

Stanley Fish And The Storm In Ottawa: Seven Professors Say What They Think

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Denis Rancourt, a professor of physics at Ottawa University, an anarchist and a backer of Critical Pedagogy, may be the most dramatic example of a politicized teacher yet seen in North America. He believes that college instruction is an instrument of oppression and that his proper job is to combat this oppression by ignoring what he is supposed to be teaching—physics and the environment—and instead promoting radical political action in his class. Over the weekend, Stanley Fish posted a blog on Rancourt at the [New York Times](#) website that attracted a good deal of attention. So we asked several professors to write brief reactions to Rancourt and Fish.

— John Leo

Peter Berkowitz

In *Save the World on Your Own Time*, his 2008 polemic about higher education, Stanley Fish harshly criticized professors who use the classroom to advance political agendas.

Professors, he insisted, have a contractual duty to pursue academic purposes in their teaching, to transmit knowledge and refine students' intellectual abilities. Academic freedom was well-defined and narrow: it protected a professor's right to discharge his academic

duties without political interference. For professors to use academic freedom as a cover to inculcate in students moral and political doctrines was, in Fish's eyes, a gross abuse. Or it was in the summer of 2008, when his book came out. Unfortunately, in his exploration of the case of University of Ottawa physics professor Denis Rancourt, Fish indicates that in the winter 2009 the meaning of academic freedom in his judgment is not a matter of right, duty, and the proper understanding of academic life and the university's mission, but rather reflects a clash between narrower and broader views of academic freedom.

To be sure, Fish's relativizing conclusion is in tension with his unflattering portrayal of Professor Rancourt. On the one hand, he concedes that Professor Rancourt's granting an "A+" to each of his students, his refusal to teach courses he has been assigned by his department and for which students sign up, and in the courses he chooses to teach his urging students to engage in political activism represent instances of how "some academics contrive to turn serial irresponsibility into a form of heroism under the banner of academic freedom." On the other hand, Fish treats Rancourt's conception of academic freedom—"the ideal under which professors and students are autonomous and design their own development and interactions"—which Rancourt invokes to justify enlisting students in the quest to transform society and save the world, as a legitimate, if broader, conception of academic freedom that can only be defeated by "an essentially political decision."

Underlying Rancourt's pedagogy, Fish notes, is the "belief that higher education as we know it is simply a delivery system for a regime of oppressors and exploiters." But this moral judgment does not change the parameters of academic freedom. And it is no more a defense against Rancourt's being fired by the university for failing to do the job for which he was hired than it would be for an executive at Exxon Mobil to hold that because oil is polluting the planet, he is entitled to collect his salary while feeding false information to his superiors and encouraging his subordinates to subvert the company from within.

Nor is Rancourt's appeal to Socrates a convincing support for his freedom, against university requirements, to refuse to give students grades. What Rancourt overlooks and Fish fails to point out is that Socrates was not a university professor, did not take money to teach, and taught the obligation to respect, not to subvert, custom and law.

Although there are alternative conceptions of freedom, there is only one conception of academic freedom that is well-grounded in the principles of liberal education and the historic mission of the university. It is the conception forcefully defended by Stanley Fish in *Save the World on Your Own Time*. Regrettably, by suggesting that Denis Rancourt's rank politicization of the classroom reflects an alternative conception of academic freedom, as opposed to a perversion of academic freedom, Fish lends dignity to a fraudulent claim.

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Jonathan Imber

Cases about academic freedom are bellwethers for larger social and cultural unrest. They always have been, all the way back to the First World War with the founding of the AAUP. When Arthur O. Lovejoy was dismissed from his position at Stanford University for simply defending a colleague's right to criticize the university, he joined with others in making the

case that universities have a special responsibility to allow as full and open debate about all things as possible. Of course, Lovejoy and his colleagues would never have confused lack of collegiality or failure to teach one's subject as defensible in terms of academic freedom.

