Book Reviews

Tenure for Socrates: A Study in the Betrayal of the American Professor—Jon Huer; Bergin & Garvey; 1991; 211 pp. ISBN 0-89789-244-5.

When academic tenure comes under attack from outside the academy, we anticipate the complaint that academic tenure provides job security for the incompetent, a sinecure for intellectual charlatans too lazy to do a decent day’s work. After all, tenure insures that faculty members in higher education cannot be fired from their jobs without just cause, and establishing the justice of a cause for termination, short of gross moral turpitude, is so difficult as to practically guarantee the jobs of all in academic life. On the other hand, we expect those inside the institution to understand that tenure protects not job security but academic freedom. Those whose professional lives depend on the sanctity of free inquiry and the right to challenge orthodoxy are obliged to know the history of tenure and to understand the forces that have threatened tenure in this century.

By a paradox central to tenure and academic freedom, even if we are distressed when a professor with tenure attacks the institution for the wrong reasons, we still must defend the professor’s right to attack because that right is the justification for tenure itself. All we can fairly insist is that the attacker be true to the commitments that academic freedom entails. We can demand that the attack be well reasoned, carefully presented, and based on accurate information.

Jon Huer’s Tenure for Socrates: A Study in the Betrayal of the American Professor tests the patience of a defender of academic tenure. Huer distorts academic life to make a point. He suggests most professors equate academic tenure with simple job security and regard tenure as the pinnacle of academic life (3). Although Huer insists that the purpose of tenure is to free professors from economic pressures so that they can pursue teaching and scholarship independently (6), he proclaims at length that professors seek tenure for the wrong reasons and squander their freedom by abandoning the search for truth.

On the positive side, Huer appreciates the historical value and origins of tenure, saying tenure is not a reward for a job well done, but was designed by universities to protect professors from the consequences of speaking the truth (11). Indeed, the book is in large part a tribute to American society and to the university for daring to invent tenure and so protect that segment of society most dangerous to society, social critics and seekers of truth.
The ambivalence of Huer's message results from his effort to defend tenure and attack those who enjoy it. After an opening section in which he describes tenure as "the greatest weapon mankind has ever invented" (13) and traces the history of academic tenure briefly, Huer devotes the second section of his book, "Truth and Academic Freedom," to exploring the ways the privileged members of our society, those with academic tenure, have betrayed their privilege. Here the shallowness of Huer's book reveals itself. For Huer's treatment of tenure and the tenured fails to examine with care the individuals who make up the culture he is evaluating. Instead, it reduces the professoriate to a caricature.

Symptomatic of the shortcomings of this book is Huer's analysis of academic disciplines. Huer gathers all academic disciplines into two groups: the functional disciplines and the academic disciplines. According to Huer's analysis, the functional disciplines (chemistry and accounting are his particular targets) have no need for tenure. If the professors of these practical disciplines were to lose their jobs, it would not be over issues of truth. Chemists and accountants have no concern with truth, only with facts. And if they lost their positions in the academy, they would simply go forth into corporations or industry, where they would easily find employers for their practical skills. The real need for tenure, Huer suggests, lies with the professors in the academic disciplines—philosophy and the arts, for example. The world has no practical use for philosophers, literary critics, and social theorists, and therefore these searchers after truth (in philosophy and the arts there are no facts) must have their jobs protected.

This reductive analysis of academic disciplines leaves the author's own discipline exposed. Sociology is neither practical nor academic. It lacks the methods of science, and its practitioners have abandoned the search for truth. Huer is particularly scornful of those in sociology who affect the scientific method. "Substantial scholarship, fairly abundant in [sociology's] early development, has now been replaced by 'functional' research. Sociologists must appear 'scientific,' talk 'research,' and work with the 'computer'" (38). In the place of modern sociologists Huer would put his favorite social critics, C. Wright Mills and Thorstein Veblen. From the long history of social criticism he would preserve Plato and Marx.

The main point of Tenure for Socrates is that the privilege of tenure entails a corresponding obligation to serve the society by being its critic. As we learn in section three, "Truth in Society," the professoriate has a duty to criticize the competitive market system that keeps ordinary citizens under the heel of oppression. Huer finds the justification for his position in the principle he attributes to Lord Acton: power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely. The goal of all institutions, from the society at large down to the American university, is to protect themselves
by acquiring power. Because of the law articulated by Acton, the more institutions succeed in their first purpose, to become more powerful, the more corrupt they become. The defense against this destructive but inevitable progress is a vigorous class of social critics who can keep the institution honest by pursuing a selfless higher truth and attacking the abuse of power. It is the genius of American democracy, and especially of the American academy, that we have singled out and protected a single class of citizens, tenured professors, to criticize the institution that protects them.

That the professoriate has failed in its duty accounts for the subtitle of Huer’s book, “A Study in the Betrayal of the American Professor.” Somehow the professoriate has become too caught up in the society’s values to serve its true function. These values, in Huer’s cynical view, are those to be found “in the ‘Me Generation,’ the first fully selfinterested generation the world has ever seen. They are in the appalling decline of moral life and in the proliferation of sleaze in high offices as well as in the ordinary habits of mind. They are in the Disney World mentality in pursuit of fantasy life, get-rich-quick schemes, easy escape from realities” (132).

