

PLATO AS THE POST-1960S STUDENT: RANCOURT'S ONLY CHANCE?

BY: DENIS G. RANCOURT

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MY CASE—which is best documented at <http://academicfreedom.ca>—leaves few conscious students indifferent. Students either vehemently want me to go away or care about my case and side with me against the administration. Both reactions are based on an understanding of the facts: students who oppose me understand that I threaten their comfort as they aspire to integrate into the system; students who side with me understand that I fight with them against our common oppressor – institutional hierarchy, administrative control of our lives, and undemocratic rule.

I am gambling that a meaningless life of servitude is not enough for some of us, irrespective of the perks and brown-nosed social status that come with it. I am gambling that enough students and citizens want to be in charge of their lives, want to own their personal influence on the community and society, and want a full political dimension outside of management by manufactured representation. I am gambling my profession on it.

A meaningless life of servitude was not enough on campuses in the 1960s. In those days, students fought and won. They repealed *in loco parentis*. They defeated trespass laws to win freedom of speech. They won representatives on every committee and council up to and including the Senate and Board. In the 1960s students kicked ass because they wanted to be alive rather than be treated like barn animals watching PowerPoint presentations. YouTube “Mario Savio” to open a small window into what I mean: “Beneath the cobblestones there is the beach” meant something.

Then came the long sleep as increasingly globalized and corporatized universities clawed back the gains with codes of conduct, ever increasing tests and deadlines, ever increasing tuition fees, professors hired for their corporate ties, politician presidents, etc. And, now, trespass to property is back and used against student demonstrators across the country – UBC, U of T, York, Ottawa...

Now the administration *tells* the SFUO who the student reps on committees can and cannot be, and the SFUO lies down and dies because it does not stand for anything. Student unions are now federations and associations that manage services and educational campaigns rather than being the cutting edges of student power that they could be. SFUO

executives could start with one simple rule: “No more secret meetings with the administration behind closed doors. Period.” Everything open, recorded, and transparent.

On the professorial side, it is a measure of the state of affairs and of the present state of academic freedom, when a university administration judges that it can fire a full and tenured dissident professor using a pretext as bold as high grades in one course. My case is one that all university administrations are following with interest: “Can we now cleanse the campus of dissidents and radicals?” Welcome to Sterile U where all the answers are in the PowerPoint slides, where discourse is forbidden, and where *that* is not in the syllabus.

So-called radical professors who promote radical thinking are the top-end neutralizers of activist students. They teach that the pen is mightier than the sword, and that problems are solved by good ideas, and other such nonsense that distances the service intellectuals of tomorrow from anything that would threaten power. My practice is one of liberation, not one of constructing mental prisons for the castrated priests who will serve hierarchies. I am an anarchist. I seek to press the pyramid down into a more horizontal shape, by any means, starting in the classroom.

In the classroom, I give up my power by giving up the grade. The only way to precipitate independent thinking is to give freedom. Students who are preoccupied with reading my mind or with regurgitating on command for a grade distance themselves from themselves; from even the most basic ability to know when they do not understand something. It is to remove a student's humanity to reduce him or her to a trained parrot and to an obedient slave, no matter how “progressive” the ideas are.

Go to academicfreedom.ca and read the more than seventy-five letters from former students about my pedagogical experiments and the impacts on students' lives. Then contrast these testimonies with the administration's zeal to fire me. It does not make any sense – until you recognize that it is not about education. It is about control, external power, class privilege, and an emperor who has no clothes.

Like Socrates, I have worked hard for my hemlock. Plato watched and was silent but Plato had not seen the 1960s. What part will you play? Start your education. Reject the syllabus. ☹