that it is not media and popular knowledge, which defends Israeli policy and Zionism's axioms, that is ideological, but rather academic scholarship which has largely uncovered unsavory facts about both. Thus when young American students who come from ideologically charged homes, schools, and environments, attend university classes about the subject, they mistake established scholarship as pro- Palestinian propaganda, a conclusion that is propped up by the likes of Campus Watch, the David Project, and the Anti- Defamation League, all three organisations who make it part or all their business to attack scholarly criticisms of Israeli policy.

Let me provide a few examples of what I mean. All respected scholars in the field agree that most or all Palestinians who became refugees in 1948 were expelled directly or indirectly by Israel. The debate that exists is about whether all Palestinian refugees were physically expelled by the Israeli army or that the Israeli army expelled the majority while a minority of refugees fled, not as a direct result of physical force but as an indirect consequence of actions taken by the Israeli army and government which might, or might not, have been deliberately intended to expel them. In contrast, media and popular ideological knowledge in the US still insists that the Palestinians fled on their own, or worse, were called upon to do so by Arab leaders (despite Israeli false claims that Arab leaders called on Palestinians to flee, research has shown that they called upon them to remain steadfast in their homeland) while the Zionists begged them to stay!

Established scholarship enumerates all the racist laws and institutional racist practices in operation in Israel which discriminate between Jews and non-Jews, granting Jews differential rights and privileges over non-Jews, and rendering Israel a racist state by law. Popular and media knowledge, in contrast, depict Israel as a democratic liberal state that treats all its citizens equally. It is also established in scholarship that Israel discriminates against non-European Jews (the majority of the country's Jewish population) and also against recent Russian Jewish immigrants, and has engaged and continues to engage in a racist discourse about them and in unofficial institutional discrimination against them (witness the most recent case of discrimination against Ethiopian Jews in admissions to Israeli universities). In contrast, popular and media knowledge depicts Israel as a place where all Jews are equal. Scholarly knowledge addresses the question of Israel as a quasi-theological state, where religious law

governs major aspects of Jewish life and that only Orthodox Judaism is allowed to have religious authority over Jewish citizens to the exclusion of Reform and Conservative Judaism, let alone other Jewish denominations. In contrast, media and popular knowledge depict Israel as a secular state. These are only a few examples of how scholarly knowledge is drastically different from and contradicts media and popular knowledge about key issues regarding Israeli society and history.

Israel's apologists and right-wing witch-hunters aim to establish this popular and media "knowledge", which echo the official positions of the State of Israel and its US lobby, as "scholarly" and dismiss academic scholarship as ideology. It is in this context that many of the organisations and individuals attacking me are under the false impression that what I teach in my classes is a "Palestinian" perspective or narrative. In fact, at the risk of engaging my fanatical critics, whose outrageous claims and inventions should not be given any legitimacy, I do no such thing. In my class on the topic, I teach academic scholarship on Palestine and Israel, which is precisely why the witch-hunters want Columbia to fire me.

As academic knowledge is of no interest to these ideologues, they have marshalled all their resources to transform the university into a mouthpiece for Israeli propaganda. They have recently been joined by The New York Times who, in an editorial on 7 April, called on Columbia University to monitor the classroom for "pro-Palestinian" bias. The Times' editors asserted that the (illegitimate) investigative panel that Columbia University convened as part of its own intimidation of its own professors failed to examine the real allegations of pro-Israel students who are allied with pro-Israeli lobbying groups outside the university. These allegations speak of stridently pro-Palestinian, anti-Israeli bias on the part of several professors. The panel had no mandate to examine the quality and fairness of teaching. That leaves the university to follow up on complaints about politicised courses and a lack of scholarly rigour as part of its effort to upgrade the department. One can only hope that Columbia will proceed with more determination and care than it has heretofore.

What the Times' editors mean is that it is incumbent upon Columbia University to bring scholarly knowledge transmitted in its classrooms in line with Israeli propaganda, which the New York Times itself has never found too difficult to disseminate as objective truth anyway. Indeed, Ethan Bronner, the Times' deputy foreign editor, was quoted in an article on 24 April asserting that as far as United Nations Security Council resolutions on

the Palestinian/Israeli conflict are concerned, the newspaper editors "view ourselves as neutral and unbound by such judgements. We cite them, but we do not live by them." If the Times can ignore so casually UN decisions as unbinding, why shouldn't scholars do the same? Indeed why shouldn't Columbia University do the same? The fact that for now at least, Columbia's administration has not taken steps to monitor the politics of scholarship should not reassure us. Aside from his commitment to the pro-Israeli and anti-Palestinian line espoused by the New York Times and manifest in many of his own public statements, Columbia's president, Lee Bollinger, has spoken about his concern of a lack of "balance" and the presence of "bias" in some classes on the Palestinian/Israeli conflict taught at Columbia, which he intends to rectify. He even expressed concern that Columbia scholars of the Middle East do not seem to explain "the relationship... between the environmental facts of life in the Middle East and Asia, or its diseases, and the culture there?" Columbia may soon hire Middle East scholars who will attempt to answer this important question!

