



## A Greenhouse of Dirty Knowledge

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Currently, academic workers in higher education confront a plethora of problems. We contend with diminishing public investment in education and its consequences: soaring tuition and outrageous student debt rates. As the number of tenure & tenure-track faculty positions plummets, increasing numbers of contingent academic workers attempt to keep body and soul together, often teaching course loads double or triple that of their tenure-track colleagues for a fraction of the salary on contracts that sometimes arrive well into the semester and can be revoked at any time.

Simultaneously, a profusion of well-compensated administrators, intent on justifying their fat salaries, insist on aligning academic labor with marketplace expectations, hoping to placate corporations and politicians that often seem disinterested, at best, in the fate of the colleges and universities in their communities. Ever-more arcane and time-consuming assessment protocols add to faculty workloads in a desperate attempt by administrators to prove that universities are, in fact, productive in corporate terms.

As if all of this were not enough, a seemingly endless campaign by far-right operatives around questions of "free speech" frames campuses as out of touch "wokeocracies" that brainwash students and endanger First Amendment protections in some imaginary regime of "political correctness." AstroTurf-ed student groups such as Turning Point USA bring far right provocateurs like Ben Shapiro and Milo Yiannopoulos to speak on campuses, provoking protest by students, faculty, and community members. Professing their commitment to "freedom of speech," administrators often respond to these events by ramping up policing. Deployed in the name of civility to maintain "order," police tend to focus their efforts more on the protesters than on the well-paid, divisive speakers. While seemingly disparate, these appearances and the conflicts they provoke are part of the broad far-right assault on higher education, public institutions in particular.

In response to such crises, some universities and state legislatures have advocated for "free speech" regulations such as the University of Wisconsin Board of Regents' ["Commitment to Academic Freedom and Freedom of Expression Policies,"](#) which

conflate academic freedom with freedom of speech. In 2019, for example, a student on the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee campus took a sign emblazoned with a swastika from the man holding it and destroyed it. She was [subsequently accused](#) of interfering in this individual's right to "free expression." Academic workers who speak out against the speakers or other provocations presented by far-right operatives can be targeted for harassment and sometimes dismissal, particularly if they hold contingent positions.

Julia Schleck's *Dirty Knowledge: Academic Freedom in the Age of Neoliberalism* emerges from one such infamous conflict.<sup>1</sup> In 2017, Courtney Lawton, a graduate instructor at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, lost her job after a much-publicized conflict with Turning Point USA operatives on campus. Their heated exchange generated viral images that were immediately disseminated as part of a politically orchestrated firestorm of pressure on university administrators, who ultimately dismissed Lawton from her contingent employment in the English Department. They claimed that she had been "uncivil" in her conduct. Ultimately, this action by the university resulted in [sanction](#) by the AAUP after an investigation "found that UNL may have violated principles of academic freedom in suspending and failing to reinstate Ms. Courtney Lawton from her teaching responsibilities." (The AAUP lifted sanctions in 2021.) As a contingent worker, Lawton had the support of AAUP, but few protections when it came to keeping her job.

The book emerges out of conflicts over "free expression" like the one that took place at the University of Nebraska. In this response to it, I will outline the important contribution of this slim volume and then examine critically Schleck's prescriptions for the crisis confronting faculty.

Schleck wastes no time in expertly dissecting the differences between free speech and academic freedom, terms often confused by campus administrations and state legislatures. Academic freedom, she clarifies, is unlike freedom of speech, in that it is a collective, not an individual right. As Joan Scott famously explains, academic freedom constitutes the collective processes of peer review to establish what is true and valuable.<sup>2</sup> Defenses of academic freedom protect these collaborative operations; Eva Cherniavsky notes that "academic freedom is the expression of the faculty's collective power to differentially assess the merit of ideas."<sup>3</sup>

Schleck argues that battles over "freedom of expression" like the one in Nebraska constitute struggles over the labor conditions of faculty. Drawing on Wendy Brown's characterization of neoliberalism as the widespread application of market-based logic and language to public institutions, she elaborates the ways that increased contingency among academic workers erodes the collective protections of academic freedom, posing

it instead as an individual right like freedom of speech. Viewed through Schleck's apt framework, Lawton's case becomes a neoliberal spectacle of precarity, meant to advise contingent workers of the dangers of extramural expression.

