

The Psychological and Biosocial Consequences of Academic Suppression

R. M. FRUMKIN

In the classic WHITE COLLAR, C. Wright Mills made the unfriendly comment that "Men of brilliance, energy, and imagination are not often attracted to college teaching," and that colleges do not get their fair share of the best brains.¹ After having spent more than 20 years as a college professor, I am inclined to agree with Mills. with few exceptions whom we can call 'academic outcasts'. As a whole I characterize them as all those things Mills says most academic perennial professors are not, that is, brilliant, energetic, imaginative, and somethings Mills did not mention, namely, fiercely independent, satirical, downright courageous, and often very witty. They are the gadflies whom Philistine college presidents find ready targets for their Procrustean frustration. They are the teachers who make rather dull campuses lively, exciting and meaningful. The saga of a few such professors who have experienced academic suppression in recent years in the United States will be recorded in this paper.

In 1980 Dr. Robert Dyal, tenured professor of philosophy at Kent State University for 11 years, took a leave of absence. Anticipating that he might never return to Kent State, in an eloquent letter to *The Daily Kent Stater*, the student newspaper, Dyal in a cry of anguish stated: "I lament, to be a faculty member at Kent State is to live with a broken heart." Mimicking the fictional anchorman in the film *Network*, Dyal said; "I'm mad as hell and I'm not gonna take it anymore."²

Dyal's cry of anguish is from a person who was not denied tenure, not dismissed from a tenured position, and had not experienced the hellish aftermath of what is essentially academic blacklisting.

Imagine then the extent to which anguish and broken hearts may be the burden of the academic outcasts who roam the world today. We wish to review here some of the personal reactions, the social psychological and biosocial consequences of what such outcasts have experienced and are experiencing. Since I am one of those outcasts, I will include my experiences as well³.

1. WAYNE HIELD, sociologist, social activist, free love advocate, anti-McCarthyism leader, denied tenure at the University of Buffalo. The

stress associated with his blacklisting I feel contributed to his developing multiple sclerosis and to his premature death.⁴

2. ROY LICHTENSTEIN, artist and art professor, denied tenure at the Oswego State College in New York. His satirical humor and wit was never fully appreciated at Oswego. Fortunately for the world he left academia and now is known the world over as one of the great top artists.

3. JOHN CHARLES KOKEN, mathematics professor, also denied tenure at the Oswego State College. This brilliant man was a social activist with the kind of razor sharp satirical wit which caused administrators to take cover every time he opened his mouth. After leaving Oswego, the trauma of tenure denial led, in part, to his divorcing his wife, and the early onset of heart disease. He died in obscurity, after holding several low level jobs in community colleges (two-year colleges).

4. F. JOSEPH SMITH, music and philosophy professor, dismissed from his tenured professorship at Kent State University. Smith is a brilliant renaissance man who was a union organizer, peace activist, and critic of academic fraud on campus. Like the late Koken, he has a satirical wit and facility with words which caused timid college administrators to run for cover. Since his illegal dismissal in 1973, he has not held a full-time job. Like so many academic outcasts, he and his family survive on part-time jobs and there is a daily struggle to take care of basic necessities. The stress associated with his dismissal and his relentless efforts for redress, it is believed, have led to severe psychosomatic ailments in his wife and the stillbirth of his only son. Smith has also suffered from psychosomatic and psychological problems stemming from these many years without a normal job and income security. His two young daughters, it seems to me, have also been psychologically damaged by living in a family atmosphere continually under stress. Although Smith continues some of his former scholarly activities outside of academia, it is said that hundreds of students have been deprived of his teaching and inspiration.⁵

5. ANGELA DAVIS, social activist, has never been granted tenure at an American university or college, although she has held nontenured, adjunct positions at several colleges. This brilliant, eloquent, vivacious leader of the Communist Party of the USA, author of popular books on social issues, is just too much of a threat to the status quo in stodgy American colleges and universities. Like Lichtenstein, however, she has done well without a full-time, tenured position in academia.⁶

The above persons are but a few of the many academic outcasts I personally have had some contact with.

I guess that the most common psychological consequence of intellectual suppression which results in expulsion from the academic world is depression. It is the type of depression which is similar to that experienced following the death of a loved one. In this case the dead loved one is the *Academic self*. There are very few professions in which the ego is so inextricably woven into work as that of the committed academic. The academic life is not tied to

the clock. It is not a 9—5, weekdays only type of work routine. Committed academics' *whole* lives are ubiquitously involved with ideas, books, journals notes, data, endless scholarly adventures, an obsessive need to know, and an insatiable curiosity. I have known spouses so jealous of their academic mate's involvement with scholarly projects that they (the spouses) have voiced the idea that they feel it might have been easier for them to deal with an adulterous spouse than a scholarly one.

