Repression in Academia: A Report from the Field

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Amidst the cornfields of central Illinois stand the twin cities of Champaign-Urbana wherein can be found that growing congestion of graceless brick buildings known as the University of Illinois. Within the university are men who research such matters as "Stability and Rebellion in Guatemala" and who write reports which, while sometimes called "unclassified," are never intended for publication. Other scholars at the U. of I. have been pushing hard for the construction of a Pentagon-financed twenty-four million-dollar computer center (Illiac IV); its functions would be, among other things, to develop a world weather map for strategic aerial bombing and new methods for detecting and controlling insurgency at home and abroad. For handsome fees and contracts, faculty members provide a variety of research and consultation services to business, industry, law, engineering, and agricultural corporations. The more prominent of these corporations use the campus periodically to hold business conventions and to recruit from among those students who are trained at public expense in the skills and dedications of private enterprise.

On this same campus, certain university facilities are devoted to ROTC programs of a content difficult to justify by normal academic standards. And armed forces have privileged access to the campus for purposes of recruitment. In short, the U. of I. performs a wide range of services–from advanced research to specialized personnel training and recruitment–which are essential to military and corporate interests. The university also has a more immediate investment in the corporate-military structure in the form of a substantial stock portfolio.

On this same campus there can be found professors and administrators, including many engaged in the activities mentioned above, who argue with all apparent seriousness that a university is a place apart from the immediate partisan interests of this world. Those students and faculty who protest against the U. of I.'s involvement in military and corporate interests are seen by the more establishment-oriented people as using the campus to inject "outside" partisan issues into a dispassionate neutral community of scholars. The protesters frequently find themselves in the curious position of being accused of the very thing they are protesting: university involvement with outside special interests. Thus, in its worldly complicity and other-worldly pretensions, in its realities and illusions, the University of Illinois differs little

from most other American institutions of higher learning.

Save for the standard peace marches, there had been little antiwar activity at the University of Illinois until one day in early March of 1970 when a group of about two hundred people demonstrated against a General Electric recruitment team that had set up office on campus. Several of the protesters were beaten and arrested by the police when attempting to force their way into the building. A few hours later it was announced that the board of trustees had voted in an emergency session to bar William Kunstler from speaking on the campus. In the eyes of many students, the university was revealing the true nature of its commitments. A corporation like G.E. with its extensive involvement in the military-industrial war machine was being granted privileged access to the campus for purposes of manpower recruitment, while Kunstler and his audience were to be denied their rights to an open forum. Enraged by the actions of the police and the trustees, a crowd of more than one thousand took to the streets that evening, blocking traffic, stoning the windows of several of the more over-priced and unpopular campus stores, as well as the windows of the administration building and the armory buildings where ROTC was housed.

During these occurrences I was out of town lecturing at another university, ironically enough on "Power and Protest." I returned to witness two more nights of demonstrations, rallies, minor trashing, and the imposition of a curfew that was enforced with numerous arrests and much unnecessary brutality. Most commonly, students caught in the streets after curfew were chased and clubbed by police in what looked at times like a primitive rabbit hunt. From the window of a campus building I witnessed a girl pursued, beaten over the head, and then dragged apparently unconsicous to a police car. In the days to follow, it was a cause of dismay to some of us that U. of I. Chancellor Jack Peltason, a former political scientist, issued statements of undiluted praise for the police while offering them not a word of criticism or urging any restraint.

For the next two months the administration weeded out the activist students, many of whom had not been arrested in the March disturbances but who were known to be of radical persuasion. In violation of the university's own procedure, the Chancellor bypassed the faculty-student committee that had been newly established to deal with discipline cases and invited a prominent Illinois lawyer (whose firm was on retainer with the university) to preside as an ostensibly disinterested investigator over suspension hearings involving some forty students.