This is an important formulation. Schleck writes: "The real threat to academic freedom is not the interference of morally outraged conservative politicians insisting on the unequal assertion of free speech rights on campus. The real threat to academic freedom is contractual, economic, and woven into the very structure of contemporary American higher education" (14). Limning the advent of this threat, Schleck describes the ways that universities have lost the public trust as providers of the common good so crucial to defenses of academic freedom such as the [AAUP's 1940 Statement on Academic Freedom and Tenure](#).

Schleck ably traces a neoliberal predicament that has led to public disinvestment in higher education. The public subsidizes the university through taxes, pays for products invented there through corporate and federal contracts, and, particularly in the past two or three decades, confronts rapidly escalating tuition and related debt for their own educations. As tuition skyrockets and right-wing provocateurs deride the universities, many people question the idea that higher education serves the public good at all.

While this formulation is incisive, Schleck chooses not to discuss the long, political campaign against public institutions so well documented in recent works, such as Nancy MacLean's *Democracy in Chains: The Deep History of the Radical Right's Stealth Plan for America* and Jane Mayer's *Dark Money: The Hidden History of the Billionaires behind the Radical Right*.<sup>4</sup> As these works make clear, academic workers are not the only ones with a collaborative project. Aware that simply closing public institutions like universities and schools would be unpopular, far-right operatives such as the Koch brothers have long worked to undermine the basis for their support. The advent of the neoliberal era of public defunding and administrative bloat is part of a long, very well-funded campaign by the far right: it is political.

Schleck delineates how the neoliberal era has meant the imposition of market standards of productivity and worth onto academic labor, as well as the unending search for a cheaper and more flexible labor force. As this regime erodes the vital collective functioning of tenure and faculty governance, a contingent workforce labors at the will of administrators. Increased contingency in the academic labor force is an administrator's dream of cost-saving, right-on-time instruction. In terms of academic freedom, it's a nightmare.

Contingent faculty teach without the benefit of tenure and its protections. While they publish within the peer review system and are often evaluated in their teaching by other faculty members, their peers can do little in terms of protecting them or increasing their job security. To the extent that contingent academic workers have access to academic freedom, it can only be construed, Schleck argues, as an individual right. Lacking the collective protections of tenure and faculty governance, the individual rights of precarious faculty are fungible. Living short-term contract to short-term contract undermines the collective academic freedom of faculty.

This is one of this book's key insights: the current transformation of academic freedom from a collective to an individual right. This metamorphosis is the source of the frequent conflation of academic freedom with freedom of speech, or in the University of Wisconsin Board of Regents' inventive formulation: "freedom of expression." Outside of corporations, which are construed as individuals through a peculiar interpretation of the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment to the US constitution, the perpetrators of neoliberal capitalism despise nothing more than the prospect of collectivity.

With the advent of the neoliberal regime on campus comes a shift from knowledge production to economic production. Faced with declining public support, administrators are eager to claim that the university aids the economy by inventing products and educating workers. Lost is the idea of researchers pursuing the lofty goal of knowledge for its own sake, one of the bases of the idea of academic freedom.

Schleck argues that the premise that the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake benefits the "public good" has been key to the defense of the university against the onslaught of the current, neoliberal regime. But, for the reasons she outlines, this rhetoric no longer serves. There are monsters at the university gates, in terms of far-right challengers bent on defunding and destroying higher education as well as increasing public skepticism about its ability to contribute to the public good. Some of the monsters, neoliberal administrators responsive more to cost savings than to educational imperatives, are inside the walls, flourishing at a time of widespread austerity and loss.

So, what is to be done?

As her title advertises, Schleck advocates dispensing with the notion that knowledge can ever be impartial. Instead, she advocates the embrace of "dirty," partisan knowledge, thriving in the unique arena of the university. She writes: "conceiving of the university as an arena for fierce contention over what questions are best to be researched and taught enjoys the singular advantage of being an accurate description of the university"

(203). To Schleck, this idea of “dirty knowledge” should replace prior conceptions of academic freedom as the impartial pursuit of truth for its own sake.