Academics forced to give up the work they love consequently often go through four of the five stages which Elisabeth Kubler-Ross describes when examining the terminally ill who have learned the truth about their condition. That is, they first experience *denial* as expressed in the idea that this can't be happening to them. Second, they feel much *anger* and ask "Why me?" Third, they attempt *bargaining* with their enemies, asking: "Let me stay on just another semester. Give me time to find a new job." They never feel ready to leave and literally often have to be forcibly removed from their offices which have served as a kind of home away from home. Once leaving the university, there is the *depression* which follows the anxiety engendered by the loss of the academic self and best exemplified in that special office crowded with myriads of books, journals, papers, data, and indelible memories. "How can I give all that up? Now I have nothing; I am nothing", the outcast might be thinking and feeling. The final stage is one which academic outcasts rarely reach, the stage of *acceptance*, that is, being able to say and feel "It's all O.K. I can find a new life in some other work."⁷ Although this is a healthy attitude, not too many make the successful transition and change their life goals. Lichtenstein made a sensational shift and success was his great fortune. But most others I know about have been much less fortunate. The stress associated with Morris Starsky's struggle for redress and getting another job in all probability had much to do with his developing heart disease prematurely.⁸ He was dismissed from his tenured job as assistant professor of philosophy at Arizona State University in 1970 and he is still in the process of seeking full redress, if such a thing is humanly possible. How, one might ask, and this applies to most victims of intellectual suppression, does one obtain redress for health and family ties destroyed? There can never be, in the best of all worlds, full redress for the damage done to such persons' lives.

While visiting a hospital several years ago I was walking down a corridor and saw a middle-aged man in housekeeping (custodial) clothes mopping the floor and looking rather pensive and detached. I said to myself: "I know that man." And indeed I did. He had been a former colleague of mine who was one of those victims of intellectual suppression who never made it back to an academic or any decent job. I reluctantly asked him: "Why this work?" His answer was straightforward and to the point: "I've got to eat and pay my rent. I've got to survive." His image still haunts me like some persistent, restless ghost.

That encounter made me angry as hell. If he had been the same scholar

in Japan he might have been declared a "Living National Treasure." The Japanese people honor their gifted people. They don't unwittingly or consciously destroy them as we often do in the USA.

For each of us, the loss of some part of university life is like the loss of a limb and more. For me, the loss of my library carrel is such a personal loss. That small, private room hidden in the bowels of the huge library was like a womb—a place of peace and quiet and refuge. There was no telephone there, no knocks on the door; no intrusions into the thought one might be in the midst of.

And then there were the students with whom I worked on theses and dissertations. Those were special adventures with special people and extraordinary priceless satisfactions.

Most of all I miss the teaching/learning process in the advanced graduate seminars. Each encounter was a challenge which engaged the best in all of us.

I have been away from university life, as I knew it back at Kent State (1967-1975) for some 12 years, I was, I readily admit, spoiled by that academic lifestyle. There I had the time and energy to do all the things I really loved to do—teaching, research, clinical practice, and publishing, as well as having time to enjoy extracurricular sports, music, and artwork, and even a rich personal social life. I have never fully accepted the fact that I am blacklisted from teaching full-time in an accredited college or university in the USA. Unfortunately, I have been too rigid in not focusing my energies into a new career away from academia as some other have done. For example, Staughton Lynd, the able historian dismissed from Yale University for his anti-Vietnam War activities, went to law school and is now a successful labor lawyer. Katherine van Wormer, former sociologist and criminologist, not wasting a minute after being denied tenure at Kent State, went to social work school and is now a social worker⁹. After 12 years I am still, as I know many others in my situation are, not ready to bury the academic self and begin a new non-academic career. It's a funny thing. Doing this essay makes me for the first time (since 1975) able to think that now I am finally ready to look into preparation for and involvement in a new career even though I'm getting very close to the general retirement age. I am now almost ready and looking forward to burying my academic self and starting a new. May be, therefore, the important lesson of this paper is that the victims of academic suppression must be quicker than I have been to bury the academic self and begin a better life in something far from academia. It is the more sane and practical thing to do in a society where talented maverick scholar/professors are not regarded as *living national treasures*. □

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