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Right of Reply: Israel's academic Left on the attack

By GERALD STEINBERG
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Seizing on fringe amendments long dropped from the discussion, the campaign against a law to ensure the public's 'right to know' is distorted as a defense of free speech.

Claiming to be under unprecedented threat, the powerful Israel academic Left has launched fierce counter-attacks on enemies, real and imagined, among which I and NGO Monitor are included prominently. Prof. David Newman has lashed out repeatedly in *The Jerusalem Post* ("[Bashing the academic left](#)," April 14, 2009; "[Who's monitoring the monitor?](#)" November 30, 2009; "[The politics of delegitimization](#)" February 9; and again in a [May 11 op-ed](#), coauthored with Sharon Pardo). After Newman was elected by like-minded colleagues as dean at Ben-Gurion University, he used an interview in the *Post* ("[How to make the next Buber](#)," May 11, 2010) to repeat the attacks.

Others involved in this ideological trench warfare include Prof. Daniel Bar-Tal. In a conference at Tel Aviv University, allegedly focused on academic free speech in the context of conflict, Bar-Tal condemned imagined "right-wing" McCarthyite threats to Israeli democracy and freedom of speech. The list of speakers also included, Prof. Galia Golan (Peace Now), Newman and Prof. Naomi Chazan, head of the controversial New Israel Fund. Chazan passionately wrapped herself in the bandages of victimization, while saying nothing when I presented the examples of how the NIF and partner organizations seek to silence their critics.

For this group, the right to free speech only applies to the Left. Their protests over the government's misguided attempt to keep radical Prof. Noam Chomsky from visiting Bir Zeit University would be more credible if they had not sought to silence Alan Dershowitz. The Harvard professor criticized the use of classrooms for political indoctrination at Tel Aviv University recently.

Other allegations in this campaign attack a fictitious version of a draft Knesset law on transparency for foreign government funding provided to Israeli nongovernmental organizations. A number of these NGOs support the Goldstone process, as well as the boycotts, divestment and sanctions campaign. But such core dimensions are all erased from the complaints. Instead, seizing on fringe amendments long dropped from the discussion, the campaign against a law to ensure the public's "right to know" is distorted as a defense of free speech.

NOT COINCIDENTALLY, many Leftist academics benefit directly from these highly secretive processes. For example, next week, Newman is a prominent speaker at a conference on "The External Relations of the European Union."

Looking at the program, observers might conclude that the participants were chosen from a narrow spectrum, perhaps to avoid serious academic debate. And coinciding with this conference, Newman's latest op-ed ("Doomed to succeed," May 11, with Sharon Pardo) lashes out yet again. This version warns darkly that "the recent attacks on the EU and its funding of civil society and human rights organizations and NGOs" will result in Israel's expulsion from "the family of nations for whom democracy and free speech constitute the most basic of common values."

In this demagoguery, the authors also hid the fact that this European money goes exclusively to leftist causes, and not to the wider Israeli civil society in whose name they claim to speak. Similarly, the use of the label

“human rights organizations” often hides the abuses of these principles, as highlighted in the tendentious accusations of “war crimes.”

More broadly, the very concept of an “academic Left” that Newman and others claim to defend is wrongheaded. Universities exist to teach students to think for themselves and to pursue knowledge, debunk myths and encourage debate, in contrast to the doctrinal nature of religion and ideology. An academic Left is as absurd as an academic Right – both ideological straitjackets are antithetical to the pursuit of knowledge and vigorous debate.

Such frameworks, which dominate European campuses and are spreading to the US, are inconsistent with complexity, open thought and substantive debate. This alternative universe has no room for intelligent people, including open-minded rationalists who seek a wide range of evidence, and analyze it openly and not through ideological filters.

All of this is entirely inconsistent with the values and professional ethics that provide the foundations for academic endeavors, and the privileged status of university professors. Instead of attacking the Right or Left for their views, real and imagined, we are supposed to welcome important debates to clarify complex issues needed to distinguish between scientifically supported theories and bunk. Unfortunately, in many areas, the ideological cant has overwhelms substantive debat

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