Along with replacing the idea of the search for pure truth with “dirty knowledge,” Schleck argues, would come a necessary relinquishing of the “public good” mission of the university. She contends that the advent of postmodernism and the insurgent, diverse knowledges that have been imported to campus from movements for racial, gender, sexual, and economic justice since the 1970s have largely discredited the idea of “pure knowledge.” Further, she contends, the “public good” mission of the university is “profoundly antidemocratic” (96), and that it implies that those lacking the benefits of higher education are unqualified for participation in democracy.

Ironically, the problems with Schleck’s diagnosis here emanate from her disinclination to imagine collectivity. If the neoliberal regime undermines academic freedom as a collective right, then it would seem paramount to reclaim a sense of collective purpose in combatting it. For one thing, while postmodern theory and insurgent knowledges showed up at the university at roughly the same time and work in a complementary way in some scholarship, they are not the same thing. And, while postmodern theory certainly undermines the very notion of “pure knowledge,” is it so difficult to imagine an intersectional, democratic rhetoric of the public good?

Further, while she expresses some support for faculty unionization as the force most likely to combat the increasing contingency of the academic labor force, Schleck evinces little faith that unionized faculty will be able to provide “the broader vision of the university in society that is ultimately needed to justify the special employment protections for which unions fight” (84). Arguing against AAUP lion Henry Reichman’s *The Future of Academic Freedom* (2019) as well as the [historic 2022 affiliation](#) between the American Federation of Teachers and the AAUP, Schleck sees unionization as only a partial fix, unlikely to inspire and guide higher education through and beyond the twenty-first century. She provides little in the way of historical analysis about the failures of academic unions, simply asserting with some confidence that they are not up to the task of reimagining and defending academic freedom.

While brilliant in its elaboration of the current, collective predicament of academic workers, this book stalls at the critical task of finding a way out. Because Schleck does not frame the advent of neoliberalism in higher education in a broad historical context, she loses footing that could have pointed to the way forward. Far from being limited to this book, the tendency of much scholarship on academia is to consider the university in isolation. Our own predicament preoccupies us.

But “the Age of Neoliberalism” is a global epoch, a phase of the regime of global racial capitalism that began in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. The storms currently affecting academic freedom take place within universities, but they pick up momentum elsewhere, and their effects are felt well beyond campus. In *Democracy in Chains*, MacLean explains that the current assault on education is part of a long campaign against the mid-twentieth century victories of the Civil Rights Movement. Through MacLean’s lens, the advent of city managers who implement the cost saving measures leading to toxic water supplies in majority Black cities like Jackson and Lansing is connected to the defunding of public education, kindergarten through PhD. Public disdain for higher education has been produced by the forces Schleck limns, but it is also part of a broader, collective project by the far right. The storms of neoliberalism wreak havoc on public institutions and structures of democracy, but the connection between them is only evident with a broad historical framework.

Outside the university, labor contingency is nothing new. Twentieth century histories of agricultural and warehouse labor, for example, resound with Schleck’s excellent description of the contemporary university: “It is the nature of neoliberal, ‘just-in-time’ capitalism to generate a body of laborers who can be dismissed at the precise moment the system requires their labor and be rehired at a moment of need” (61-62). This is also an excellent description of the “gig economy.”

My point here is not that Schleck should have written a different history, but that by confining her investigation to the university she misses out on some resources that could have informed her search for a better response to it. The neoliberal university is part of a broader constellation of global racial capitalism; faculty can learn from and seek solidarity with movements beyond its walls.

As S. Ani Mukherji and I argue in our introduction to the 2021 edition of *The Journal of Academic Freedom*, academic freedom struggles are and must be intrinsically related to broader freedom struggles.<sup>5</sup> Just as faculty labor contingency undermines the foundations of academic freedom, converting it from a collective to a flimsy individual right, this assault is part of a broader attack on movements for justice. It is no accident that the inflammatory, far-right speakers discussed above have a now too-familiar agenda condemning struggles for transgender rights, for racial and gender justice. Neither is it coincidental that the moral panic about Critical Race Theory comes after the largest civil rights mobilizations in U.S. history during the summer of 2020, or that it targets departments and programs that emerged out of student and community activism. Successful responses to this powerful assault must be collective. Rather than abandoning the rhetoric of the public good, we must collectively reimagine it. “Practices of academic freedom,” we write, “emerge out of political struggle.”