Other measures were taken in the name of security. The campus police, notoriously inept at protecting students from the numerous robberies, assaults, and rapes that plague the campus community, have devoted their main efforts, like any good counter-insurgency force, not to the safeguarding of individual life and limb but to protecting the U. of I. administration from

its own populace. Elaborate and detailed dossiers are kept on hundreds of students and scores of faculty; newspaper clippings in which a name has appeared in association with a controversial issue or event, other statements made at public or organizational meetings as reported by police agents, photographs documenting someone's presence at a rally, teach-in, or demonstration—such are the kinds of things to be found in one's security file. The campus police know the names and faces of the "troublemakers" and of many others who would be surprised to discover themselves deserving such attentions. For weeks after the March events, university police were busy taking snapshots of people on campus, issuing suspension warrants, and filing complaints in criminal court. Scores of students were arrested, held for bail, and released. In most cases charges were dropped months later for lack of evidence, indicating the purpose of the arrest to have been not prosecution but intimidation. After being released, some students were then re-arrested a second and a third time in their homes or dormitories on charges for which the specifics were sometimes hard to determine.

Not long after this purge seemed to have run its course, Mr. Nixon invaded Cambodia, guardsmen killed four Kent State students, and a local Champaign policeman killed a black man named Edgar Hoults. From all evidence Hoults, a bookstore employee, was innocent of any crime except driving without a license, but he made the mistake of taking flight when police approached, and was shot in the back without warning. The culpable officer was indicted for voluntary manslaughter, later reduced to involuntary manslaughter, and released on five-thousand-dollar bond—another familiar story.

On the evening after the murder of Hoults and the Kent State murders, a crowd of more than three thousand attended a rally called by student leaders. Several students and faculty, including this writer, spoke in support of an immediate strike to protest Cambodia, Kent State, the Hoults murder, police brutality, and the presence of ROTC and the Illiac IV computer on campus. The next day, May 6, 1970, saw the strike gathering momentum; pickets were appearing in front of the major buildings; thousands of students were staying away from classes.

That same afternoon I joined a group of students and faculty standing in a service driveway. The group was engaged in an altercation with university police in an effort to determine why a garbage truck had been backed into a crowd of striking students with no effort made to clear the driveway and at a substantial risk to the people present. The verbal exchange was summarily ended when approximately fifty club-swinging state troopers charged into the crowd without warning. Several students were knocked down; others were pushed into the shrubbery; one had his front teeth bashed out by a police club. I was clubbed full force over my left eye and on the back of my head. After being knocked to the ground, I was clubbed on the legs, kicked and beaten on the back, chest, and neck. Another political scientist, Philip

Meranto, came racing into the knot of policemen surrounding me, shouting at them to leave me alone. Professor Meranto threw himself on me in a courageous attempt to absorb some of the punishment only to be dragged off, kicked and held face down in the driveway. While the crowd was held back by a force of troopers and university police, Meranto and I were hand cuffed and driven to the university police station along with several students arrested in the same incident.

I was held without medical care for approximately an hour, my face, head, and neck soaked in my own blood. Outside the station a crowd of about one thousand angry students were facing a ring of police armed with shotguns. In the adjacent hallway I heard an officer, whom I could not identify, say, "If I had gotten a good clean first lick on him, he would be a dead man now." Soon after, three men in plainclothes, standing more directly in my view, began a conversation in low but excited tones. I heard one remark: "That's the one who gave the speech last night. Now the Chancellor will want us to put the heat on." During this time a man entered the room to look at my wounds, and began questioning me while making a great show of friendly concern. His inquiries invited inquiries of my own, and he eventually admitted that he was not a doctor but an FBI agent. In response to my refusal to provide him with any details, he made a point of telling me, "That's okay, we know all about you, Michael John" (the use of my middle name probably intended to impress me with the intimacy of his knowledge).

