Academic Freedom Under Pressure

No Ivory Tower. McCarthyism and the Universities. ELLEN W. SCHRECKER. Oxford University Press, New York, 1986. x, 437 pp. $20.95.

"McCarthyism" is a generic term. In this valuable account of American universities from the 1930's to the mid-1950's Ellen Schrecker, a lecturer in history at Princeton University and the New School, uses it broadly to describe the academy's eviction of suspected Communists from its midst, in collaboration with the red hunt being waged by state and federal agencies and in violation of its hallowed canon of academic freedom. The necessity of squaring the principle of academic freedom with the practice of repression (for never did the academy cease to uphold the principle) provides a central element of tension in this book. Schrecker's contribution is not so much to have added another piece to the picture of the national phenomenon we call McCarthyism as it is to have raised anew questions about the character and conduct of the American university, particularly under conditions of stress.

The sources for this subject are diffuse and often fugitive. Schrecker was able to draw upon a large, albeit uneven, body of secondary literature on American Communism, anti-Communism, and McCarthyism in its various guises. The primary sources were harder to come by: the American Association of University Professors only opened its archives when her manuscript was in its final stages; universities were "haphazard" in granting access to their records (p. 350); and it took the combined skills of "journalist," "detective," and "pest" (p. 343) to locate individuals, correspondence, minutes, transcripts, and other memorabilia for a subject about which reticence persists. Oral history was an invaluable aid; Schrecker identifies by name 138 people she interviewed (others, she says, requested anonymity) and cites 28 interviews conducted by others (for example at the American Institute of Physics and the Columbia University Oral History Research Office). When the record for an important subject is incomplete, as, for example, it is about the blacklist, Schrecker reluctantly and responsibly draws conclusions from inference and speculation. This book is informed by a very clear judgment: for the academic world to have succumbed to anti-Communism and purged its ranks of suspects, particularly during the McCarthy years, represented an abdication of principle and a failure of nerve. But it is not a judgmental book; its aim is to describe and explain an important chapter in American academic history.

Schrecker does not attempt a survey of American colleges and universities to determine systematically the number and kinds of institutions that committed abuses of academic freedom; she moves back from the academic freedom cases to the institutions where they occurred. In this respect the book lacks methodological rigor; yet it makes a compelling case for the ubiquity of abuses and the variety of institutions in which they took place. About 100 individuals lost their jobs in the campus purges; there is reason to believe that this number would be much larger if we could count the untenured faculty who were dismissed simply by not being rehired; and we never will know how many people lived in dread of being fired if their past political associations and activity became known.

The activity in question was membership in the Communist Party, during the 1930's and 1940's. Schrecker describes academic Communists as "neither dupes nor conspirators" but serious men and women drawn to the party through the trauma of the Depression, the rise of fascism, and the Spanish Civil War. "They did not let the Party interfere with their academic work and, in fact, consciously strove to keep their political activities separate from their scholarly ones. . . .they did not proselytize in class or try to subvert their universities" (pp. 61–62). The American academy never welcomed left-wing radicals, but Schrecker points out that it did not go after even known Communists on the faculty until outside pressure to do so became intense. Then there was a two-stage process, by which suspects first were identified by legislative committees and then were fired by their institutions. By the time the purges were at their peak, around 1953–54, the American Communist Party had long since lost its effectiveness and appeal, there was no organized political activity on campus, and most academics had left the party by breaking with it or by drifting away. But by then the view of the Communist Party as a conspiratorial organization, under the Soviet Union's thumb and requiring that its members engage in subterfuge and deceit, appeared to render Communists morally and professionally unfit to teach, and the academic community was caught up in the nationwide inquisition to ferret out the hidden enemy.

