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Book Review

Knowledge Under Siege: Charting a Future for Universities, Edited by Marc Spooner & James McNinch, University of Regina Press, 2026, ISBN 9781779401243

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We live in frightening times. In the United States, a newly re-elected President Donald J. Trump quickly unravelled what was left of liberal democracy shortly after securing victory in 2024. Trump's assault on his enemies was swift. Even allied states were caught in the President's crosshairs. Why the world was caught by surprise is uncertain, as Trump and his supporters made their intentions clear leading up to the election. Universities were, in no uncertain terms, recognized as a threat to the President's far-right agenda. JD Vance's 2021 speech, "Universities are the Enemy", foreshadowed the war that Republican's would unleash against post-secondary institutions, like Harvard and Columbia, after securing power (Green, 2025). And these are the institutions that constitute a breeding ground for the country's economic and political elite!

Canada, of course, is witnessing similar tendencies, albeit more subdued. Mirroring the narrative that defines *Project 2025*, the manifesto that outlined Trump's agenda upon his return to the White House, the Canadian Conservative Party promised to "put an end to the imposition of woke ideology in the federal public service and in the allocation of federal funds for university research" (Wherry & Cullen, 2025). That's at the federal level. For decades, rising tuition, public sector austerity, the shuttering of academic programs, and even anti-union interventions by provincial governments have pushed universities further into the orbit of corporatization. Academic freedom at both institutional and individual scholarly level has been compromised as a result. This is what makes *Knowledge Under Siege: Charting a future for universities*, edited by Drs. Marc Spooner and James McNinch (2026) so timely.

Premised on an international conference hosted at the University of Regina in 2023, *Knowledge Under Siege* draws from the experiences of students, university leaders, and academics who chronicle the present state of advanced education. For the book's editors, the current condition is one of "chronic underfunding, international student quotas, and anti-woke sentiment" aimed at "initiatives meant to permit greater participation in increasingly conservative and authoritarian interventionist states" (p. xxx). It is also a time for "audit culture, anti-intellectualism, and disinformation", as Spooner and McNinch insist (p. xxx). In this plot line the far-right agenda is clear: "to erode the idea that higher education should nurture questioning, complexity, and dissent"

(p. xxviii). What follows in *Knowledge Under Siege* is an exceptional reflection on the purpose of universities – and why academics and members of the public at-large must fight to save our post-secondary institutions.

Jonathan R. Cole's chapter leads with a question that serves as the foundation for the entire collection: what are universities for? The former Columbia University provost takes the perspective of students for much of his analysis at a time "when government is trying to exercise control over our universities in terms of what can be taught, who can teach, and who can lead great places of higher learning" (p. 3). Cole's chapter naturally asks if what we are witnessing in the United States is a form of New McCarthyism, in which intellectual dissenters are deemed to be enemies of the state, with blacklists used to marginalize certain thinkers and ideas from the halls of academe. The global academic freedom association, Scholars at Risk (SaR), has been sounding this alarm for years (Speri, 2025).

SaR's most recent *Free to Think* report illustrates that the "nature of these attacks shifted after January 2025, as the US federal government amplified its assault on academic freedom by initiating "an unprecedented range of actions aimed at controlling university admissions, hiring, research, teaching, departmental structures, policies on speech, disciplinary policies, internal sanctions, and finances" (Scholars at Risk Network, 2025). Public sentiment, SaR argues, is being weaponized to advance a political agenda across the country, building on trends already underway at the local level. For Cole, this requires an assessment of what influence politics can and should have on universities. If post-secondary institutions shoulder an obligation to deliver to students a "healthy dose of what is required for good citizenship" (p. 11), so too must we recognize the harms associated with institutional political endorsements, lest universities "become pawns in political wars." Academics must certainly be free to express themselves beyond the constraints of institutional censorship, but Cole insists that university leaders themselves must avoid taking explicitly partisan positions.

Philosopher and Provost at Saint Mary's University in Halifax, Shannon Dea, takes a different approach in her chapter about *when* universities *should* take a stand. Institutions that have long maintained their neutrality were put to task during the Palestinian genocide in Gaza. Professor Dea encountered this as Dean of Arts at the University of Regina when a motion calling for her institution to support a ceasefire was debated and ultimately withdrawn. Dea's conclusion is that universities *should* take a stand on socio-political matters, but with much restraint. Such positions must follow what Dea terms the "proximity model" (p. 192) for rendering official statements and policy positions. Put another way, a breach of neutrality should only be exercised when the issue is context-sensitive, like the use of land acknowledgements at institutions situated on Treaty Territories. In this sense, universities must develop and advance statements that serve to protect established institutional values.

This is where Charter of Rights and Freedoms principles related to expressive freedoms and academic freedom converge. One might extend Dea's logic to suggest that an institution like the University of Regina, which claims to acknowledge the harms of colonialism, might see the proximity between Israel's Occupation of Palestinian lands and the ongoing disenfranchisement of Indigenous peoples in Canada. Or, perhaps the same institution acknowledges the meaning of condemning the forceful and sometimes violent displacement of pro-Palestinian student activists from campuses as proximity to academic and expressive values that universities ostensibly hold dear. Is institutional neutrality a meaningful position aimed up upholding values, or an excuse to stay silent and enjoy the conveniences of tenured life? These parallels are rarely recognized by

university leaders, revealing a thread of disingenuousness and performativity in their embrace of certain values (i.e., Truth and Reconciliation) while sidestepping other, more difficult issues despite the obvious connection. History suggests that “proximity” is deployed as another word for “convenience” when it comes to institutional statements that border on the political. Priya Chatterjee’s chapter on privilege forces us to contend with these contradictions, as she dares permanent academics to think about their responsibility in supporting students who take real risks in challenging institutional complicity on political matters, like Palestinian human rights. Campuses are not just about an exchange of ideas, but sites of social and political struggle.