Eventually I was taken to the hospital where I received twelve stitches on my face and head and X-rays for internal injuries. I was then transported to a state jail where I was booked, fingerprinted, and held in a cell for some thirty sleepless hours, my head burning and my body shivering, without knowledge of the charges against me and having been denied repeated requests to see my doctor and my lawyer. I was released the next day on a ten-thousand-dollar bond—by the same judge who had set a five-thousand-dollar bond on the policeman who had killed Edgar Hoults—and charged with five counts including, much to my astonishment, aggravated battery. A state trooper testified during my preliminary hearing that I had chipped his tooth with my "hand." (Earlier he had reported to university officials that I had struck him with a "hard object." On a later occasion he said he was hit by a "fist." Whichever it be, I and other eyewitnesses knew his story to be either a fabrication or a case of mistaken identity.) Professor Meranto, who had been arrested with me, was re-arrested the next day while appearing in court for his arraignment. The same state trooper, apparently capable of instant testimony, told the court that Meranto's knee had "brushed" against his leg; a complaint of aggravated battery was filed against Meranto, and he, too, was released under a ten-thousand-dollar bond by the same judge.

Chancellor Jack Peltason did not offer any assistance to the two of us who had been mistreated, arrested, and falsely charged; he did not call for an investi-

gation of the incident to ascertain whether justice had been done; he made no effort to determine whether his security officers were dangerous fools in ordering the garbage truck back into the crowd. Rather, it was his office that filed the complaints against Professor Meranto and me, and on the day of our release Peltason announced to the press that the status of our positions at the university was under close review. In glowing terms he also voiced his confidence in the particular security officer who had so determinedly protected the rights of a garbage truck. (Students were demanding that the officer be fired.)

The beating and the arrests further galvanized the students. As at Columbia, Harvard, and elsewhere, great numbers seemed ready to set aside their political differences and close ranks when their own people were being attacked by the police. Some ten thousand rallied the day after my arrest, congregating with the intention of violating that evening's curfew despite the presence of a National Guard contingent, an act of defiance which caused civil authorities to lift the curfew. The strike, now involving the great majority of the students, continued for the next week or so, replete with pickets, demonstrations, "liberated classes," and over a hundred more arrests and numerous beatings by the free-swinging forces of law and order.

During the strike, fifteen political scientists formed a "Faculty for Resistance" and promulgated a statement condemning President Nixon, the Cambodian invasion, the Vietnam War, the Kent State killings, the systematic murder of black militants, and the increasing repression of dissent. They vowed to devote their time to teaching students how to "intellectually arm" and protect themselves from "the encroachments of a criminal regime."

As in March, the return of normalcy in mid-May of 1970 brought with it the usual threats and retributions. Some graduate students who had been active in the strike found themselves faced with loss of fellowships and teaching assistantships. At least two TA's were dismissed outright. Professor Meranto, who previously had been assured of tenure and promotion because of his teaching and publications, and whose only crime had been to try to protect a colleague from physical harm, was informed by the Director of the Institute of Government and Public Affairs that it would be wise to begin searching for a new position. At the same time, young instructors in various departments were informed that "any strike activities" would in the future be grounds for cancellation of contract. Chancellor Peltason sent a letter to all department heads to have their faculty account for their time during the week of the strike.

Peltason personally wrote to inform me that the allegations against me (which he referred to as allegations but then assumed to be true) were grounds for dismissal, but that, since I was departing anyway, he decided that the matter was to be filed in my "permanent record file," and made available to any university, public agency, or prospective employer wanting infor-

mation on me. He also informed me that for the duration of my stay he would see that I "be reassigned to the extent necessary to eliminate any further interaction with students in [my] teaching or research functions." In response I informed him that I disliked being judged guilty on a matter pending before the courts, that the threat to make a dossier available to other prospective employers savored of blacklisting, and that any attempt to interfere with my interaction with students would only be a further infringement of my civil liberties.