The problem with Stanley Fish's assessment is that it has very little to do with the everyday indignities that beset colleges and universities as the result of colleagues who do not do their jobs and thus make everything more difficult. Instead, Fish is taken in by the exotic cases to make otherwise ordinary points. The ordinary points are quite clear: the oversight of faculty at most colleges and universities takes for granted a great deal of good will on both the part of faculty and administrators (most of whom have been faculty). When that good will is tested, it is usually about decisions made by administrators, not about anarchist physics professors. It is impressive in its own way that so much time was given to a person who clearly understood that being paid for his insubordination was likely to be challenged at some point. I suppose Fish's point is that there will always be some case where somebody tries to defy gravity.

But the real lesson is how much our institutions of higher learning depend on a basic trust given in particular to those of us fortunate enough to have what others see as "job security." We owe the public an explanation of what we do and why we do it. Most of us cede this responsibility to our presidents and deans, but in the end, it is the faculty who have the power and responsibility to determine this. We should not become a conspiracy against the laity, especially in times like these.

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Daphne Patai

It's hard to see why Stanley Fish is hot and bothered by the Rancourt case at the University of Ottawa. After all, it's merely an extreme example of a routine event – a professor's political grandstanding and exhibitionism of his impeccable leftist credentials. What's unusual is only that Rancourt did suffer the consequences of his professional irresponsibility. The real story here, however, is that so many professors, especially in the humanities and social sciences, routinely and with far less drama than Rancourt contrive to treat their classrooms as staging grounds for their political commitments. In many cases they announce this without embarrassment – look at the mission statements and job ads for various identity programs, in which activism (of a certain type only, of course) is routinely promoted as an academic goal. This is so much the norm these days that only truly egregious cases, such as Rancourt's, or Ward Churchill's, evoke strong reactions and censure. It's very rare for a professor to be charged with incompetence. There's almost no such thing in higher education these days, least of all over manifesting political biases.

To the contrary, the real threat to education these days is far more likely to come from the shutting down of free speech by means of university policies aimed at inhibiting "harassment" (sexual or racial primarily), which has many professors watching their every word. Look at Brandeis University, which last year found Professor Donald Hindley guilty of "racial harassment" and placed a monitor in his classroom! His offense? To discuss the word

“wetback” as a racial slur in his Latin American Politics course! FIRE, the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, keeps track of the sorry state of free speech on America’s campuses, and has had to go to bat for many of the accused (see its website at www.thefire.org). Where political correctness rather than genuine education has become a norm in American universities, why be surprised that professors feel free to indulge their biases? Most of them, of course, are a bit less blatant about their agenda than Rancourt obviously was.

As for the guaranteed grades of A+ — that too is noteworthy only because it takes to an extreme a pervasive problem in education: grade inflation. The only surprise is that a university administration actually acted in the Rancourt case. Competence seems rarely to be questioned and all kinds of partisan distortions of education are promoted and even celebrated. So we should thank Rancourt for having taken standard professorial actions to an extreme and thus calling attention to a persistent reality that is rarely addressed.

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Amitai Etzioni

Stan Fish does here what he does so well: he takes one odd case and builds a general theory on its peculiar facts. I wish he would be more of a sociologist. Look at the thousands of tenured professors (a declining number by the way). See how often they are under attack for being too liberal, too anti-Israel, even too conservative. Realize that although most people in society do not have their kind of protection—it serves a free society well to have several thousands who are so privileged, just as it is served by having some judges who have tenure.

True, some abuse their tenure (typically not by outlier behavior but by doing little work). Such abuses are largely handled through informal social pressures which Fish confuses with coercion. And when things get really bad, some of the abusers have their tenure revoked. Given that the world around us is collapsing and we are at war, maybe Professor Fish can use his privileged position to worry about even greater threats to our freedoms, well-being, indeed sanity.