The most interesting chapter of the book is “The Americanization of Marx.” Huer maintains that the Marxist professor poses the most serious threat to a capitalist society, but at the same time offers “the most beneficial function for American society’s own improvement and perfection” (145). To the Marxist, capitalism is wrong and must be attacked. For that reason American society fears Marxism and has throughout the twentieth century. Yet in the American academy the professor has a right to tenure and academic freedom. As a result, the Marxist professor has the right, indeed the obligation, to attack the institution that provides protection. If successful, the Marxist movement would bring down the institution that allows the Marxist to exist. Huer’s solution to the dilemma created by Marxism is that American Marxists should present the Marxist truth without endorsing a Marxist movement. Good truth-seeking professors—academic professors—are not practical activists in any case. Marxist professors must give up the inflammatory language, words like “dialectic” and “exploitation” (151). America, on its side, must embrace Marxist critics, the society’s most severe and dangerous critics, on the grounds that informed, pointed criticism is the surest path to self-correction.

Although Huer’s message is obscured by his vicious attack on tenured professors, Tenure for Socrates is finally a defense of tenure. Despite the generally strident tone, the book presents its wisdom in an appealing aphoristic style. The central aphorism, on which the book depends, is that “those who need tenure do not have it, and those who
have tenure do not need it" (178). “Tenure is a privilege, and all privileges eventually corrupt,” says Huer (4). Later, discussing the mission of the professor, Huer says, “Truth is the end and livelihood the means. When livelihood becomes his end and truth his means, we witness potentially the most corrupt transformation of a noble idea” (78). Out of context, Huer’s claims are salty and fun. Huer even has the grace to acknowledge in his introduction that he owes to tenure the privilege of writing his attack: “My special thanks goes to UNC-Wilmington for making this near miracle possible” (xvi).

But the book has regrettable flaws in its presentation. For example, the book is badly edited. Mechanical sentence flaws are the result of carelessness, I am sure. Where the text says, “Nursing instructors are much more sanguine about life in general than and untenured juniors in history” (16), we have to assume some words were unintentionally left out. Occasionally the weakness is in style. When Huer is justifying his simplified classification of university disciplines, he makes the following statements: “After all, the best classification is neither most exhaustive nor most accurate; it is most serviceable for the purpose in hand. And the academic-functional dichotomy should do just that” (17). The first sentence provides no verb to which do can refer.

The offense against editing taste that I find most troubling is the sexist bias in the language. Early in the book Huer justifies his persistent use of the masculine pronoun to refer to all professors by saying “the tenured seniority consists predominantly of male professors (five to one)” (xv). Yet later in the text, where he is not talking specifically about tenured professors, he says, “it may be thought that more money or more things will make a man happier” (61). He resorts to gender stereotyping as a source of humor, saying the fear of imitation in academic pursuits “is like the fear of a woman who goes to a party only to find, to her horror, that someone else is wearing the same dress” (75), and later, “A man’s character is perhaps best revealed by what his ex-wife says about him” (148).

Damaging to the scholarly persuasiveness of Tenure for Socrates is that the examinations of the culture on which the book is based are out of date. Referring to the social critics he admires, Huer mentions C. Wright Mills, David Riesman, Richard Sennett, Christopher Lasch, Andrew Hacker, William Whyte, and John Kenneth Galbraith (70). The most recent of the publications cited in support of this note of praise is Lasch’s The Culture of Narcissism, published in 1979. The references to the literature on tenure and academic freedom include some few pieces published in Academe during the 1980s, but the majority of the works cited are from the 1950s and 1960s. The source on which Huer relies most heavily is a volume edited by Edmund L. Pincoffs, The Concept of Academic Freedom, published in 1972.
In the end this small book by Jon Huer (203 pages plus bibliography and index) fails to provide the solid defense of tenure the author apparently intended. The research is dated, the analysis is slanted and oversimplified, and the presentation is careless. Jon Huer has set himself a challenging task, to defend the institution and at the same time attack those who embody it. Huer has the right to take on this task without putting his job on the line. As a reader and as a defender of academic tenure, I wish Jon Huer had lived up to the truth-seeking ideal on which the book is based.

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Every book generates itself from within some desire—more or less consciously specified—and fulfills or completes that desire (more or less successfully) through the labor of writing. Jarratt describes the desire from which her work moves in this way: “I begin with an impulse, a wish, an intuition—a desire for a different kind of history.” The sophists, of course, are the object of desire here as well as a different form of historical reflection. Jarratt turns to the sophistic tradition to expand our conceptualization of classical rhetoric which, she rightly claims, has been dominated too long by Aristotle, Cicero, and Quintilian. Following Friedrich Nietzsche, Michel Foucault, and Hayden White, and working alongside other revisionary historians in rhetoric and composition studies (e.g., Sharon Crowley, John Schilb, James Berlin, Victor Vitanza), Jarratt conceives history not as a science but as a kind of strategic intervention in the present. Thus, a history of sophistic rhetoric is meant to serve as “an alternative warrant” for contemporary rhetoric and composition studies. The desire for a different kind of history is also a desire for a different kind of future.

In a clearly written, highly readable style, Rereading the Sophists broaches the question of history and historiography most directly in the first chapter, where Jarratt looks to the sophists (particularly Gorgias and Protagoras) for a particular attitude toward history and for an identifiable practice of historiography. She aligns sophistic practice with a poststructuralist theory of history (e.g., Nietzschean genealogy), arguing that the sophists’ own historical work provides a model for rhetorical