The story is grim. Communists were not in the majority of cases allowed to speak on college campuses. No institution would hire a known or suspected Communist, and college presidents made it clear that academic freedom would not protect the jobs of individuals who belonged to the Party. To retain their jobs those who were called before congressional investigating committees on suspicion of being Communists had to prove themselves innocent (use of the Fifth Amendment right against self-incrimination was for a long time treated as evidence of guilt), and they frequently were under constraint by their institutions to inform on others. Not only were academics being victimized by their institutions for what they might have done in the past, they sometimes were fired because of what they might do in the future—that is, refuse to become informers. This was such a bizarre perversion of academic personnel procedures that administrators used subterfuge to accomplish it, for example giving bureaucratic or personality reasons for the termination of employment. Here Schrecker makes a cogent observation: administrators, she says, engaged in "furtive behavior" at precisely the time "they were imposing an obligation of candor upon the rest of the academic community." This contradiction "suggests how seriously the nation's colleges and universities had been compromised by their collaboration with McCarthyism" (p. 266). Fired professors were unable to find other university positions in the United States (the evidence for a blacklist is intangible but suggestive) and had to improvise to earn a living until the witch-hunt abated, in the late 1950's. By then, ruined lives and a badly compromised academic community were testimony to McCarthyism's toll.

This summary should not be taken to suggest that Schrecker has painted a monochromatic picture by building a case on generalization. To the contrary, her description of academic institutions' responses to outside assaults on their members includes full and fair accounts of differences within and among them. When it comes to explaining what she so well describes, however, she is less successful.

Schrecker correctly perceives that institutional loyalty crippled the will and capacity of faculty and administrators to defend individual rights, but she does not take this observation far enough. She blames faculty and administrators, "who could have, had they wanted to, prevented much of what happened," for reacting to outside pressure

in ways that would best "protect or enhance their school's reputation." This, she concludes, rendered academic freedom "an essentially corporate protection" (pp. 11, 23). The real dilemma McCarthyism created for the academy and the real conflict it provoked in individuals need more serious consideration. As the institutional home of the higher learning, the university provides and protects the conditions necessary for scholar-teachers to work. For that reason institutional autonomy is as essential to academic freedom as individual rights. The American university always has had an uncertain and uneasy relationship with society. The McCarthyite attack on the academy presented a real Catch 22: it appeared necessary to sacrifice individuals to protect institutions that were necessary to protect individuals. In the 1960's when the university no longer was perceived as the protector of humane values, for several of its constituencies institutional loyalty collapsed.

Schrecker is particularly concerned about the failure of faculty to stand up for their colleagues. Among her explanations for that failure are agreement with the verdict of the firings; persistent "gentlemanliness," which made professors reluctant to attack presidents; belief that it was more effective to work behind the scenes; fear of getting fired; and the AAUP's abysmal failure "to perform its expected function," which, she says, "contributed as much, if not more, to the inability of the nation's college teachers to protect their colleagues as the shortcomings of individual professors and faculties" (p. 315). Schrecker's description of "bureaucratic torpor" at the AAUP, particularly under the last years of Ralph Himstead's general secretaryship, makes a real contribution to knowledge. But her observation that AAUP censure, when it finally did come, proved to be little more than an "irksome annoyance," undercuts her charge that the organization bears a central responsibility for what happened.

At bottom, "most of the men and women who participated in or condoned the firing of their controversial colleagues did so because they sincerely believed that what they were doing was in the nation's interest" (p. 340). If it is so that the academic community really believed that national security was at stake in the search for subversives, we need look no further for explanations of why it collaborated with McCarthyism. The episode is as much a reflection of credulity and provincialism in the American academy as it is of faint-hearted commitment to principle.

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Physics of the Early Universe

Inner Space/Outer Space. The Interface between Cosmology and Particle Physics. EDWARD W. KOLB *et al.*, Eds. University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1986. xii, 638 pp., illus. $55; paper, $25. Theoretical Astrophysics. From a conference, Batavia, IL, May 1984.

