

Academic Scandals and the Broadcast Media

By Rhonda Hammer and Douglas Kellner

In 2005, the mainstream media provided a rare focus on academic scandals, including Harvard President Larry Summer's remarks about how women's inherent biology was a key reason why there were not more women in academic science positions. In addition, Ward Churchill, a Professor in Ethnic Studies at the University of Boulder and an American Indian rights activist, came under assault for his comments on the 9/11 terror attacks. Churchill had been invited to speak at Hamilton College and in February, 2005, the college newspaper published excerpts from an essay he had written three years before called "Some People Push Back; on the Justice of Roosting Chickens." Churchill had described some of the people killed in the World Trade Center as "little Eichmanns," in that, he argued, they were not innocent victims, but part of a "technocratic corps at the very heart of America's global financial empire."

Conservative television pundit Bill O'Reilly relentlessly skewered Churchill on his widely watched Fox news channel program The O'Reilly Factor, denigrating him as anti-American and characterizing his statements as bordering on treason, a crusade taken up by scores on the Right. Not only was Churchill's invitation at Hamilton College withdrawn (after weeks of negative criticism and threats of violence), but the governor of Colorado called for his resignation and charges of plagiarism and fraud (regarding both his writings and his claims to American Indian ancestry) were raised. Indeed, the case of Ward Churchill is now fodder for the mainstream media as well as academic chronicles.

Radical professors and the cultural wars were visible on a second season broadcast of Law & Order: Criminal Intent, "Anti-Thesis," broadcast October 13, 2002. In this episode, a controversial African-American professor, modeled on Cornel West, clashed with the president of a prestigious Eastern University over his teaching style and production and performances of a rap album. The American Studies professors in the episode provided stereotypes of your campus feminist, queer theorist, multiculturalist students of color, and other conservative nightmares.

It is interesting that in the past year, three books have been published on academic scandal, Ron Robin's Scandals and Scoundrels (2004), Jon Wiener's Historians in Trouble (2004), and Peter Charles Hoffer's Past Imperfect (2005). Consequently, academic scandals have become an important part of the escalating role of media spectacle in contemporary society. The role of media and new technologies in disseminating and criticizing scholarly work and unethical behaviors is one of the key themes of Ron Robin's Scandals and Scoundrels which describes and analyses a number of academic scandals within the fields of history and anthropology.¹ As Robin explains it: "Scandals exposed in public avoid complexity and ambiguity, and therefore foster the melodramatic. The scandal as a media event is driven by blockbuster mentality: a sensationalist repetition of well-worn dramatic principles, such as the morality tale of pride leading to the fall. It draws on sensational language, polarized rhetoric, personalized conflict, and familiar mass-media images. Deliberations on academic wrong-doings are retooled to fit the media's interpretative frameworks" (23).

After an introductory chapter on academic scandals and why they happen, Robin offers a three part overview which begins with three chapters on recent history scandals,

three case studies of scandals in anthropology, and in the final section, a discussion of hoaxes, with particular emphasis on the case of Alan Sokal, a physicist who faked an article on postmodern science which was published in an issue of the prestigious journal *Social Text*, in 1996. In this final section, Robin goes on to discuss “the science wars” and postmodernism, as well as providing analyses of the nature, meanings and implications of proliferating academic scandals. He does so within the context of contemporary U.S. culture, with its obsessions with celebrity, voyeurism and schadenfreude in seeing the powerful and prestigious brought down.