The production of academic knowledge in American universities was never separable from the overall social, political, and economic requirements of the American state. Links between the university and state policy and the interests of the private sector have a long history and are structurally built into the research agenda of universities, most importantly through the mechanism of funding. I still remember how as an undergraduate in the US, I was always baffled by political scientists who would ridicule Soviet academic scholarship as lacking "independence" due to its being beholden to an agenda set and funded by the Soviet state, while being proud of their own scholarship and discipline, which was hardly "independent" of US government funding as well as funding from the private sector which most often drove US state interests. Despite these structural limitations, however, there remained an important and crucial space in the university where serious scholarship could be produced and which scholars have utilised to produce their work.

This is not to say that scholarship is unbiased. On the contrary, all respectable scholarship about Nazi Germany and the holocaust, to take an important example, is indeed biased against the Nazis, but no one except anti-Semites would dare equate scholarly judgment of Nazi Germany and the holocaust as the "Jewish" perspective or narrative. The same applies to scholarship about South Africa under Apartheid, which is never described as the "Black" perspective or narrative. Feminist scholarship is equally biased against sexism, but is not labelled as "women's" narrative or perspective.

Scholarship on Stalin, on US slavery, on British colonialism, on American racism, on institutionalised sexism and discrimination against women, etc, is always biased, and no amount of lobbying from right-wing groups will force academics to teach the Nazi or slavery perspectives in the interest of "balance." It is this scholarly space that the university enshrines which the neo-conservative culture commissars want to close off. To do so, what better place to create consensus than the Palestine/Israel conflict on which there is total US cultural agreement echoed by the mainstream and the right-wing and left-wing press. If Fox news and CNN and ABC news can agree on the "facts" surrounding Israel and its policies, as do the New York Times, the Wall Street Journal, the Daily News, and the New York Sun, then surely critical scholarship on this question will find little popular support. In this regard you can have a civil libertarian Zionist like the Village Voice's Nat Hentoff, liberal Zionist apologists like the Nation magazine, and the New York Sun and the New York Post, join hands to discredit scholars on Palestine and Israel as "dogmatic", "uncompromising," "strident" and the like. Ostensible civil libertarian and Harvard Law Professor Alan Dershowitz has not only joined the campaign in writing for the press, but also by lecturing at Columbia University against "pro-Palestinian" professors whom he accused of supporting terrorism. Luckily, Dershowitz did not advise Columbia on the types of legal torture that it could mete out to "guilty" professors.

This is not to say that there is no disagreement among the members of this unholy alliance. There is. Such disagreement revolves on the division between "good" Arabs and "bad" Arabs. This is not new but harks back to the emergence of Egyptian president Anwar El-Sadat as the first "good" Arab to be rescued from the lot in the American media. Since then, while the right-wing has had no truck with these divisions, as all Arabs are "bad," as far as it is concerned, the mainstream and the "left" very much dabble in this division. Thus, Arabs who are seen as "moderate" and who are seen as speaking a language that does not challenge all the received wisdom on Israel are considered "good," while those who are seen as exposing the hypocrisy of liberal apologists for Israel are "bad" and are described as "extremists." This is an important strategy for liberal Zionists, as it achieves two important goals: it avoids and pre-empts the accusation of anti-Arab racism while encouraging "moderation" among Arab scholars by offering them much needed public and media praise. Thus, I was recently faulted by the reporter of the left-liberal Nation magazine for daring to call Israel a racist state, even though I base my accurate description of the country on its myriad racist laws that discriminate between Jews and non-Jews, and that grant Jews rights

and privileges that are denied to non-Jews. Such laws include the law of return (1950), the law of absentee property (1950), the law of the state's property (1951), the law of citizenship (1952), the status law (1952), the Israel lands administration law (1960), the construction and building law (1965), among others. What the Nation and Nat Hentoff find objectionable in my characterisation of Israel as racist is that it contradicts media and popular knowledge about Israel, which is the only acceptable measure of knowledge of the country in the US media. Herein lies their complicity with the rightwing on rejecting academic scholarship on Israel. The Nation and Hentoff, among others, made sure to contrast me with other "moderate" Arab scholars whom they praise and do not dismiss.

By using the popular and media consensus on Palestine/Israel as its entry point for the dismantling of the university and its cardinal principle of academic freedom, the pro-Israel lobbyists were able to find allies in the university administration, among the faculty, and certainly among students. Even though the main target of the witch-hunters is academic scholarship on Palestine and Israel, which they want to delegitimise fully as a scholarly endeavour, in favour of accepting the official Israeli government's representation of itself as academic truth, their efforts have mushroomed into an all out attack on the concept of academic freedom, and the very institution of the University. Their strategy, however, has backfired, as faculty quickly realised that the attack would indeed touch on the very nature of university pedagogy and the production of scholarly knowledge. In this regard, Columbia's faculty and other faculties around the country have begun to mobilise against these enemies of academic freedom. These enemies of academic freedom do not only threaten junior faculty but all classroom settings and all scholarship.

In light of the organised power and influence of the witch-hunters, the task before academics is not only to continue to insist on writing and producing scholarship about Palestine and Israel, which will continue to expose the true nature of the Israeli state and its oppressive policies, but to defend the scholarly endeavour itself, which can only be ensured if the institution of the university is maintained as a space where academic freedom is upheld. The university, with all its limitations, is one of the few remaining spaces, if not the only remaining one, where critical intellectuals can still live the life of the mind. What the witch-hunters want us to do is to live the life of servitude to state power, as technocrats and as ideologues. This we refuse to do.

Joseph Massad is assistant professor of modern Arab politics and intellectual history at Columbia University.