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It Wasn't a Tenure Case

A Personal Testimony, with Reflections

David Graeber

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First of all allow me to remark how touched and honored I am to be put on the same list as James Mooney, who I've always admired, and Edmund Leach, who may have been the man who most inspired me to take up an anthropological career. Leach for me always been a model of intellectual freedom.

I hadn't heard that Dimitra Doukas hasn't been given a proper job and am outraged to hear it; the fact that she hasn't it seems to me also answers the question with which the essay ends, of why US anthropology didn't foresee Trump, since her work is specifically about using ethnographic tools to understand right-wing populism. I was myself writing about similar issues—in Harpers, since Anthropology didn't seem much interested—around the time I too was being effectively expelled from US academia, though mine were mere musings in comparison.

There are many mysteries of the academy which would be appropriate objects of ethnographic analysis. One question that never ceases to intrigue me is tenure. How could a system ostensibly designed to give scholars the security to be able to say dangerous things have been transformed into a system

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so harrowing and psychologically destructive that, by the time scholars find themselves in a secure position, 99% of them have forgotten what it would even mean to have a dangerous idea? How is the magic effected, systematically, on the most intelligent and creative people our societies produce? Shouldn't they of all people know better? There is a reason the works of Michel Foucault are so popular in US academia. We largely do this to ourselves. But for this very reason such questions will never be researched.

Since my own case features prominently in the text, I might as well say what really happened at Yale. I think it's important to do so, in part, because it illustrates that one way that tactics of bullying, silencing, and other abusive structures of power operate is by the insistence on the part of the bulk of the academic community that things like this cannot possibly happen. Consider the circumstances. In my case, American anthropologists were confronted with the information that an untenured "out" anarchist scholar had been dismissed from his job at a prominent university, in a highly irregular fashion (it was not a tenure case and what sparse media coverage there was noted this), despite a strong publication record and student support. No official reason was given. American anthropologists were asked to decide between two options:

1. politics played a role
2. he must have been dismissed for some other reason, just the department for some reason didn't say what it was

Judging by the response when I then applied for jobs, the overwhelming majority appear to have chosen 2.

So here's a narrative of the principle events:

In 2000 I had passed my first reappointment review with flying colors and was assured I was proceeding exactly as I should as a junior prof—though warned to stay out of politics, I was

encouraged to think I had a strong chance at tenure if I followed this advice. In fact I was aware that the Yale tenure rate was roughly 7% so tenure struck me as unlikely, no matter how well I played my cards. Therefore, when the Global Justice Movement picked up and I felt I was uniquely positioned—and therefore had an historical responsibility—to contribute, I effectively told myself “well, it’s not like I’d have gotten tenure anyway” and jumped on board. I soon became convinced the tools of ethnography could be useful to those trying to create new forms of direct democracy and took a sabbatical year (2001–2002) to pursue this idea. In the course of that sabbatical year I also made press statements as a member of various direct action-oriented and broadly anarchist groups involved in the protests that successfully halted the Free Trade Area of the Americas treaty and other neoliberal trade initiatives. When I returned in the fall of 2002, several previously friendly members of the senior faculty – people I had not been in contact with at all during my sabbatical – refused to speak to me. They did not return my greetings and walked by as if I wasn’t there.

I should clarify the Yale socio-cultural anthropology department was, at that time, in an unhappy state. If they were known outside New Haven for anything, at that time, it was for their unique institutional culture, epitomized by the habit of some members of the senior faculty of writing lukewarm or even hostile letters of recommendation for their own graduate students—students who, I might note, were on average of a clearly higher intellectual calibre than the faculty, but lived in a climate of fear and intimidation as a result. (Needless to say it was the same clique who wrote the hostile letters who suddenly stopped speaking to me.) Matters were complicated by a grad student unionization drive that met with unremitting hostility from this same dominant clique: union organizers had been screamed at, received abusive emails, been object of all sorts of false accusations, even been threatened with police; there were multiple outstanding student grievances and com-

plaints against such behavior and even one pending NLRB case. At the same time the students themselves were deeply divided about the merits of the union. Junior faculty were caught in the middle. For my own part, I made the strategic decision to avoid internal Yale politics, and focus on larger targets (such as the IMF). In New Haven, I concentrated my efforts on teaching, and on mentoring and protecting my own students—who, I am proud to report, are almost all now pursuing successful academic careers.

