



## Beyond Solidarity and Academic Freedom

A conversation between Luther Blissett and Karen Eliot

Over the past year there have been an increasing number of attacks on the activities of radicals and progressives in the academy. These attacks have both occurred in the US (with the media circus around Ward Churchill and the attempts to pin trumped bioterrorism charges on Steve Kurtz from the Critical Art Ensemble) to the controversy around the invited appearance of Antonio Negri at a conference in Australia. Most recently Yale anthropologist David Graeber has been fired under somewhat dubious circumstances that appear to be largely politically motivated.

As argued by Angela Mitropoulos in her article ‘Physiognomy of Civilisation’<sup>1</sup> it is not the truth or falsity of the claims that matter for making them is damaging enough in itself. Furthermore, it is not enough to fall back on claims of academic freedom or appeals to the status of being a philosopher or well respected academic. For if there existed a space in the alleged ivory towers where this kind of protection was afforded (which is doubtful to begin with), this very depoliticization of knowledge often served to mask other forms of nefarious power and dealings.

But this begs the question, what then would a response be to these on-going attempts to ferret radical voices out of the academy? And if one is not appealing to a conception of academic freedom or the space of the university, how does one respond? To what or whom does one appeal? As argued by Noam Chomsky, “It would be criminal to overlook the serious flaws and inadequacies in our institutions, or to fail to utilize the substantial degree of freedom that most of us enjoy, within the framework of these flawed institutions, to modify or even replace them by a better social order.”<sup>2</sup> In a time where this degree of freedom is increasingly encroached upon by a well organized and mobilized right wing, what kind of response(s) should one take up? We posed these questions to Luther Blissett, who holds the Marvelous Chair in Ontological Mayhem at the University of Bleckableckastan, and Karen Eliot, who is a Reader in the Uncanny from the Center for Study of Psychogeographic Self-Negation in Milano, as a means of sparking a conversation. The authors, who may have not been feeling as much as themselves as usual that day resulted in the following ways.

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1 Mitropoulos, A. (2005) ‘Physiognomy of Civilisation,’ Interactivist InfoExchange [http://info.interactivist.net/article.pl?sid=05/04/04/1850213&mode=thread&tid=9]

2 Chomsky, N. (2003) *Objectivity and Liberal Scholarship*. New York: New Press, 19.

**Luther Blissett:** First, as a radical, I've never appreciated liberalism more than in the years since 9/11, including in the academy. While the academy has never matched in reality the image of protected intellectual freedom, even the battered and tattered versions of that idea have created more space for free thinking than anyplace else in the economy. If you think, for instance, of why you find a broader range of opinions and ideas on a university campus than in a newsroom, even though journalists too are writers and thinkers, I don't think it's because we're smarter than them or even because we have the luxury of longer-term investigation and writing. It's because academia is the only place where, mostly, you can't be fired for your opinion. As flawed as this protection is in reality, I think the post-9/11 regime is threatening to erase the line much more, and this is something we need to resist.

**Karen Eliot:** For me this raises some basic but important issues about what academic radicalism means in itself. This gets to thinking about the idea of being a radical academic, that is, having one's being an academic be one's radicalism. Part of the motivation is a story a friend told about being in grad school during the start of the Iraq war. He tells me that in one of his classes there was a big discussion about how now is a time when we must all be very political. By 'being political' (a problematic phrase I know), what was meant was reading a lot of Lacan very closely. Which, presumably, is what grad students in a seminar on Lacan are expected to do closely.



**Luther Blissett:** I think we need to think about the particular role of universities in societies, especially at a time when much of what academics do is now done in think-tanks, corporate science labs or social science operations, and much of what happens on campus is now high-level job training rather than intellectual development. The line has been blurred but that just makes it more important to know what our particular role is. I think a key component of what a university is, is that we are supposed to be the home of or repository of ideas that can't be tolerated anywhere else in society. A university is not supposed to be 'balanced' per se – it is not supposed to reflect the thinking outside the university. It's supposed to be much more radical and varied than what for-profit or government agencies allow.

