

In Anticipation of an Unleashed Professoriate

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“Within an organization, it is vital to continually foster trust by recognizing the totality of the other’s existence, to train each other and build up each other’s subjectivity.”

– From “The Organization to Come” by Mitsuko Tokoro,
translated by Setsu Shigematsu²

A friend recently reminded me of wartime sociology’s tendency “to psychologize the enemy, to produce and interpret data on the enemy’s mentality and behaviour” and how precisely this type of wartime sociology is being mobilized against students in general, and particularly activist students in the contemporary university. For example, we see this when administrative bodies deliberate on how to anticipate and respond to possible security problems posed by depressed or disgruntled graduate students and in disciplinary hearings convened to punish students whose activism disrupts university business. Although we might object to wartime psychologizing of the enemy in general, in the current context in which it is already being mobilized to manage and crush political dissent on campuses, turning the tables and psychologizing the well-behaved, anti-activist, and highly rewarded professoriate offers one

¹ My thanks to Rosalind Hampton, Michelle Hartman, Thomas Lamarre, Abby Lippman, and William Clare Roberts. They are not responsible for any errors or problems in this essay.

² Setsu Shigematsu, *Scream From the Shadows: the Women’s Liberation Movement in Japan* (University of Minnesota Press, 2012) 43.

way to begin understanding the opposition disgruntled radicals face within universities today. To that end, the following is an attempt to turn the tables on a narrative that posits embracing (institutional) security as a sign of maturity, using an example from McGill University that played out parallel to, but partially outside of, the 2012 student strike.

Student occupations of McGill's James administration building on November 10, 2011, and from February 7-11, 2012, were met with a wave of disciplinary action against student activists, which built as strike-related actions took place through the spring. Beginning in February of 2012, sixteen professors at McGill University organized support for and defended those student activists subjected to university disciplinary procedures. These efforts, some of which are ongoing, involved hundreds of hours of research, preparation, meetings, and time spent in disciplinary hearings and other proceedings. The group of professors came from departments across campus (though notably not the Faculty of Law) and included untenured assistant professors, tenured professors, and one emerita faculty member. While narrowly focused on defending and supporting students in their particular situations, the professors' solidarity organizing nonetheless warrants examination as an indication of the potential for an unmanageable professoriate, as well as the limits of resistance performed as a professor, or perhaps in any professional capacity.

Heavily trained to rely on and serve bureaucratic and institutional interests by adhering to or appealing to written policies and codes, professors tend to be among the

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most manageable of workers and the least likely to step outside of officially recognized channels to take direct action against authority, particularly the authority of their employers. That a number of professors devoted a great deal of time and energy to defending actions decried by their employer—and with no anticipation of any professional or institutional recognition or reward—would be remarkable on its own given the extent to which academic labour demands a high level of careerist self-interest and self-management. The risks in this instance, minuscule though they may have been, were amplified by the nature of challenging one's employer on the employer's turf, as well as what one colleague aptly described as “a professorial desire to not be minoritized.”

Those familiar with academic labour conditions will appreciate, for example, the disincentives untenured faculty face when considering whether and how to show solidarity with actions denounced by one's employer. Those unfamiliar with academic labour conditions may find it interesting that all of the university employees who served on the Committee on Student Discipline (CSD), or who otherwise provided labour necessary for the disciplinary proceedings to take place, were compensated in some way.³ For example, professors are compensated for CSD service with professional credit considered for salary increases, promotion, and/or tenure. This was not the case for the professors who served as students' advisors and witnesses in the hearings. Unlike the members of the CSD, these professors were not appointed to their positions by any university process: relevant university policy provided

³ The CSD includes student and faculty members, and is akin to a judicial board in disciplinary hearings.

a way for them to take on the roles of ersatz defence counsels as volunteers, but organizing among themselves and with students made it possible for them to do so.