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Mark Bauerlein

Stanley Fish’s ruminations on academic freedom are always stimulating, but in this case his example is a no-brainer. A physics professor whose classroom posture aims to undo the institution and invalidate his own grades doesn’t pose difficult questions about duty and freedom. No arguments about oppression and exploitation can turn his dereliction into an academic outlook. The very distance between his expertise, physics, and his subversive role-playing makes the case too easy.

What about fields, though, that close the distance, for instance, the composition instructor who believes that student writing will improve only when students question authority, including the authority of teachers and schools to evaluate them? What about education schools that explicitly profess to convert students into “change agents”?

In other words, academic freedom gets fuzzy when adversarial, radical, revolution, and other ideological goals are admitted as legitimate aspects of disciplines themselves. In these cases, we look not to the conduct of wayward instructors hijacking classrooms—a rare enough happening. No, we look to entire fields and subfields and departments that have made political agendas a normal functioning of research, hiring, peer review, graduate training, and undergraduate instruction. And that condition, unfortunately, isn't as rare as it ought to be.

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Patrick Deneen

The antics of Professor Denis Rancourt are an extreme version – albeit not even as extreme as one might suppose – of too much of what has taken place on college campuses for the past several decades. Beginning with his almost parodic version of grade inflation – a general practice on today's campuses that purports to be a recognition of universal excellence but in fact reflects indifference of faculty toward students – to his apparent revolutionary philosophy spouted from the comfort of a tenured perch, Rancourt places in relief many of the behaviors that have come to mark the modern professoriate. Extreme, yes, but wholly recognizable.

Academic freedom has come to be a shield to protect educators who often despise the very inheritance that has granted them such freedom. Attacking Western thought and its achievements – preeminent among which is the American republic – our radical professoriate is permitted maximum liberty of expression with minimal responsibility for what is said or done. A noble and hard-won achievement – academic freedom – has been requisitioned to attack the very basis of its existence. Only the most extreme versions of such behavior, such as that exhibited by Professor Rancourt, result in suspension or dismissal, but daily there are less colorful, but for that reason perhaps more dangerous, versions of Professor Rancourt's views and behaviors.

Now we enter a time of challenge for America's colleges and universities. Parents, students, politicians, trustees and administrators will ask whether the cost of college can be justified given diminishing economic prospects, and whether society can afford to subsidize the bad behavior and ingratitude of a class of elites who too often evince disdain and antipathy toward the foundations of their own society amid the attendant comforts they enjoy. I fear, but foresee, a reckoning in which the wheat and the chaff alike are swept away in a fundamental reconfiguration of higher education – one in which it is the humanities especially that will bear the brunt, in significant part because the professors of humanities have ceased to be able to give account for why anyone ought to study the humanities. Professors will be permitted to denounce the system all they like, but without its protections and blessing. They will be responsible for their denunciations, and will learn that radicalism is a pose easiest to assume from positions of comfort and security.

It is to be hoped that academic freedom will not cease altogether – it is a great achievement of the West to understand the need to protect unpopular speech – but at the same time

those who are bestowed with such generous protections need to re-learn the ability to exercise such freedom responsibly. Simply because one is permitted to say anything does not mean that one should lightly say anything, particularly those things that are said for the sake of offense or to demonstrate one's disdain for those for whom your protections were intended to serve. A chastened professoriate may yet arise – one capable of teaching something of value in the rubble – evincing new humility and gratitude for the gifts of knowledge, and exercising stewardship in their conveyance to a new generation in need of understanding.