**Karen Eliot:** But that doesn't really get around the problem. The gist of my hesitation is quite simple – 'academic' is a job class. If it's possible to be a radical academic then that would mean that 'academic' is a job unlike nearly any other. That is, what would it mean to be a radical doctor, a radical teacher, a radical electrician, etc? I can see an element of shopfloor resistance in all of this, but, if the radical teacher's students don't pass the US Constitution test, or if the radical electrician doesn't take the job doing some of the wiring at the mental hospital, there are tremendous personal job related consequences. Similarly, if a professor's students rate them poorly or they don't get into grad school or they don't finish their PhDs or whatever, there are big consequences as well. I think the change, though, is that the freedom of academics is becoming closer to the range of freedom that most other people have on the job, which is to say, very little on their own. That's definitely a shame, but do you think it's happening because of a shift in power relations in the academy as a workplace, or is it a response to something else, a response that can happen with relatively little impediment because of an already existing imbalance of power in the academy as a workplace?

**Luther Blissett:** I'm increasingly of the view that the attacks on academics are part of a broader process – what one might call the enclosure of the academy, or a neoliberal transformation. Basically, 'traditional' universities have been functional to capitalism but in an indirect way; their own mode of production was either pre-capitalist or early capitalist – pre-capitalist in the sense of being similar to the organisation of a guild of artisans, with internal standards of expertise determining acceptance and status in the 'trade' (even to the point of the production of a 'masterpiece', the PhD) – early (or earlier) capitalist in the sense of being linked to the elite-based kinds of capitalism and later, to welfare state education expansion goals. Universities have performed roles for capitalism but are not yet fully made-capitalist. They have been formally but not really subsumed in capitalism. Actually the functions performed by universities were/are indirect. One of the most important functions for capitalism is (meritocratic or elite-reproducing) social stratification – the selection of layers of people for entry into certain social strata. In relation to this function, the activities of academics and the specifics of what is taught and how it is taught are actually not very important to capitalism.

**Karen Eliot:** Thus, many of the kinds of things people like Chomsky criticise, are not necessarily aspects of capitalism itself. They're ways in which academic research is functional or profitable for capitalism, or oppressive structures specific to the kind of oppressive structure pertaining to early or pre-capitalist forms. Academic freedoms are usually in fact veiled references to the self-regulation or internal disciplining of

academics as a professional group – a reproduction of the structure of artisan guilds. This self-regulation is dependent on the autonomy and freedom of the group from external limitations and requirements. At the same time, it is not necessarily freedom for each worker, since the profession may be structured hierarchically or involve conservative pressures from the established professionals. Apart from academics, the only professions structured this way in the West today are lawyers and doctors. Another thing critics point to are the signs of the early stages of capitalist real-subsumption of the universities: for instance, direct corporate and military-industrial-complex involvement in scientific research.

**Luther Blissett:** The present period of capitalism seems to be typified by pervasive neoliberal attacks on any sectors which appear decommodified or are not fully integrated into capitalism. In many ways this is a desperate attack by capitalism, similar to what Gramsci calls the ‘economic-corporate’ kind of politics (rather than hegemonic) – by imposing the logic of ‘the market’ everywhere, capitalism destroys other logics which are necessary for its own functioning and stability. In universities, the attack takes the following forms, among others: Pay-to-learn fee based access, mathematised performance measurement rather than self-regulation of the profession, a switch from education and research to ‘skill training,’ and attempts to form direct links between taught materials and capitalist functioning. Actually, there is an ambiguity here, because the ‘reforms’ weaken functionality for capitalism – pay-to-learn eliminates the small meritocratic element which existed before and makes elite reproduction both mechanical and explicit; performance measurement creates pressures for quantity (over quality) and acceptance (over originality) which impede research; and the whole process makes capitalist control explicit. It’s likely to become harder for the social system to legitimate itself as its mechanisms are less obscured and as legitimacy institutions and secondary mediations are eliminated.

**Karen Eliot:** As regards critical academics, the ‘traditional’ situation is that, because the functionality of universities for capitalism was not dependent on what academics teach or research but rather, on the elite-selecting function and the legitimacy effects. Universities are something of a niche for radicals who meet the criteria of the profession but not those of capitalism; and there is a space for engaging in critical writing as recognised ‘work’. This openness/self-regulation is under attack, with basically an attempt to proletarianise academics along the lines previously seen in the case of artisans and craft-workers (the switch to ‘skill-training’ and the attempt to impose course content eliminating professional self-regulation in determining course content, the performance indicators limiting what counts as ‘research’ and the amount and type to be produced, pay-to-learn restricting access into the profession of people from working-class and so-called ‘non-traditional’ backgrounds). There is still some leeway left, mainly because the performance indicators are impersonal and leave some room for continued self-regulation of the profession (e.g. if critical journals are accepted as ‘top’ journals in a field, critical scholarship will continue to be valorised).