Previous experiences in solidarity organizing contributed to the formation of the core group of faculty who supported student activists through the disciplinary process. For example, from September 1 to December 1, 2011, non-academic and non-managerial staff represented by the MUNACA union were on strike at McGill. Their primary demands were for pay parity and a say in changes made to pension and benefit policies. In fact, unilateral changes had been made to the pension and benefits plans by the senior administration of McGill, some of which impacted the professoriate and other non-unionized workers at McGill as well. A small but relatively visible *ad hoc* faculty solidarity network, MFLAG (McGill Faculty Labour Action Group), emerged to support striking MUNACA workers. The type and level of involvement varied from writing statements in support of the union's demands, to arranging for food and coffee for striking workers, to refusing to cross the picket line (thus losing a semester's salary). The professors who would later organize support for student activists were among the most active contributors to MFLAG. Some of these professors had additional experience in solidarity organizing with students through two campus-community organizations, QPIRG-McGill (the Québec Public Interest Research Group) and CKUT (McGill's campus-community radio station). These organizations have long served as nexuses for fostering ongoing student-staff-faculty-community solidarity.

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In early 2012, after a referendum that demonstrated student support for the continued existence of these two groups—and in the immediate aftermath of the MUNA-CA strike—the senior administration of McGill refused to renew their memorandum of agreement with either QPIRG-McGill or CKUT, essentially ensuring the end of their existence.⁴ Having exhausted the possibilities of institutional channels only to be rebuffed and dismissed by Deputy Provost of Student Life and Learning Morton Mendelson, many students, as well as some faculty and staff, came to the conclusion that the university's handling of this matter had to be challenged directly.

On February 7, 2012, seventeen students held a surprise retirement party for Mendelson in his office – complete with a cake, decorations, party hats, and music. A larger group of students, faculty, and staff held a solidarity party in the lobby of the administration building.⁵ While the presence of campus security quickly dampened the festivities, the lobby party lasted overnight, and the party in Mendelson's office on the sixth floor of the administration building lasted until police were called in to shut the party down on the morning of Sunday, February 12th. The university alleged students had violated McGill's Code of Student Conduct by holding these parties in the administration building, and roughly fifty were singled out for disciplinary proceedings (ranging in their degree

⁴ The administration claimed its refusal was based on the poorly-worded nature of the referendum questions, which, it should be noted, had been officially vetted in advance. Among other elements, the memoranda in question commit the university to collecting student fees to support each of these organization.

⁵ For a further discussion of these events see the chapter by Hampton, Luxion, and Swain in this volume.

of seriousness). The Disciplinary Officer (DO) acted as the university's chief investigator and prosecutor for the student disciplinary proceedings (having previously and summarily banned several student activists from campus). The DO pushed for punishments ranging from fines to expulsion. No disciplinary actions were taken against faculty or staff who openly participated in the lobby party and/or publicly supported the party on the sixth floor, including faculty and staff who did exactly the same things as some students who were subjected to the punishing disciplinary process. (This last detail warrants underscoring if we are to appreciate how universities rely on a self-managed professoriate to avoid even the smallest risks.)

A significant contributing factor to the professors' efforts to defend student activists was the political culture in the area McGill occupies. Numerous political and social movements in Montreal set the bar very high for solidarity efforts in general, and local political cultures have generated a great deal of knowledge and practice that contributed greatly to the Unlimited General Strike of 2012, as well as a variety of McGill-specific or McGill-centred protests. Furthermore, networks of solidarity and knowledge and skill-sharing among students and faculty from Chile to Greece, the availability of anarchist news and information-sharing networks, independent media, the Occupy and Decolonize movements, as well as activist exchange/travel and participation in direct actions at G8/G20 protests all informed, to varying degrees, the alliances of solidarity that had already been emerging on the McGill campus.

