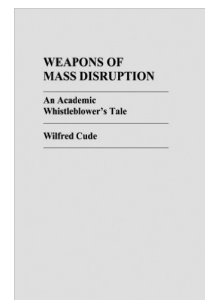


Scholarship vs academia

***Weapons of Mass Disruption: An Academic Whistleblower's Tale* by Wilfred Cude.**

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Reviewed by Brian Martin



Wilfred Cude's life provides a model for maintaining scholarly integrity after being treated badly in the academic system.

In the 1970s, Cude had a promising career ahead. He was completing his PhD in English literature, with a focus on Canadian literature, at the University of Alberta. He had earlier completed all the required coursework and exams with excellent marks. While working on his thesis, he published a series of articles, based on chapters in the thesis, in leading Canadian literary journals, a signal achievement for a student; many established academics could not claim an equivalent record any time in their career. With years of experience and peer acknowledgement as a dedicated and effective teacher, Cude anticipated finding a permanent academic post before long.

But there was an obstacle: his thesis supervisor, who was tardy in commenting on Cude's work and who then unexpectedly demanded major changes. Over time, it became apparent that Cude's supervisor would not accept his work unless it was rewritten into a completely different framework, excluding his best published work. Cude had challenged local intellectual orthodoxies, and this could not be allowed. Another factor was probably what Ken Westhues, Canadian analyst of academic mobbing, calls 'the envy of excellence' (Westhues, 2005).

Cude was ABD, all but dissertation, and this meant his job prospects were limited. However, even as he struggled with his supervisor and mounted appeals within the University of Alberta, he was able to obtain a two-year contract position at Concordia University, being appointed over candidates holding doctorates. In his application, Cude had laid out his apparently terminal difficulties in obtaining his PhD. Arriving at the university to begin work, he sought out the chair of the appointment committee and asked why he had got the job. The chair said that in the meeting of the three members of the committee, he had said that he himself was nearly in Cude's position, and had only received his PhD with difficulty after resistance from his doctoral committee.

Much to his astonishment, each of the others in turn confessed to virtually the same experience: each had his doctoral program gravely compromised through some entanglement with the supervisory committee, and each had survived the ordeal only through an extraordinary struggle and a significant measure of good luck. (p. 197)

For Cude, this was one more piece of evidence that his difficulties were part of a wider dysfunctional pattern in North American doctoral studies.

Cude pursued his doctorate with vigour. He finished his thesis and, to put pressure on his committee, submitted it for publication. When it was published by a university press (Cude, 1980), it received praise from most reviewers, including from leaders in the field. However, this was not enough to sway his opponents in the English Department at the University of Alberta. Not coincidentally, the one vicious review of his book was by one of those opponents.

Cude went on to a life as a lowly paid sessional academic, taking on whatever work he could obtain at nearby universities. Meanwhile, he continued his studies and publications in Canadian literature, and took up another strand of investigation: toxic effects of the North American doctoral system, especially in the humanities. Collecting evidence of long completion times and a high percentage of dropouts, Cude wrote a book titled *The Ph.D. Trap*, which garnered praise and publicity (Cude, 1987).

His writings about problems in higher education led others to contact him and tell about their own struggles. Cude became a magnet for information from dissatisfied scholars, many with stories similar to his own. His experience shows the value of writing about one's own travails in a way that can help others to make sense of their own experiences.

So great was the response to *The Ph.D. Trap* that Cude was encouraged to prepare a revised and greatly expanded version, *The Ph.D. Trap Revisited* (Cude, 2001), which I reviewed earlier (Martin, 2001). He and I have been in correspondence for many years, so I am hardly

a neutral evaluator of his work. His ideas also receive visibility through YouTube.

More recently, Cude has written another book, *Weapons of Mass Disruption: An Academic Whistleblower's Story*, self-published in 2014. It is a type of scholarly autobiography, giving Cude's background, including a stimulating time in the military and then the Royal Military College, then the sorry story of his treatment at the University of Alberta as well as a later appointment saga at St. Francis Xavier University (CAUT, 1997). Some of the passages can be gut-wrenching for anyone who has encountered malevolent academic gatekeepers:

Then it hit, nearly with the impact of a physical blow. A package in the mail, innocuous enough in appearance, the first two chapters of my thesis returned to me with comments from my supervisor. I opened the package and started to read, initially in a casual fashion, then gradually more intently, my mind numbing in anguish and disbelief. Page after page was scrawled with pencilled comments, all negative, most combative, and some downright nasty. The total impression was one of thoroughgoing rejection, with the material manhandled in the manner of an abrasive senior professor dismissing an inferior freshman submission with well-deserved contempt (pp. 11-12).

Most scholarly autobiographies, and biographies too, are written by or about the winners, those who rose among their colleagues to positions of status and influence, applauded by their peers, promoted by their employers and welcomed into prestigious academies. These accounts give a one-sided view of academic life, because for every such star there are many hard-working academics with satisfying careers, as well as many more who are even less visible: those ejected from the academy. Few of the rejects want to tell their stories, understandably so. Who wants to tell about failure? Cude is hardly a typical dropout, but even so he speaks on behalf of an experience of academia that is seldom articulated.

In one part of *Weapons of Mass Disruption*, Cude tells about building a small house in the Cape Breton woods for his growing family. He had little money and undeveloped building skills, but needed the house for survival. He tells of his struggles and mistakes and of the unsolicited help he received from nearby residents, some of whom were highly knowledgeable and knew just what to do to help him in practical terms and in improving his skills.

At first I thought this house-building episode was a diversion from the main narrative about Canadian academia, until I reflected on a contrast implicit in the story. On the one hand, in a rural setting, neighbours generously helped a novice out of a sense of sympathy and solidarity – and they became Cude's friends. On the other hand was academic life, characterised by competition and lack of mutual support. The contrast was stark. In the Cape Breton woods, mutual help and friendship arose spontaneously. In Canadian academia, mutual help and friendship could develop, but required careful cultivation in the face of ruthless one-upmanship and intolerance of dissent.

Despite his marginal position academically, Cude had a satisfying, indeed stimulating, career, being a more productive scholar than many of those who blocked his PhD. His story provides a reminder that it is important to savour the journey, and those who accompany you on it, and to seek causes with meaning.

Unfortunately, many of the problems in academia highlighted by Cude remain. The system has a momentum that is hard to counter. If there is a takeaway message, it is not to put all your identity into becoming or being an academic. There are principles of fairness and solidarity that are ultimately more important than success in climbing the ladder. There is indeed a scholarly community, but it is not identical to the body of academics.

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