**Luther Blissett:** Hmm, are there other notions of academic freedom that aren’t just ‘radical’ negations of it in practice? The main issue I actually want to get at is the whole ‘theory’ bit, as the program I chair is very theory heavy and seems to have an implied view that theory is valuable in itself, and politically so. I’m ambivalent, as I like the

stuff, but am not sure that it has a political value all the time, in all contexts. I'm particularly suspicious because, as a professor, part of one's job is theory, reading and writing it, and I'm just always very suspicious about the idea that one can get paid for smashing the state or overthrowing the bosses.

**Karen Eliot:** It's very possible that 'academic freedom' has always been an empty, hollow, and problematic term and concept that has only been useful and will only continue to be of any use if it holds any effective rhetorical value; which, if it did, seems to be declining, which does not mean we've figured out what to do now in that situation. In some ways, it's the kind of thing that happens to people all the time in regular jobs – always fucked up, but not atypical – but my sense is that academia had been an atypical workplace for a while, so that this type of thing is particularly striking. I wonder if that atypical-ness is changing/under attack. It clearly is in some places, from both sides – management restructuring and employee organizing – but I suspect none of this is really news to you. A struggle against neoliberal decimation of the universities, and thus against the attacks on academic self-regulation, needs to be combined with a critique of the ways in which this professional autonomy is used. The line of flight to be sought here is one which takes the aspect of traditional universities which is peripheral to capitalism (academic autonomy) and take it on a line leading away from functionality for capitalism and away from hierarchic organisation. The eventual destination of this line, in my view, would be something akin to the deschooled universities proposed by Paul Goodman, where those who see the point in carrying on a particular line of research or study have the resources and opportunities to do so, with holders of knowledge available to help on a networked and gift-economical basis.

**Luther Blissett:** Those who follow the 'passage through capitalism instead of resisting it' line a la recent Hardt and Negri, Žižek, etc. should (if they are consistent) take the position of supporting the neoliberal restructuring of higher education. Though I don't see how this process of neoliberal imposition helps create the potential for later resistance or overcoming. But then again, I don't see this in terms of most other applications of this particular dogma either. Obviously a defence of welfare state institutions etc. can be viewed as reactionary if capitalism is taken as definitive of progress – but this is precisely the identification to reject. It can also be criticised as reformist, and certainly in the first instance it is a defence of discourses and arrangements of space which are functional to capitalism, and which are only relatively autonomous, so to speak. But this isn't really reformist so much as transitional, as long as the goal of reconstructing capitalism on a less neoliberal basis is not affirmed. The transition is through the most peripheral elements into the possibility of a 'beyond' irreducible to capitalism.

**Karen Eliot:** This said, many of those involved in the struggle at the present stage will not share the transformative goal. And a defence of relatively autonomous (but functional) university spaces is itself better than a neoliberal reconstruction. And it is possible to rally to this defence, not only critical academics, but also conservative academics concerned about 'standards,' liberal academics concerned about academic freedom and tolerance, and social-democratic academics concerned about the social role of education. Basically, academics as a social group are threatened by these measures, pretty much regardless of their political affiliations and preferences (albeit the measures

have the worst impact on critical academics). There is thus the potential – and it is at present only a potential – for profession-wide resistance to the ‘restructuring’ measures. I would suggest a resistance strategy based on refusal to implement, organised across the profession as a whole. Basically, because the academic profession is largely self-regulated, the imposition of neoliberalism is being attempted through the medium of the profession itself, and depends at many points on the labour of academics – as quality auditors, as assessors for funding bodies, as people involved in deciding appointments, as journal editors and referees, as course designers, as members of committees deciding on course design and performance and other issues, etc. A withdrawal or syncretic appropriation of this function would effectively neutralise the imposition of neoliberalism