In the weeks after the strike, I found myself undergoing a trial by newspaper and radio. One local talk show kept referring to a "violent Professor Parenti" who "stuffed a brick in a policeman's face" and who "stirred up the students to riot." Professor Meranto and I were informed by a sympathetic and usually reliable newspaper reporter that we were on an "elimination list" compiled by a coterie of local police and that we had better take precautions. Two students also reported separate conversations they had had with campus police who spoke of their intent to "get Parenti." For the first two weeks after the strike, whenever Meranto and I were either driving or walking together, we found ourselves tailed by police. One evening during the strike, a patrol car followed me home and then staked out directly in front of my house for the entire night. I left via a backyard path under cover of darkness and spent several days at a friend's house. The mother of a lady friend of mine was visited at her Chicago residence by FBI agents who unsettled her with the information that her daughter was in the company of a "dangerous revolutionary," who was being kept "under constant surveillance." They also inquired as to the exact nature of her daughter's relationship to me—information which the woman did not possess.

The political scientists who signed the "Faculty for Resistance" statement in the spring of 1970 did not fare too well either. A *Chicago Tribune* editorial, accusing them of being "academic vipers," guilty of "unprofessional and unethical conduct and academic incompetence," called for their dismissal. Soon afterward, a state senator took up the cry and the U. of I. board of trustees demanded that the fifteen retract their "Statement of Resistance" or face further action. One board member suggested that their classes should be monitored. Two of the original signers wrote a very conciliatory letter which the trustees accepted as repentance. The remaining thirteen sent a clarifying but uncompromising response and the trustees voted unanimously to rebuke them for using "without explanation or justification" such terms in their original statement as "official racism," "present societal madness," the "systematic elimination of black militants," and "a criminal regime." One trustee called it "anarchist language," but all agreed that the thirteen were guilty of inaccurate and unrestrained descriptions of America which did not reflect "the standards of scholarly and professional expression expected of faculty members." Thus did the business executives, realty ty-

coons, big merchants, corporate lawyers, and successful speculators and investors who compose the U. of I. board of trustees become the self-appointed experts and final judges of scholarly performance.

Repressive measures extended beyond the boundaries of the University of Illinois; one of the thirteen signers was turned down for a job at Purdue University, being considered too "controversial." One U. of I. political science graduate student, applying for a teaching position at an Indiana state college, was informed by the department chairman that the school's administration had already rejected two applicants because of their "radical propensities" and that no interviews could be arranged with any "radical or SDS types." Another political science graduate student provided me with a written account of his job-hunting experience. I quote from his letter:

> ...From first to last the item of highest priority was student issues, the complaints they were raising and the trouble they caused. Of much less importance were my qualifications for the position. Since I generally found myself at odds with my questioners about the major topics at hand and since I wanted the job, I tried to balance diplomacy and honesty, with little success. Feigning ignorance of the facts or little concern about the problem partially accomplished the former; trying to show empathy (as opposed to agreement) with the students partly accomplished the latter. Naturally the result of all this was an unsettling feeling that I had sold out but not enough.

Another job seeker reflected on his experiences: "At one place I was asked a continuous barrage of questions about student disorders and black militants. Perhaps my interviewers never realized they were administering a loyalty test." A colleague of senior rank comments: "[One school] refused me because they felt my recent involvement with political issues showed a lack of scholarly detachment, even though my past work was quite scholarly...." The experiences of people at Illinois, of course, are representative of what has been happening to colleagues at Purdue, Simon Fraser, Stanford, SUNY at Buffalo, and other places too numerous to mention.

The following October I returned to Illinois to stand trial for aggravated battery, disorderly conduct, and resisting arrest (two other charges were dropped). Given the climate of opinion in Champaign County, my lawyer advised that I waive jury trial and settle for a bench trial. The presiding judge, an elderly man named Birch Morgan, heard the testimony of two state troopers, both of whom gave widely contradictory accounts of what transpired.