On the whole, Robin provides balanced and descriptive narrative accounts of the scandals. His method is to describe the emergence of the scandal, the criticisms of the academic in question and how the scandal played out. He is generally judicious in his judgments and balanced in presenting the opposing sides and players in the academic scandals. One wonders why, however, he downplays the significance of Doris Kearns Goodwin’s plagiarism scandals, focusing instead largely on Oates and Ambrose. Robin implies that Goodwin’s sin was simply inadvertent plagiarism from Lynne McTaggart in writing her Fitzgerald-Kennedy family book for which she apologized and paid off in an out-of-court settlement (32), whereas a August 4, 2002 [Los Angeles Times](#) article demonstrates with copious documentation that Goodwin systematically plagiarized in a whole series of her major works.²

Another criticism emerges in the way he fits postmodernism into his narrative. Generally, Robin takes the most extreme versions of postmodern theory as exemplary of the trend, rather than seeing there are a diversity of postmodern positions not all of which advocate extreme relativism and the denial of truth and objectivity as Robin claims. In some sense, the recent academic scandals are influenced by a pervasive context of postmodern media, spectacle, and a loosening of modern critical standards in key academic disciplines, but they are also influenced by the culture wars and an especially acrimonious set of battles between Left and Right in a variety of issues since the 1960s. Robin provides captivating accounts of some of the major academic scandals of our times and illuminates the conditions around the seven major areas of scandals that he engages, but does not always appear to grasp the highly conflicted political context around the scandals and the ways that organized interest groups, mostly on the Right, are fuelling the scandals wars as part of a larger political agenda that involves attempts to gain total hegemony of US society for the Right.

Jon Wiener’s *Historians in Trouble* (2004) details a large number of academic sins, but argues that, for the most part, the cases that become media spectacles of academic scandals usually involve more radical historians who are targeted by rightwing groups, while more mainstream historians who error are often protected by conservative groups and avoid media scrutiny and scandal.³ Indeed, organized rightwing groups have been systematically targeting leftist professors for years, as well as attacking alleged “liberal media” and helping shape mainstream media discourse.⁴ It is ironic, however, that two of the most outspoken and aggressive critics of leftwing professors and “liberal media” are themselves hardly paragons of virtue, as Rush Limbaugh has been accused of drug addiction and illegal purchase of prescribed medication, while Bill O’Reilly has been charged with sexual harassment.⁵

Wiener opens with three studies of conservative academics who were charged with a variety of academic violations ranging from behavior to scholarship, but escaped

media spectacle and academic penalty; indeed, the three have been recently awarded prestigious national posts by the Bush administration. Conservative anti-feminist Elizabeth Fox-Genovese had been accused by numerous students and colleagues of brutal harassment, exploitation, and vendettas against those who would not submit to her autocratic ways. One colleague, Virginia Gould, sued Fox-Genovese, and Emory University negotiated an approximately million dollar settlement (Wiener, p. 15). Yet Fox-Genovese was not disciplined further by Emory and was championed by conservatives as a strong anti-feminist and militant (conservative) scholar; the Bush administration awarded her with a National Humanities Medal in November 2003 (Wiener, p. 13).

Historian Allan Weinstein had long been controversial when a Russian collaborator on a Cold War history of the Soviet Union claimed that Weinstein had not adequately consulted with him before publication of The Haunted Wood: Soviet Espionage in America (1999), and misrepresented many of the documents (Weinstein does not know Russian). Weinstein was also attacked for his 1978 book Perjury on the Alger Hiss case where he made the sensational claim that Hiss was guilty of Soviet espionage; six of his major twelve sources, however, claimed Weinstein had totally misrepresented them. Weinstein repeatedly promised he'd make available his transcripts and key documents and kept shoving their release back in time. Despite the constant academic criticism of him, Weinstein largely escaped media scrutiny and was nominated by the Bush administration for the post of National Archivist and now serves an indefinite term.

Wiener's third case of how conservatives escaped potential scandal involves Harvard historian Stephen Thernstrom who was accused by three black students of racial insensitivity in an introductory history course. Thernstrom claimed that the Harvard administration did not adequately defend him of the charges, a debatable claim as Wiener argues. Subsequently, Dinesh D'Souza and other conservatives made Thernstrom a hero of rectitude in the face of university "political correctness," leading the Bush administration to appoint him to a term on the National Council on the Humanities in 2002.