Instead, Schleck draws on her idea of the university as an arena of competing ideas to develop an image of higher education as a “seed bank.” Lyrically, she writes: “The forms of life represented by university disciplines produces both the dirty knowledge of today and store in their cool depths the varied seeds that will be necessary to feed the world in the future” (80). This imaginative notion is another version of the “public good” argument.

But what is a seed bank and how might it resist the neoliberal storm? For one thing, a seed bank is a kind of archive, with the attendant questions about the politics of collection, maintenance, and access. As historian Frieda Knobloch writes about the archives of the US Department of Agriculture, the “archive represents the fantasy of empire, the unrealizable goal of comprehensive control and uninterrupted progress.”<sup>6</sup> Like archives, a seed bank can be a site of occupation and control, a place where collaborative thought and collective organizing are deracinated and destroyed.

But perhaps Schleck’s metaphor can lead us in another direction. Like Schleck, revolutionary theorist Amilcar Cabral favored botanical metaphor. He wrote: “Culture contains the seed of opposition, becoming the flower of liberation.”<sup>7</sup>

A repository for growing and nurturing such seeds would indeed be most useful to contemporary university faculty. A greenhouse of collective resistance, it would be a site for collaboration between academic and non-academic workers. There, the soils of myriad knowledges, forged within and beyond the university, could foster a rich proliferation of blooms. Perhaps it could be located off-campus, somewhere that faculty and others could walk to.

As Davarian Baldwin contends, the neoliberal university currently strips resources from the most vulnerable communities, extracting from rather than adding to the public good.<sup>8</sup> Just as the consumption of leafy greens helps to combat lead ingested from scantily regulated paints, a greenhouse of collective resistance could be the site for reconsidering and refiguring the university’s contribution to the public good. It could be a sanctuary for academic freedom, for scholars and students at risk; it could be a resource hub for communities in need, including faculty, a place of exchange, a site of envisioning our collective future.

This way forward is not easy. It requires academic workers to venture off campus, to consider our struggles in broader terms, to organize with people whose problems and languages are different from our own. But it is the only way to recover a meaningful academic freedom.

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<sup>1</sup> Julia Schleck, *Dirty Knowledge: Academic Freedom in the Age of Neoliberalism* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2022). Subsequent references to this book will be cited parenthetically.

<sup>2</sup> Joan Wallach Scott, *Knowledge, Power, and Academic Freedom* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019).

<sup>3</sup> Eva Cherniavsky, “Against the Common Sense: Academic Freedom as Collective Right,” *AAUP Journal Of Academic Freedom* 12 (2021): <https://www.aaup.org/sites/default/files/Cherniavsky-.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> Nancy MacLean, *Democracy in Chains: The Deep History of the Radical Right’s Stealth Plan for America* (New York: Viking, 2017); Jane Mayer *Dark Money: The Hidden History of the Billionaires Behind the Radical Right* (New York: Anchor Books, 2017).

<sup>5</sup> Rachel Ida Buff and S. Ani Mukherji, “Editor’s Introduction,” *AAUP Journal of Academic Freedom* 12 (2021): <https://www.aaup.org/JAF12/editors-introduction#.Y1wMZozMJll>.

<sup>6</sup> Frieda Knobloch, *The Culture of Wilderness: Agriculture as Colonization in the American West* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), pp. 153-154.

<sup>7</sup> Amilcar Cabral, “National Liberation and Culture (1970),” *BlackPast.org* (August 10, 2009): <https://www.blackpast.org/global-african-history/1970-amilcar-cabral-national-liberation-and-culture/>

<sup>8</sup> Davarian Baldwin, *In the Shadow of the Ivory Tower: How Universities are Plundering Our Cities* (New York: Bold Type Books, 2021).