The trooper with the chipped tooth testified that he was struck by an open hand. On cross-examination he admitted he never saw the blow struck but was sure I had done it when attempting to rise to my feet from a sitting position. The trooper who clubbed me described me as standing upright, toe-to-toe with the "injured" officer, delivering a succession of

blows upon him with clenched fists while he stood there motionlessly and helplessly with his helmet, face-visor, and riot baton. (I am five feet, six inches tall; the trooper with the chipped tooth is six feet, three inches tall.) My lawyer presented six witnesses (besides myself) who described in detail my actions of that day. All of them testified that I never struck anyone and that I at no time resisted arrest. At the close of the trial, friends of mine who had observed the proceedings were confident and indeed jubilant that the state had not established a case.

The following day, Judge Morgan delivered his opinion. It was a most remarkable one. He chose to ignore both the conflicts in the testimonies given by the troopers and the consistencies in the testimonies of defense witnesses. Without benefit of evidence, he implied that I must have been the instigator of the entire garbage truck incident. He observed that I had "no business being there in the first place." By focusing on a few minor discrepancies in their testimony (e.g., whether the garbage truck was facing north or south), Morgan concluded that defense witnesses were hopelessly confused. He argued that the most credible testimony was that of the troopers; his final declaration was: "I can't believe a state trooper would hit anyone for no reason." It seems, then, that my beating was proof of my culpability. The trial was merely to determine the exact nature of my crime.

Having established the infallibility of law enforcement agents, the judge found me "guilty beyond a reasonable doubt" on all three counts. In the opinion of many of my supporters, I was tried and convicted because of my highly visible political activities. Interestingly enough, this is also the opinion of certain unsympathetic people who, have indicated, in so many words, that "it serves you right."

Sentencing in my case was delayed until June 1971, at which time I was given two years' probation, fined $250, and ordered to pay court costs of $430. During the interim, Meranto was tried, found guilty of disorderly conduct, and sentenced to one year's probation and court costs. Both cases are being appealed.

It might be added that not long after my conviction, Morgan's court heard the case of the policeman who had killed the black man, Edgar Hoults. A number of black residents testified that they saw the officer take deliberate aim and shoot Hoults from a distance of about fifty feet. The officer claimed he tripped and his gun went off accidentally. An all-white, middle-American jury found the policeman innocent of second-degree murder and innocent also of the lesser count of involuntary manslaughter.

I would like to offer several observations concerning the events described herein:

1. While the established authorities expect others to treat regulations and procedures as inviolate, they were themselves not above playing fast with

these rules when it served their interests. Witness Peltason's bypassing of the student-faculty discipline committee in favor of a hand-picked hearing officer, or the treatment meted out to Meranto who, according to the rules, qualified for promotion because of his exceptional capabilities as scholar and teacher, or the suspension of TA contracts and the bypassing of qualified but politically bothersome graduate students, or the many other politically motivated hiring and firing practices encountered throughout the profession.

Or consider the following reports. Not long after the radical students at the U. of I. won control of the student government in an election against two competing slates and on an openly professed radical platform, student government found certain of its supplies and funds cut off. When students attempted to establish a non-disruptive dialogue with workers by leafletting in front of the Magnavox factory in Urbana—and received a surprisingly sympathetic response from employees passing through the gate—they were run off the street by police under threat of arrest for "disorderly conduct" and "disrupting traffic." Students who stopped delivery trucks approaching the U. of I. campus and persuaded the first two incoming truck drivers, in the best tradition of trade unionism, to honor the picket line were forcibly dispersed, clubbed, and arrested by police who follow their own traditions in such matters. At no time did the striking students seek to block any other student from going to class. Pickets, teach-ins, liberation classes, and spontaneous discussions were the methods used by the dissenters with their fellow students—and with much success. Most of the actual coercion came from the other side, from police who constantly resorted to excessive and unnecessary force, from unsympathetic faculty who deliberately scheduled examinations during the strike and threatened absenting students with failure, and from administrators who threatened and carried out suspensions and expulsions against strike leaders.