The next three cases in the section "Targeted by the Right" are studies of how leftist professors were savaged and in some case had their career ruined because of attacks by rightwing groups and media spectacle around their cases that were prejudicial to a scholarly appraisal of their work. Emory historian Michael Bellesiles' award-winning 2001 book Arming America was subject to a fierce attack by the NRA and conservative gun groups, seriously impugning his reputation, and forcing him to resign, as we will see below. Princeton historian David Abrahams's book on Weimar Germany was subject to a vendetta by conservative historians, whose case was well publicized in the media, and he was not able to get a tenured history position, despite strong qualifications, and moved over the field of law. And Mike Davis' popular books on Los Angeles City of Quartz (1990) and Ecology of Fear (1998) were savaged by conservative LA booster groups and regularly pilloried in the Los Angeles Times, creating obstacles to getting jobs he applied for in Southern California, although Davis did get a tenured position at the University of New York at Stony Brooke and continues to write controversial and popular books and articles.

Given the nature of the academics involved, especially their celebrity status within the university and some public domains, in conjunction with a growing hostility towards intellectuals in the United States, it is hardly surprising that these kinds of scandalous situations have become more popular within mainstream media. In addition to the importance of the broadcast media and journalism for how academic scandals are identified and addressed, Robin argues that the expansion and accessibility of cyberspace technology, internet forms and web blogs contributes to their dissemination and hype. “Internet discourse is democratic, immediate, and accessible. It is, as well, spontaneous and often inflammatory” (Wiener, p. 25).

The significance of broadcasting media and cyberspace within the academic realm, is also related to epistemological shifts in the humanities and social sciences which champion subjective narratives and multiple truths, while eschewing dominant modes of thoughts promoting empirically based, scientifically “objective” studies. New post-1960s radical scholarship and the increasing fragmentation of disciplinary boundaries have made it difficult to establish authoritative professional associations, panels of experts, and peer-reviewed scholarly journals to identify and arbitrate disciplinary disputes. As Robin explains it: “Alternative methods of disciplinary enforcement are thriving... Alternative and highly visible forums of adjudication become visible and vocal when conventional avenues for projecting rules are contested, reassessed, reframed, or rendered obsolete by cultural and technological shifts ” (Wiener, p. 231). However, these forums are hardly discreet and move these kinds of matters from the relatively private domain of the university into the public domain of popular culture. It is within this context that questions about the legitimacy of a scholar’s research can become a pretext for character assassinations which can be motivated by professional jealousy or mediated by political issues.

Yet, the kinds of “academic crimes and misdemeanors” documented in Robin’s and Wiener’s provocative texts, lead to serious questions about the pervasiveness of plagiarism, falsification and misrepresentation within the university by not only students, but by those who have attained the status of experts and mentors, as well as like superstar historians like Stephen Oates, Doris Kearns Goodwin and Stephen Ambrose who frequently appear on television and regularly win awards and recognition within both academia and other forums.

While earlier accusations of plagiarism in major historical scholars like Philip Foner, who was accused in 1971 of copying sections of James Morris’s master’s thesis, in his book on The Case of Joe Hill, tended to be ignored in the mainstream media, media-promoted demonstrations of plagiarism by popular historians, like Stephen Oates, Doris Kearns Goodwin and Stephen Ambrose were widely circulated through print and broadcast media. All three frequently appeared on television as commentators on history and current events and their fame and celebrity brought focused media attention on them. Robin argues that, Oates and Ambrose cross-over into the popular realm elevated them from historical scholars to celebrity heroes and opened them up to media and internet assault.

Wiener notes that while Doris Kearns Goodwin was forced to resign from the Pulitzer Prize committee and to give up her position as a news commentator on PBS’s MacNeil-Lehrer Hour, she was, nonetheless, able to return to the media stage by 2004 with an NBC contract to appear on CNBC News, Chris Mathew’s Hardball, Meet the

Press, and other programs. The New York Times exposed that Goodwin was working with Democratic Party political consultant Bob Schrum to organize letters of support from prominent historians and politicians, including Ted Kennedy, and TV appearances on David Letterman and other shows as a come-back campaign (Weiner, p. pp. 185ff).

