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Israeli Counter-Intellectuals Take Aim at Academic Freedom

Gadi Taub - October 5, 2012 10:00 am

Here is one more thing in which Israel is imitating America: neocon tactics. American neocons think that American universities are overwhelmingly liberal, and so they have created alternatives in the form of think tanks designed to foster conservative thought. This, in itself, is not a bad thing. The Left often tends not only to preach to the converted, but also to argue only with the converted, and when one keeps only agreeable company, arguments tend to atrophy and criticism degenerates into self-righteousness. It has never been good for thought to go unchallenged.

But often such think tanks go so far in putting politics before inquiry that the thought they produce is crude, shrill, and smacks of dishonesty. Mark Lilla called such right-wing thinkers counter-intellectuals. A less-than-flattering term. When you put the cart before the horse, you may discover horses are not as good at pushing carts as they are at pulling them. Thought, too, is better at seeking political conclusions than it is at pushing a preconceived agenda.

Much the same thing has happened in Israel in recent decades. The Right has developed think tanks; groomed pundits, jurists, and journalists; and aspired in general to infiltrate what it sees as the left-leaning network of Israel's elites. Some of these efforts are honest and serious. But many are not. We have been provided with a plethora of counter-commentary, counter-demographic data, counter-essays, and counter-jurisprudence.

The Right's politicians have not only been facilitators of such trends, they have sometimes initiated them and extended their scope. They have attempted, with only partial success, to bend the judicial branch of government to the right (this is not simple in Israel, since the executive and legislative branches have very little influence on appointments to the judiciary). And they have, with much vigor, turned their attention to the ivory tower, which they consider a bastion of the Left. First, there was Ariel College. Ariel is a city-sized settlement in the West Bank, and it aspired to make its college a full-blown university, the first in the occupied territories. The goal was obviously political.

Israeli universities are largely publicly funded, so the question of political interference in academic affairs is always relevant. To prevent it, Israel created a body called the Council for Higher Education, which is supposed to distribute public funds while buffering against political pressures. One of its subcommittees considered the Ariel matter and decided that there was no academic justification for Ariel's request. Israel already has too many universities relative to the size of its population. Then the Council itself rejected the whole matter on grounds that it had no jurisdiction outside Israel (the occupied territories are not part of Israel proper, and the sovereign there is not the Knesset but the army). And so came into being a new creature: the Council for Higher Education in Judea and Samaria. It is not exactly clear how such a body is to be part of the military administration of the territories, but this did not deter its members. Rather than follow the original Council's practice and appoint an academically respectable international committee to consider the eligibility of the college for full research university status, it appointed politically minded right-wing professors, all of them Israeli, and invented its own criteria for university status, which, to no one's surprise, Ariel College successfully met. A petition has been submitted to the Supreme Court against this strange procedure, and the issue is now pending the court's decision.

But meddling in academic affairs did not stop there. Right-wing governments have decided to nip the whole alleged lefty conspiracy in the bud by appointing right-wingers and settlers to the Council for Higher Education itself (the Israeli one, not that of Judea and Samaria). Gideon Saar (Likud), Israel's Minister of Education, is both the chair of the Council and a central driving force behind the attempt to turn it into a political tool. And one of its latest endeavors is an attack on the Department of Politics and Government at Ben-Gurion University.

The department is not unproblematic. Some of its teachers have indeed turned their academic appointments into political pulpits of the extreme anti-Zionist Left. The former chair of the department, Professor Neve Gordon, has been disseminating propaganda against the right of the Jewish state to exist and has publicly called for an international boycott of all Israeli universities, his own included. I've written against Gordon in the Israeli press. I find his politics malicious and childish, and his abuse of his (tenured) position outrageous. I have also written, however, that he should be left alone by university authorities. Academic freedom is too precious to meddle with, even if Gordon used it against itself (boycotts are, in effect, an attempt to shut people up) and even if there are, arguably, disciplinary grounds to fire him (since he causes deliberate damage to the institution that pays his salary; a boycott would deprive the university of external funding, as well as isolate its scholars from the community of researchers). It would also be counterproductive to fire him, I argued, because it would turn him into martyr. Folly should be countered with argument, not disciplinary measures. The university, apparently, thought so too, and he still teaches there.

But not so Israel's new breed of counter-intellectuals, who are now threatening to shut him and his colleagues up. The affair began with an evaluation committee that was asked to review the department. This is standard procedure. All academic departments in Israel are periodically subject to this process. Such committees are carefully appointed to be balanced and serious, and they are composed mainly of foreign scholars to prevent any conflict of interests. And such too was the committee asked to review the Department of Politics and Government. The report it produced was harsh. It took care not to meddle in political arguments but it did say that there was an imbalance—described as methodological—in the department, and that it should be closed down unless it became more methodologically diverse in its hiring and course offerings. Ben-Gurion University complied, as it should have, to the satisfaction of the chair of the evaluation committee.

But then the Council for Higher Education, with its new right-wing appointees, decided that Ben-Gurion University's compliance fell short. A sub-committee of the Council has now recommended that no new students be allowed to enroll for study in the department, effectively a recommendation to close it down.

It is not likely that this will actually take place. The move began on the basis of the evaluation committee's report, and it is not likely to conclude against that committee's professional opinion. Even if the Council for Higher Education tries to force the department's closure, an appeal to the Supreme Court is likely to overturn its decision. But it is likely that what these counter-intellectuals hope to achieve goes beyond Ben-Gurion's Department of Politics. They aim, it seems, to threaten all departments into curbing academic freedom.

This is both alarming and short sighted. The damage done to thought and research by political meddling can be devastating, whichever side of the political spectrum it comes from. It can be devastating when self-proclaimed radicals indulge in infantile provocations and try to indoctrinate students rather than teach them. But it is exponentially more devastating when government itself intervenes. Government cannot let itself be as childish, and should not bite the bait. Neve Gordon's threat to academic freedom is minor. The government's is major.

But Likud, it seems, is still in its long adolescence. After more than a quarter of a century of more or less continuous rule, it still behaves as if the institutions and traditions of Israeli democracy belong to Mom and Dad—Labor Zionism—and it is Likud's business to rebel against them. Israeli counter-intellectualism is different from its American counterpart in this: it does not have that air of self-importance and it is not trying to simulate the posture of a responsible adult. True, it shares the neocon paranoia and shrill tones, but it also has a glint of mischief in its eye, and treats the state like teenagers would treat the home when their parents are gone.

But the parents really are gone. And Likud really is in charge. And its counter-intellectualism is, in this case as in so many others, counter-productive and highly damaging to Israel in an age of delegitimization.

But above all political and tactical questions, there is a matter of principle here. Even if academic freedom itself is not, for now, seriously threatened, and the Department of Politics will survive, as I think it will, Likud's attempts to gain political leverage over academic life should be resisted, and academics should raise a clear cry of protest. If this is to be a precedent, it should be one that teaches politicians that academia will resist any attempt at political control.

[Israel, academic freedom, Ben-Gurion University, Neve Gordon](#)

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