Dialogue, persuasion, appealing to the minds of others, then, are all very well until such tactics begin to generate real support for the dissenters. Then the rules are suspended. The real question is: how do we get the guardians to abide by the law and order which they profess to uphold?

Abe Fortas, in a book which won the kudos of the liberal establishment, wrote in one neglected passage that the police "too, are subject to the rule of law, and if they exceed the authorized bounds of firmness and self-protection and needlessly assaulted the people whom they encountered, they should be disciplined, tried and convicted. It is a deplorable truth that because they are officers of the state they frequently escape the penalty for their lawlessness." They escape the penalty, I would add, because those who rely on them sanction their force and violence, however unlawful it might be. In most instances, college presidents have proved themselves no more publicly critical of police abuse and excesses than Mayor Daley. Far from

being critical, they are congratulatory.

2. Those who are quiescent and conformist and who yet fear the backlash that would rob them of what they consider to be their liberties have a most imperfect notion of how repression works. Contrary to Orwell's *1984*, a book which seems to have achieved a curious authority on this question, ordinary citizens, including college professors, are not hounded in the intimacies of their lives for enunciating ideologically innocuous thoughts and theories, especially if they obey the tax laws, draft laws, and other laws which put them, for all practical purposes, in complicity with the needs and interests of the established policy makers. They will almost always be left alone if only because the state has no interest in doing otherwise. If this is the freedom some people seek to preserve, they will always be free.

This was the freedom we all enjoyed during the McCarthy period of 1950-1954 when there was less active repression by public agencies than today because we more thoroughly repressed ourselves. In those days we refused to sign protest statements or join controversial organizations; we never dreamed of burning our draft cards; we never considered refusing to pay taxes or walking in a picket line or engaging in a sit-in; we worried much more about maintaining non-controversial and pleasing appearances than we do today, and much more about which of our opinions might get us into trouble with what future employer or what public authority. There are those who will always counsel that the best way to preserve our freedom of movement is by lying still, and this is what we did through the McCarthy period. We lay in fear lest a worse repression come get us.

Not surprisingly, those academics who are fearfully preoccupied with the backlash of tomorrow tend to give less than adequate attention to the repression of today. But their more outspoken and activist colleagues know better—those who have undergone FBI investigations, been followed, staked out, threatened and beaten by the police, faced with unjust charges, expensive court trials and possible imprisonment, and made to suffer loss of employment despite proven capabilities. It is a rare militant—especially a rare black militant—who is not either under indictment, or in jail or in hiding, or in exile or dead. In view of all this, we find it curious that some of our colleagues keep speaking of repression in the future tense. By doing so, of course, they preserve the illusion that they are free. But they might worry less about the anticipated repression of *1984* and deal more with the repression at hand. Their gaze is so fearfully fixed downward on some imagined hell that they cannot confront the enormities of this earth.

3. A growing number of students and faculty are coming to the realization that the university is an institution with major commitments to powerful economic and military interests and that it is therefore structurally incapable of responding to the ostensibly moderate and reformist demands set forth by dissenters.

That top administrators, be they hidebound conservatives or new-breed liberals, are so unresponsive to demands for change may be due less to their personal obdurateness and more to the fact that their institutions serve the needs of powerful corporate and governmental forces, and such forces are not ready to forego the often indispensable services and resources of the university merely to placate the protesters. Far from being uncomprehending, college authorities comprehend all too well; they realize that the apparently limited and reasonable demands for reform strike at some essential arrangements in the class-power-ideological structure of America. To respond to such reforms is to recast the university's role in the corporate-military establishment and that establishment's role in American society and in the world.

And this may bring us to the heart of the matter. Instead of talking about the necessity for sweeping changes, we might examine why such changes never materialize; why and how present material, social, and power relations prevail, and why the results of our best efforts—regardless of what the gradualists say—do not bring us to flexible, viable transformations but to bloodied heads.