In 1958–60, when I was a graduate student, the big news in cosmology was the measurement by William Baum and Rudolph Minkowski of record high galaxy redshifts, $z = 0.3$ to 0.46. ($1 + z$ is the ratio of observed to emitted wavelength of a feature in the spectrum of the light from a distant object. At $z << 1$, z is proportional to the distance of the object. In conventional cosmological models, $1 + z$ is also the factor by which the universe has expanded since the time of emission, so z can be used to label an epoch in the early universe.) Now measurements of galaxy redshifts at $z \simeq 0.5$ are, if not routine, at least commonly done, and there is a rich web of data to $z \simeq 4$ from observations of absorption by material along the lines of sight to quasars. We have learned that we are in a smooth bath of radiation with a blackbody (statistical equilibrium) spectrum at a temperature of 2.76 ± 0.02 K. Since no one has been able to think of a way radiation with this spectrum could have been produced in the universe as it is now, this is generally thought to be tangible evidence that the universe expanded from a hot, dense state where radiation could have relaxed to statistical equilibrium. If we trace the expansion of the universe further back in time to a redshift $z \simeq 10^{10}$, when the temperature of the heat bath would have been $T \simeq 10^{10}$ K $\simeq 10^6$ eV, we find neutrons and protons reacting to form light elements up to lithium in amounts that agree with the observed abundances in the oldest stars. This is evidence that we understand the outlines of the behavior of the universe when it was just 1 second old, a remarkable accomplishment indeed.

On extrapolating still further back in time we are led to consider a phase transition prior to which neutrons and protons were decomposed into their parts, an almost free gas of quarks; an earlier transition that may have fixed the baryon number density out of entropy; and a transition that may have produced the entropy of the heat bath out of a high-energy state of the vacuum. This vacuum energy would have driven the universe to inflate through an enormous expansion factor that obliterated all traces of past imperfections, including perhaps a time when space behaved as though it had more dimensions than the three we know or even dissolved into a quantum space-time foam. Other phase transitions may have left topological defects: magnetic monopoles that would be readily detectable if they were present now in sufficient numbers; massive domain walls that would seriously distort space if too abundant; and massive cosmic strings that act like magnetic flux tubes in a superconductor or like vortex lines in the rotation of superfluid helium and that may have been responsible for the formation of galaxies and clusters of galaxies. And all this may have been accomplished by the creation and annihilation of a host of particles that have not been observed, including perhaps some that survived to make up the dark matter needed to account for the observations of dynamics on the scale of galaxies and larger.

All this heady stuff, and not lacking in a substantial dose of public relations puffery, but still it is based on a clear and pressing need and opportunity. We know enough about the physics of the universe now and at modest redshifts to be confident that we can extrapolate its expansion back in time to a state whose physics we know we do not understand. The expansion of the universe carries the 2.76 K heat bath we observe back in time to enormous values of the energy density in the heat bath, and, with what is believed to be the appropriate equation of state, to energies per particle that are vastly larger than anything available in the present universe. For example, the Fermilab TeV I collider produces proton-antiproton collisions at 2×10^{12} eV, and the proposed Superconducting Super Collider accelerator would reach collision energies of 4×10^{13} eV. The most energetic cosmic ray events (thought to be protons) have energy seven orders of magnitude higher than that, at about 10^{20} eV. But the Planck epoch in the early universe would have had characteristic energy another eight orders of magnitude beyond that. Thus it seems that if we are to understand the early universe we will have to borrow the expertise of particle physicists, and if we are to push research in high-energy particle physics beyond the limits of what can be reached on Earth we will have to rely on the "ultimate accelerator" of the universe.

There have been many conferences and workshops on this proposed symbiosis of cosmology and particle physics, and inevitably, many published proceedings. This book is among the best of the lot. The conference brought together a fair sample of the people working on the subject and produced 90 interesting papers covering all the main topics. The editors have helped us by providing thoughtful commentaries. If you follow developments in the physics of the early