In the end, I was not allowed to remain neutral.

When the time came in 2004 for the normally routine promotion to “Term Associate” (an untenured position that would lead in four years to tenure review), this same handful of senior faculty tried to deny me reappointment, despite uniformly positive external reviews (one by Laura Nader) and strong student evaluations (I had taught some of the most popular courses in the department’s history). They told the dean I had not done enough committee work—but when challenged were forced to admit they had not given me any. Informed they couldn’t simply fire me without warning, they solicited, and were granted, special permission to review my case again after a year—and this time, at their insistence and as far as I know in violation of all precedent, without external or student input.

At the very least this procedure was highly irregular.

The next year the same clique attempted to pressure out perhaps my most talented student, a brilliant Asian-American woman who was also an organizer in the graduate student unionization campaign, before a major student strike—on obviously fabricated grounds. (The Director of Graduate Studies had written her a negative letter of recommendation for an AAA grant application, then accused her of “ethical violations” for not using or returning it, and demanded she leave the program, despite a complete lack of any actual grounds for expulsion.) This was of course primarily an attempt to intimidate the union organizers, but partly also meant to test my

I had to indefinitely postpone my own plans to start a family. My own marriage ultimately buckled under the strains of exile, leaving me, for a while profoundly isolated. As one might imagine all this took no small emotional toll. Throwing myself into work I accomplished a good deal; but to this day the reaction of American anthropology continues to hurt me. I felt I had made important contributions not just to the discipline, but to political causes almost all my fellow anthropologists claimed to share—indeed, in many cases, built academic careers claiming to interpret and represent. Yet the main response seems to have been an eagerness to give credit to even the most transparent attempts at character assassination.

To end with a sociological reflection on silencing, then, I would invite the reader to consider the following. I agreed to write this because I have no intention to apply for an academic position in America in the foreseeable future. There is probably not a single paragraph in this essay that I would not have self-censored had that not been the case.

loyalty. I failed the test spectacularly by defending her (she was an excellent student, with good grades and strong support across departments). Afterwards I was—this is actually true—accused of “intimidating” the DGS by taking notes in the meeting where the DGS tried to pressure the student to resign, leaving me later to remark that Yale was the only place I knew of where a representative of the senior faculty can tell a student “you’re no good, get out of the program!” one junior faculty member dares to say “surely we can work something out,” and he’s the one who gets accused of “intimidation.” (Incidentally, she did not resign, did get the grant, and is now pursuing a successful academic career.)

After that my dismissal was a foregone conclusion. All that remained was to find a pretext. This however proved difficult, since I did not have a drug or drinking problem, had never been accused of plagiarism, unethical academic practices, or sexual or any other form of harassment, had never been convicted of a crime, never slept with students, had no history of clinical mental health issues, and never been the object of student grievances or complaints (in fact, it’s quite possible I was the only member of the socio-cultural faculty at that time of whom none of these things could be said.) I was also by then doing quite a bit of service work and had contracts for two forthcoming monographs in addition to the two books already out. Some students told me they were pressured to bring false charges but refused. Many wrote unsolicited letters of support. The best the other side could do was to get one foreign student, who was told she was in danger of flunking out and being deported, to write a letter complaining about the overly democratic way I had organized a seminar (!). This however allowed them to claim the students were not unanimous, and the student letters weren’t entered into evidence anyway. Some brave and wonderful colleagues fought hard to defend me, but in the end it was to no avail. (Most also left in frustration soon after.) In the end, I was told my contract was not being renewed but

no reason was given—other than a newfound concern with the supposed weakness in my academic work.

At the time, it honestly never occurred to me that I would not be able to find a job elsewhere in America. Letters of support were pouring in from seemingly everywhere – Marshall Sahlins to Laura Nader to Mick Taussig to John and Jean Comaroff. Outraged students asked me if they could protest my dismissal. This was a hard one. I had already decided not to sue, despite receiving more than one communication from people connected to the Law School suggesting I do so—and it's true I knew if I had sued, I'd have had almost uniquely well-positioned (one student, for example, was willing to testify that one of the profs leading the charge against me had actually called her parents to warn them that their daughter was taking courses with a dangerous radical!) It occurred to me suing might damage my future prospects. Still, the anthropology students had been very much divided over the unionization drive, and many told me the only thing they all agreed on was that what happened to me was wrong—they were even putting together protest committees, each carefully balanced with one pro- and one anti-union student. I felt I could hardly tell them not to. In retrospect I realize this was my undoing.