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Peter Wood

Stanley Fish has an unsurpassed talent for self-cancelling nullity. In his recent book, *Save the World on Your Own Time*, he strikes a pose against the politicized classroom only to carve out exceptions large enough to permit devoting a class to the topic, "Is George W. Bush the worst president in our history?" Radical feminists, advocates of the view that America is inherently racist, and enviro-activists can keep right on going in Fish's view, provided they spin their political positions as "analysis." Still the title of the book and some of pages taken out of context have led some conservative critics of the university to mistake Fish as an ally. But Fish is no ally of traditional academic standards. He is simply a gentleman sophist who has made an art of sitting simultaneously on both sides of the fence. Fish's *New York Times* blog, "The Two Languages of Academic Freedom," offers another study in bifurcation. It starts out sounding as though Fish morally disapproves of a man who hypocritically invokes "academic freedom" as an excuse for not performing his basic duties as a professor. The note of indignation rings through the first six paragraphs. Here is a man, Professor Rancourt, who clearly abuses his position, his students, his university, and the public trust. He denies the legitimacy of the university, but is willing to claim its protections when it suits him to. But come Fish's paragraph seven ("Rancourt is a self-described anarchist and an advocate of 'critical pedagogy'...") a new note (think of a bassoon calling from the distance) is heard: it is the note of fascination. Provide something strange, academically outre, and this Fish is hooked. He seems by his deepest nature drawn to find virtue in what others find scabrous. He loves delinquency, and behaves (at age 71 or so) like a little boy proud of having stuck his finger into the pie.

Fish's admiration for Rancourt's bad-boy behavior is lightly disguised behind a string of quotations. He's just giving us the facts, after all. This is how Rancourt sees himself, so to speak. But there is more going on. Fish gets to pose as the expositor of a doctrine we may not have heard of, "critical pedagogy," and to explicate the thieves' argot of "squatting." This is showmanship, in case you failed to recognize it. But it also expresses Fish's pleasure in tracing the contours of a fellow subversive's thought. "Rancourt does not merely preach his philosophy. He practices it," smiles Fish, and for this fellow, there is no higher compliment. But Fish has one more game to play. Up to now we might have thought he was just indulging in an amused description of Rancourt's rancid self-serving. In his last four paragraphs ("The

record shows exchanges of letters...) Fish plays his favorite epistemological trick. It turns out he is neither outraged nor enamored with Rancourt. The Ottawa academic was just a prop to show that the concept of "academic freedom" has no essential meaning. An Arizona court says academic freedom doesn't protect incompetence; Rancourt says competence be damned, academic freedom is a tool of world revolution. And Fish says, it is impossible to judge which view is right on the merits, since both entail political presuppositions and conflicting worldviews.

So Fish is once again simultaneously on both sides of the fence—though no doubt he would say he is on neither. He also denies (elsewhere) that he is a relativist, though he certainly seems to quack like one. In his own view, he helps make the world "more intelligible," but I'm not sure that demonstrating that showing that two views of academic freedom are mutually exclusive clarifies much of anything. Fish's larger purpose apparent in much of his writing is to persuade us that rationality alone won't let us decide between rules based on civilized order and demands fueled by radical dissent. We have to choose one or the other based on something other than principled judgment, by voting our disposition, our preference, or our cultural druthers. But if it all comes down to non-rational preference, who is to say that Rancourt's preference is worse than that of the University of Ottawa?

This is postmodernism at work and it provides a neat little test: can you spot the fallacy? Is it circular reasoning? (Fish assumes politics comes first, then offers his assumption as proof that politics comes first.) Or is it the use of words with unacknowledged double meanings as though they referred to the same thing. (Rancourt has an idiosyncratic definition of "academic freedom," which need not be seriously at all, except that Fish elevates it to epistemological equivalence with a well-established legal concept.)

My explication is longer than Fish's original, but I imagine as an astute critic of poems, he would appreciate that. Fish's blogs have a certain poetic quality. He long ago ceased to have original thoughts, and he devotes himself these days to compact expressions of his same old magic tricks. He is a bit like the washed up stage clown Calvero in Charlie Chaplain's wonderful movie, *Limelight* (1952) playing the same old gags over and over. Of course Fish, unlike Calvero, is still a celebrity. But it is hard to imagine that, by this point, he doesn't see through his own gags.

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