The majority of the most highly visible academic scandals, however, involve conservative groups attacking more liberal or radical scholars. Vitriolic media and cyberspace attacks by primarily conservative factions, in particular the NRA, on historian Michael Bellesiles' book on gun-ownership in the U.S. lead to critical questions about the veracity of some of his data, in particular his use of probate material, documenting what he claimed was much less gun ownership than previously believed from the American revolution to Civil War. Bellesiles argued that gun culture in the US was much less prominent than believed by providing a spectrum of data that argued that there were many less gun owners and a less prominent gun culture in the first century of the Republic than previously noted. The NRA and conservative groups fiercely attacked Bellesiles, assaulting his evidence and arguments, driving him, after intense pressure, to officially resign from a tenured position at Emory University.

Robin describes Bellesiles's case as a "noble lie" or example of "presentism," which involves the "erroneous construction of the past as an explanatory device for contemporary reality" (10). However, many scholars would contest this assessment and support Bellesiles' revisionist thesis that the US had a much more restrained gun culture in pre1850's America than had previously been imagined, while still acknowledging that there were some problems with his empirical findings and data charts. Wiener claims that Bellesiles was the only scholar caught up in recent academic scandals who lost his job because of enormous pressure by organized outside groups, and not professional historians, and that this case and others show that there is a strong element of political power in how the so-called academic scandals are framed and played out.

Although the media-political wars were not involved in the incredible case of the Pulitzer Prize winning, renowned historian, Joseph Ellis's bizarre inflation of his past, including false claims concerning his role in Vietnam and the anti-war movement and civil rights movement. Robin blames Ellis' fixation on celebrity status and especially his "almost pathological identification with Thomas Jefferson," which led him to make false heroic claims concerning his role in recent events. Indeed, his invention of an imaginary personal biography speaks to the growing propensity of academics, and especially "hybrid scholars," to gain credibility and appeal to their students and media audience through the creation of a public persona. This, Robin argues, was a rhetorical device for persuading audiences to endorse his interpretation of the past "(11) He was, perhaps, enticed "by the siren sound of 'experiential' history" (104). Yet there is division amongst scholarly, professional and public critics, as to whether Ellis's fakery constitutes serious misconduct or just narcissistic embellishment.

In a discussion of "Scandals in Anthropology," Robin demonstrates how the fame of scholars can provoke academic scandals which are designed for media spectacle. The case of Derek Freeman's attack on Margaret Mead's landmark study of sexuality and adolescence development in her classic 1928 text Coming of Age in Samoa, has become infamous due, in large part, to media exploitation. Indeed as Stephen Toulmin points out: "the public controversy was never a genuine academic discussion: rather it was made into an event by the press and television....But [Freeman's] worst mistake was that he let

Harvard University Press sensationalize his book in advance. As a result, he was sucked into a promotional campaign on the very terrain of public opinion where Margaret Mead's influence was most powerful and his own at its weakest."⁶

Bias, on the part of Mead, questionable research methodology, and her susceptibility to what he identified as a prank, played on her by some of her informants, are some of the charges made by Freeman in his 1983 book Margaret Mead and Samoa: The Making and Unmaking of an Anthropological Myth. The significance of media, the internet and public relations campaigns, initiated by scholars and their publishers to boost sales and promote academics and professional writers to celebrity status, is also part of the controversy provoked by journalist, Patrick Tierney's 2001 book Darkness in El Dorado: How Scientists and Journalist's Devastated the Amazon. Tierney attacked the research and findings of geneticist James Neil and anthropologist Napoleon Chagnon in relation to the Yanomami, an indigenous South American people, who live in the Amazon basin spanning Brazil and Venezuela. Cyberdebates, which were taken up by alternative and the popular press, concerning Tierney's accusations that Neil was involved in an aggressive, racist, possibly government sponsored genetic research program, and that Chagnon advanced sociobiological and Darwinian evolutionary positions, and promoted and incited violent behaviour on the part of Yanomami men, raged before the book was even published. This media mediated scandal, however, provoked an investigation, by the AAA (American Anthropology Association) into these charges.