The Chronicle account that Laura Nader mentions describes me as failing to land a job despite 17 attempts (by the end I think it was well over 20). This substantially understates what happened. Failure to win a position despite 20+ attempts might still be attributed to bad luck in a difficult job market. In fact, in 20+ attempts, I failed even once to even be considered for a job. Not only did I not make any short lists, I failed to make any long lists. Not a single university asked me for my letters of recommendation. That means that in every single one of those 20+ applications I was eliminated at the first cut. In contrast, before my firing from Yale, I had made at least the first cut in virtually every job I applied for, and what's more, afterwards, I continued to be considered in the same way everywhere else in

esty aimed at falsifying the facts. To this day, most academics who have heard of my case appear convinced I was simply denied tenure, which of course makes my protests of political bias seem bizarre and self-serving, since most junior faculty are denied tenure at Yale. Almost no one knows that in fact it was a highly unusual non-tenure procedure where rules were changed for my case and my case only. Why? One reason is because Yale authorities kept making statements that implied, but did not quite state, that it was a tenure case. For instance when the New York Times ran an article about my dismissal, the author mentioned in passing it was not a tenure case, but also included a quote from an ally of the senior faculty which basically would have made no sense had it not been one (she said it was telling that I “personalized” the case rather than seeing it as being about Yale tenure policy). The ploy was effective and most of those who read the article appear to have been left with a false impression of what happened. But this was only possible because of their own bias: for all the leftist posturing, most American anthropologists, presented with a confusing Rorschach-like welter of evidence, appear to have decided it was more likely that an activist scholar had unreasonably politicized a routine academic decision, than that a notoriously conservative department could possibly have changed the rules to get rid of radical who was actively engaged in organising direct actions to disrupt trade summits and discomfiting the powerful in other actual, practical, ways.

In the end, I was not silenced. I made a new career in the UK, published widely, and continued to make interventions in public life. What the Yale brass did ensure was that all this came at enormous personal cost. My two remaining close family members (brother and mother) both, as it happened, faced prolonged terminal illness while the drama at Yale was unfolding—I found myself dashing back between being care-giver to first one then the other in New York and dealing with the latest machinations of the senior faculty back at Yale—which meant

8. The (tacitly authoritarian) insistence on acting as if institutions could not possibly behave the way the anthropology department at Yale did in fact behave leads almost necessarily to victim-blaming. As a result, bullying—which I have elsewhere defined as unprovoked attacks designed to produce a reaction which can be held out as retrospective justification for the attacks themselves—tends to be an effective strategy in academic contexts. Once my contract was not renewed, I was made aware that within the larger academic community, any objections I made to how I'd been treated would be themselves be held out as retroactive justification for the non-renewal of my contract. If I was accused of being a bad teacher or scholar, and I objected that my classes were popular and my work well regarded, this would show I was self-important, and hence a bad colleague, which would then be considered the likely real reason for my dismissal. If I suggested political or even personal bias on the part of any of those who opposed renewal of my contract, I would be seen as paranoid, and therefore as likely having been let go for that very reason... And so on.

9. The truth or falsity of accusations is often treated as irrelevant. There seems a tacit rule not just of the academy but almost all aspects of professional-managerial life that if a superior plots to destroy an underling's career, this is considered disagreeable behavior, certainly, but consequences are unlikely to follow. If the victim publicly states this happened, however, this is considered unforgivable and there will be severe consequences—whether or not the accusations are correct. Similarly if accusations are directed against an underling, even if they are proven false, the underling is usually assumed to have done something else to have earned the rancor of the accuser. So in a way the veracity of the accusations is again beside the point and making too much of a fuss about it is considered bizarre.

10. Prejudice in favor of institutional authority also allows authorities to easily get away with indirect forms of dishon-

the world other than the United States. I was receiving regular feelers and even offers from departments from Paris and London to Shanghai; but in the US, suddenly no one would look at me. It is almost impossible to attribute this to statistical coincidence.

Now I must admit this outcome did surprise me. The Yale department was as I mentioned famous for its poison-pen letters. No doubt they'd be spreading rumors but who would take them seriously? And after all, as I often told myself, I only needed one job. Yet none materialized.