**Luther Blissett:** While the treatment of Ward Churchill is to be deplored, we would do well to remember that this kind of behaviour directed towards an academic is nothing new. Rather, universities are bastions of academic freedom but only within certain bounds, and these limits become obvious when we take a brief tour through some of the less salubrious examples. As an attempt at problematising the very concept of academic freedom, those practical tensions that suffuse the academy and stepping back to look at this form of life we inhabit, let us consider just a few historical cases for only then can we fully appreciate that coercion is the natural order of things. It is academic freedom that is socially engineered.<sup>3</sup> The limits to academic freedom can, in the modern age, be seen to emerge most prominently in the early twentieth century

**Karen Eliot:** Yes, exactly. By 1915 the lateral relations of power had spread still further with the first report of the American Association of University Professors Commission on Academic Freedom and Tenure registering that cases where academic freedom had been delimited while once primarily associated with religion or science now appeared ever more prevalent in connection to the political and social sciences. Indeed, places for resistance shrink to the extent that certain subjects, such as philosophy, are said to be outside of the bounds of intellectual debate for social scientists because of their speculative nature – there could be no objective conclusions that ended debate and therefore the professors could only potentially open themselves up for criticism and potential disciplinary action by their employer. This was no empty threat. Among those disciplined in this manner were radical scholars such as Ely, Bemis, Commons, Pattern, Nearing and Adams. The excessive, abnormal individuals who attempted to stray beyond the proscribed limits were normalized and their intellectual course redirected along routes deemed safe. Hardly surprising but even Ely who was sheltered at the liberal University of Wisconsin relented from his ethical agenda and bracketed his researches into labour issues turning instead to more socially respectable studies of land economics and research for private utilities. Here it was much safer to avoid controversial topics or topics otherwise out of favour with those in positions of power than to engage in any form of speaking the truth to power or *parrhesia*.

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3 Menad, L. (1996) ‘The Limits of Academic Freedom’, in L. Menand (ed.) *The Future of Academic Freedom*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 3-20.

**Luther Blissett:** This is not an unrepresentative example. Nearing, then assistant professor of economics at Wharton was actively campaigned against by influential alumni because of his ‘radical teachings’. Radical in the sense that they did not conform to ‘sound’ economic theory as supported by the founder of the school – Joseph Wharton – and led to him being denied reappointment despite his colleagues’ protestations otherwise. In a similar vein Montana State University, a frequent violator of academic freedom, suspended Louis Levine, professor of economics after he had authored a manuscript on mine taxation that had aroused the ire of powerful interests in the local community. Our genealogy of discursive closure does not, unfortunately, end here. In 1937 another lamentable case and one that bears all the hallmarks of the academic unfreedom found throughout the McCarthyite era can be found. J.P. Rowe, a professor of geology, was widely known to have been critical of his institutions administration and the censorship of library books by either the board of trustees or the president. He was charged with supporting socialistic, communistic, and atheistic attitudes and vulgar discussion of sex matters. These were all examples of the limits placed on the seeable and sayable that would accelerate through the 1940s and 1950s where the Oath Controversy triggered by academics not only having to swear a constitutional oath but also one that affirmed that they were not members of the Communist Party or committed to the overthrow of the U.S. government as “a condition of my employment and a consideration of payment of my salary.”<sup>4</sup>

**Karen Eliot:** One final example will serve to hammer the point home. Speaking to Paul Lazarsfeld and Wagner Thielens in their magisterial study of academic freedom conducted during the 1950s, an economist currently teaching a course in Soviet Economics highlights the tension and pressures that were ever present: “Members of the administration sat in on the course – a charming idea! Good course, they said afterwards. I was never actually criticized, never anything actually wrong with my teaching. There was something wrong with the course – it didn’t damn communism enough. The president suggested to me that it wasn’t advisable to have the course just now. It didn’t look nice in the catalogue. It was dropped.”<sup>5</sup> Of course, the development of knowledge particularly within the business school and in the disciplines that we associate with this institution are only intelligible against the wider set of organized and organizing practices in which they themselves play a crucial role.