Some of Tierney's most serious allegations were refuted, especially those which accused Neil of embracing eugenics and "abetting the spread of a deadly measles epidemic among the Yanomami," charges that were rejected by the committee. However, many of his critiques of Napoleon Chagnon, and what some described as checkbook anthropology, lead the AAA to criticize some of Chagnon's methodological practices and ethical behavior, especially in regards to the deleterious consequences of his depiction of the Yamomani people. "Even though the AAA task force declined to pass judgment on Chagnon's promotion of violence and his disruption of custom through gift giving, the report concluded that 'his representations of Yanomami ways of life were damaging to them and the that he made insufficient effort to undo the damage'" (Robin, p. 151).

Robin astutely points out the significance of the role of cyberspace and media contestation in revealing serious conflicts within historical and anthropological scholarly studies. What is missing from Robin's study is that underlying many of these scandals are critiques of patriarchal ideologies, and especially, challenges to the dominant scholarly canons of thought. Conservatives have been taking the culture wars very seriously and often attack radical scholars who take on conventional conservative wisdom and critique dominant institutions like patriarchy, the military, or gun culture. Wiener is surely right that which academic scandals become media spectacles and how they are presented is a function of the power of rightwing groups to influence media, ranging from Talk Radio, to TV broadcast, to the Internet, and press. Robin concludes: "The real need over the longer term is to find ways to counter the excessive power of right-wing groups. On many issues today, the right adopts uncompromising tactics and a combative stance. Those who don't share their values, who are in the political center as well as on the left, often lack the single-minded zeal of activists on the right and have priorities in their lives other than fulfilling particular political agendas" (pp. 213-214).

Wiener suggests that professional academic organizations, like the American Historical Association, and prestigious academic journals like the American Historical Review, need to get involved to adjudicate scholarly controversies and not leave it to the vicissitudes of media spectacle and organized campaigns by powerful groups. Media critics as well need to unpack both the form and content of media presentation of academic scandals and how certain groups deploy campaigns to advance their point of views. The flow of television encompasses everything from the most trivial events of pop culture to the most serious academic and political issues, and TV criticism needs to be broad enough to embrace a wide range of issues and controversies that flow over the ever-proliferating broadcast channels and new media.

Notes

¹ Ron Robin, Scandals and Scoundrels. Seven Cases That Shook The Academy. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004.

² See Peter H. King, "As History Repeats Itself, the Scholar Becomes the Story," Los Angeles Times, August 4, 2002.

³ See Jon Wiener, Historians in Trouble. Plagiarism, Fraud, and Politics in the Ivory Tower. New York: The New Press, 2004; Wiener has a web-page on his book that updates academic scandals at <http://jonwiener.com/historiansintrouble.html>

⁴ On how the rightwing echo chamber mobilizes television, talk radio, the Internet and other media to promote conservative hegemony, see Douglas Kellner, "Media Spectacle and Crisis of Democracy," in Flow http://idg.communication.utexas.edu/jot/output.php?=&pid=5&template=Flow_new&lb=1&p=0&s=0&jot=view&id=618.

⁵ See "Limbaugh admits addiction to pain medication," CNN.com, October 10, 2003 and John Pacenti, "Limbaugh allegedly 'doctor shopped' for pills," Palm Beach Post, December 5, 2003, as well as "O'Reilly Sued for Sexual Harassment," CBS News, October 13, 2004 and Howard Kurtz, "Bill O' Reilly, Producer Settle Harassment Suit," Washington Post, October 29, 2004. Conservative Republican William Bennett used to play the role of official morality czar, but when his Las Vegas gambling addiction became public, laced with stories of use of S&M prostitutes, he suddenly became less visible on the media radar as the scourge of immorality.

⁶ See Stephen Toulmin, "The Evolution of Margaret Mead," The New York Review of Books, December 6, 1984.