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For reasons too many to enumerate here, McGill provides mushroom soil for both direct action and alliances of solidarity. Thomas Lamarre explains the kinds of conditions that give rise to the disciplinary targeting of student activists at McGill (or perhaps any school) in “Outlaw Universities”:

Neoliberalism needs a high degree of extralegal latitude to exercise its prerogative to evoke and harness potentiality and to steal the future of youth, which latitude it finds today especially in universities. But it cannot control this potentiality. Anarchism, socialism, and other alternative forms of association have proven effective and will continue to be effective in student movements and popular protest, precisely because they are exerting pressure at the point where the neoliberal elite strive to harness potential freedoms for themselves via extralegal procedures of governance. This is why only social strike and direct action on university campuses will prove effective right now.⁶

Professors’ generally cowed response to the conditions Lamarre explains is inextricably linked with their socialization to abide institutional authority and avoid career risks. Degree of risk is not simple to assess, even when small, and must be considered in relation to the general level of intimidation and repression, as well as individual situations that may be impacted by health, childcare responsibilities, immigration status, or employment security concerns, to name but a few. Thus the reasons for the limited number

⁶ Thomas Lamarre, “Outlaw Universities,” *Theory and Event*, Vol. 15, Issue 3, 2012 Supplement.

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of professors who defended student activists are not restricted to ideological ones (such as support for the administration's position). Some who expressed support for the student activists in private were reluctant to take a more visible or active role in supporting students for fear of how it might impact their working conditions and job security. This was a particular concern for sessional/adjunct faculty and some untenured professors, though a number of untenured professors were also quite active in solidarity work and organizing. Finally, some attrition from professor solidarity efforts was precipitated by workplace intimidation and retaliation.

The specifics of particular cases and how professors made the arguments they made will probably not be of great interest outside the specific context of McGill, but the willingness of sixteen professors to take on varying degrees of risk and, in some cases, make substantial personal sacrifices to support student activists is perhaps one signal that the professoriate to come could be a very unmanageable one. The stereotypical image of professors holed up in a world of their own is not so far from reality, though that world is marked more by complicated bureaucracy and hierarchies than lofty thoughts. Theodore Kaczynski, who defected from academia, attempted to describe the psychology of university professors in *Industrial Society and Its Future* (the "Unabomber Manifesto"):

[T]he oversocialized person is kept on a psychological leash and spends his life running on rails that society has laid down for him ... The leftist of the oversocialized type tries to get off his psychological leash and assert his autonomy by rebelling. But

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usually he is not strong enough to rebel against the most basic values of society.

It is not hard to find this sad figure Kaczynski describes on university campuses. The leash is pulled hardest on those with a reason and/or a will to resist, as well as those whose resistance could be particularly disruptive to institutional operations. The shorter the leash, the more one's will to push limits might wane. In the saddest cases, one can find tenured professors who pull their own leashes. In some cases the reluctance to get involved can be a conditioned careerist response or the result of having been pulled back too forcefully one too many times.

As problematic and hierarchical as it is, the student-teacher relationship can lend itself to the mobilization of a group of professors for solidarity work and offer a way out of the professorial tendency towards conditioned and/or compulsive obedience. As one of the sixteen professors involved in the aforementioned efforts explained, "The 'oversocialized' professoriate may be especially susceptible to what others will think, but the student-teacher relationship, especially when your teaching interests attract student activists to your classes, can turn this affective constitution to good effect. Not wanting to disappoint one's totally amazing students is certainly a motive for me to be involved!"

The professors who served as advisers in disciplinary proceedings at McGill had months of solidarity practice leading up to the spring of 2012. Some had even longer histories of organizing together in activist settings. Some are continuing to organize together in ongoing solidarity

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alliances. It appears there is something gained by practicing fearlessness together and through the relationships of trust built along the way that can sustain certain solidarity formations. Additionally, it seems significant that there is some ideological and rank diversity among the professors who took on the toughest and most time-consuming solidarity work in defending students in disciplinary hearings. The idea of a professoriate that unleashes itself can seem like a remote fantasy, but that professoriate is also already here.