**Luther Blissett:** The production of knowledge does not liberate here; it serves to close down what can be said – at least from the sanctuary of the university. No longer sanctioned by this institution does it lose some of the credibility – I hesitate to say objectivity – but then this is probably something that continues to signal something beyond the ivory towers other than academic debates about positivism. We might preach otherness and solidarity for colleagues but do we often pause to reflect on the limited nature of the form of life in university and intellectual debate. I think not. See how wide ranging academic debate generally is; it is freedom within certain bounds. There are certain names and theories that we must repeat and recognize if our own speech acts are to be taken seriously by our peers. These are not necessarily the brand names that are associated in certain circles with philosophical faddism. They are those

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4 Stewart, G.R. (1950) *The Year of the Oath*. New York: Doubleday.

5 Lazarsfeld, P.F. and W. Thielens (1958) *The Academic Mind*. Illinois: The Free Press.

who are now well into their gerontology and who might not have full control over their own bodily organs still retain control over those ideation distribution outlets that cause research assessment committees the kind of sexual stimulation that they once gained from carnal activities and now extract from golf or rambling.

**Karen Eliot:** Perhaps now that such instances of the flagrant abuse and constriction of academic freedom are again on the rise, what we need to issue academics with is a version of an *Index Verborum Prohibitorum* in which all the dangerous terms and subject areas – that those who wish to retain their jobs in this most precarious academic labour market should not touch – are listed so that any possibility of transgressing the boundaries of what is or is not acceptable are clear for one and all.<sup>6</sup> But then I'm not a logical positivist and see no benefit to be had from closing down the already limited vocabulary that academics are conversant with especially at a time when we are only beginning to expand our way of looking at the world beyond a much too dominant Western, male, middle-class view.

**Luther Blissett:** Simply because our intellectual horizons appear to be expanding we should nevertheless remain cautious about the extent to which academic freedom always remains precarious; it is not simply during times of economic, political and social crisis that academic freedom can be called into question or otherwise subject to gradual elision. Here I could gesture towards the appointment strategies adopted in relation to the hiring and subsequent appointment to academic posts seen across university campuses. These may be the preserve of the selective choices of Vice Chancellors who like to hire old cronies; hypothetically speaking of course.

**Karen Eliot:** Whatever is the view of academic freedom that we might care to hold – usually in private – it seems clear that it is contingent in certain respects on those, and I am aware I am generalising horrendously, least fit to want to protect it. Where Deans, VCs and Chancellors are dependent on hand outs from well-heeled alumni or other important bodies – the case of Nottingham University and their willingness to take cash from the hand of death is perhaps the most blatant form of offering one's own intellectual and academic freedom in exchange for fifty pieces of silver (give or take three million or so) – what role does the academic freedom we lament play here? God only knows. Funny how none of the papers released by the International Centre for Corporate Social Responsibility have yet to look at the Tobacco industry<sup>7</sup> – or so said *Private Eye* in Issue 1133 last week. Are things getting better or are they worse? About the same as they have always been, I'd say.

**Luther Blissett:** Given that it has been cogently argued that academic freedom is most precarious when the regents of the university or those in the upper echelons of the institutional hierarchy are more conservative economically and politically than their staff members, I see only one long-term alternative, all those who want to contribute most effectively to thinking beyond thoughts on solidarity, organizing and academic freedom and move such discussion beyond its present, somewhat groundhog day status,

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6 Neurath, O. (1941) 'Universal Jargon and Terminology', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, XLI: 127-148.

7 [<http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/business/ICCSR/research/paperseries.html>]



is to join such bodies themselves and agitate from within. The alternative is too sad to consider.

**Karen Eliot:** Education in general and the university in particular are part of the web of domination and have to be destroyed if we are to be free. As technology, the systematic science of relating to the world through artifice, has developed, artificial knowledge has come to replace experiential knowledge. We 'learn' by reading or listening to the words of experts or performing a set of prescribed rituals called experiments in a totally artificial environment called a laboratory (and this only after we've taken in enough of the words of the experts). In fact, we are taught to believe that what we 'know' is what authority tells us is true and that this is more trustworthy than our own experience. So, the university is nothing more than an indoctrination centre for training us to accept authority and the dominant ideology. There may, indeed, be material in a university that can be used in the undermining of authority, but it has to be used in a way that utterly undermines the university itself, a way that counters the dominant ideology with the knowledge that comes from direct lived experience. And ultimately, that means destroying all universities and schools along with the rest of the web of domination.