I did get insider information about what happened in a few instances. As most readers will be aware, at the first round in job searches, committees are often faced with an overwhelming deluge of applications and are desperate to cull. If anyone raises a strong objection to an applicant that applicant is usually eliminated without further discussion. The effect is much like black-balling in a social club. In my own case, too, matters were complicated by the student protest. I was labeled a "trouble-maker" who would turn their students against them (a silly idea, as my subsequent history attests). So in many cases at least, the moment one person raised any such objections, my application was instantly rejected. I was also told this also happened in at least two cases where I was considered as a target of opportunity—in one case the one objection came from a faculty member, in the other from administration. But always, one objection was enough.

I'll stop the narrative here, and just underline a few relevant lessons:

1. There is a near total gulf between the way many (most?) anthropologists view situations in their field areas, where they tend to identify with the underdog, and in the academy, where they tend to instinctually take the side of structures of institutional authority. There is little doubt that most of my detractors would have come to exactly the opposite conclusion about what must have "really happened" in my case had I been

a young scholar and political dissident in Indonesia or Mozambique who was dismissed from his job with no reason being given.

2. A widespread sense of guilty discomfort about this discrepancy often sparks resentment at anyone whose active political engagement might be seen as drawing attention to these contradictions. To this day, I occasionally encounter colleagues who, on learning I have a history of activism, instantly assume I must be sitting in judgment of them for sins of hypocrisy which, in almost all cases, would never in a million years have occurred to me had they not brought them up.

3. It is difficult to exaggerate the importance of social class. I was told by one ally at Yale that my problem was that owing to my proletarian background and general comportment, I was considered “unclubbable.” That is, if one is not from a professional-managerial background, one can be accepted by one’s “betters,” but only if one makes it clear such acceptance is one’s highest life aspiration. Otherwise, ideas or actions that among the well-born would likely be treated as amusing peccadillos—such as an embrace of anti-authoritarian politics—will be considered to disqualify one from academic life entirely.

4. In extremely hierarchical environments, being nice is often seen as impertinent or subversive—at least, if one is equally friendly and sympathetic to everyone.

5. In academic environments where most people were first drawn to their careers by a sense of intellectual excitement, but feel they then had to sacrifice that sense of joy and play in order to obtain life security, it is extremely unwise to be seen as visibly enjoying oneself, even in the sense of being excited by ideas. This is viewed as inconsiderate.

6. The term “collegiality” often operates in a deeply insidious way to disguise the workings of points 4, and 5. If one hears that someone is “uncollegial” one typically assumes they are rude, contentious, nasty, unsociable, or otherwise a jerk.

In fact the term is never applied to superiors for abusing inferiors, but is almost invariably used for people lower down in a hierarchy for acting in way that others (often but not only superiors) disapprove of. It is thus perfectly possible to be too nice to students, and too enthusiastic about sharing ideas, and be denounced as “uncollegial” – thus raising in the minds of all those unfamiliar with the specifics of the case the assumption that one’s behaviour was exactly the opposite.

7. Children of the professional-managerial classes, as Tom Frank recently pointed out, tend to lack any ethos of solidarity. Solidarity is largely a value among working class people, or among the otherwise marginalized or oppressed. Professional-managers tend towards radical individualism, and for them, left politics becomes largely a matter of puritanical one-upmanship (“check your privilege!”), with the sense of responsibility to others largely displaced onto responsibility to abstractions, forms, processes, and institutions. Hence frequent comments from ostensible leftists that, in protesting my irregular dismissal, I was revealing an arrogant sense of entitlement by suggesting anthropology somehow owed me a job in the first place (I got similar reactions from some academic “leftists” when I was evicted from my lifelong family home at the instigation of Police Intelligence and Counter-Terrorism, after Occupy Wall Street. “Oh, so you think you have some kind of right to live in Manhattan?”) I find it telling, for instance, that of the few who did reach out in practical terms in the wake of my dismissal, and ask if there was anything they could do to help me find employment, the majority were African-American: i.e., people who came from a tradition of radicalism where people are keenly aware that sticking one’s neck out could have severe personal consequences, and that therefore, mutual support was necessary for survival. Many of elite background offered public moral support, but few if any offered me practical help of any kind.