Joel Westheimer’s chapter continues this debate by examining the role of universities in democratic societies. One theme resonating throughout the book is recognition that universities should be at the forefront of educating informed citizens who emerge ready to participate in the many forms of democratic governance. Westheimer stays true to this theme. Universities, he argues, “must nurture the free exchange of ideas; second, they should – to the extent possible – encourage community participation and political engagement, building community along the way” (p. 42). This mandate is even more important during the post-COVID-19 malaise of alienation that is disproportionately shouldered by young people today (World Health Organization, 2025). Universities have an obligation, Westheimer insists, to respond to these frightening trends. But this vision conflicts with the market-driven logic of universities as employment and job training facilities – what some have described as the neoliberalization of post-secondary education (Chapela, Chapter 5, p. 90). Ontario Premier, Doug Ford, expressed this logic perfectly in a recent statement about changes his government is making to student loan programs. “You’re picking basket-weaving courses, and there’s not too many baskets being sold out there”, Ford said in response to concerns from students about cuts to post-secondary education (Snisarenko, 2026). “[You] have to invest in your future, into in-demand jobs,” he continued. For Consuelo Chapela in her assessment of the function of universities from a Latin American perspective, neoliberalism puts productivity at the forefront of the university’s mission, which is valued by politicians and institutional leaders more than addressing serious “human, social, or justice problems” (p. 90). Where is the emancipatory potential in this one-dimensional, neoliberal view of universities, Chapela asks?

Ford’s comments are hardly unique. In fact, there has always been a political economic underpinning to post-secondary institutions. It’s also worth addressing the privilege of certain post-secondary institutions and their respective students who possess the opportunity to simply shop at the “marketplace of ideas” (p. xiv), as Gloria Ladson-Billings puts it in her forward to the book, with little concern for what livelihood awaits them after graduation. Universities are complex and contradictory spaces, which means that the tension between citizenship-building and the employment function is ever-present. Universities have never been entirely removed from the interests of industry and commerce. Consider Noam Chomsky’s well-documented conflicts within MIT, an institution that handsomely rewarded a leading critic of American militarism while at the same time functioned as a wing of the Pentagon and the US military industrial complex more broadly (Knight, 2026). The post-secondary institutional boom that followed the end of the Second World War was meant, in large part, to service Cold War demands. Resourcing free-inquiry and scientific discovery advanced similar objectives, even where industry and military interests acted as silent partners. Simon Marginson’s contribution builds on this by taking to task the relations of power in university science.

China's emergence as a scientific powerhouse – by measure of publications and impact – now rivals the United States on the global stage. American conservatives have identified this as a threat to US hegemony, as the authors of *Project 2025* make clear (The Heritage Foundation, 2025). Thus emerges national rivalries and potentially dangerous political disputes between superpowers on the terrain of scientific advancement. What's important about Marginson's argument is that when “nations treat science as a common human endeavour, focused on shared global problems such as climate change or epidemic diseases, the relationship is more seamless” (p. 59). Scientists and scientific communities collaborate on matters of global public welfare where their political leaders see opportunities for developments that advance military and economic objectives. Never fully removed from geo-politics, scientific communities housed in leading research institutions precariously balance their pursuit of knowledge with state interests, intentionally or not. Afterall, the money for such inquiry must come from somewhere.

For Liz Morish, such tensions have long held the markers of intra-organizational disputes. Governments that impose metrics of socio-economic success (i.e., employment, training, etc.) must do so through both consent and coercion. Academic freedom can be suffocated in the process. Morish uses as an example the purging of critical scholarship within universities that use independent, critical inquiry as a brand signifier rather than a real objective (p. 105). “Critical thought” is a brand in this scenario, not an actually-existing practice. Governance reforms aid in this expression of austerity when business and industry appointees at board levels undermine the influence of academic senates. Former CAUT President, Peter McInnis, deals with similar processes in the Canadian context in his critique of the “managerial university”. Academic freedom, in his case studies, is compromised by the risk-averse and liability-obsessed legal teams and administrators who encumber researchers with onerous ethical policies and oversight mechanisms that constrict free inquiry (p. 119-120). My claim is that we must dig deeper when it comes to uncovering the cause of these symptoms. It is easy to point fingers at industry and business-types appointed to boards of governors, who we're told are imposing their corporate values and processes onto public institutions. To some extent that is true, but the reality is that audit and managerial cultures flourishes within our own professorial ranks. We, as academics, comply with and advance the neoliberal agenda under our own power. Kevin Kumahiro's chapter calls on academics to “step up” and wrestle with this reality. Success in educational institutions, he observes, “is not necessarily a sign of being smarter or more accomplished but, at least in some ways, is a sign of learning to play the game better than most people” (p. 139). Indeed, studies of academia show that social and cultural capital contribute to achieving conventional benchmarks of professional success (Crew, 2024) just as much as merit. Playing the game means, for some, internalizing (and deploying) the neoliberal ethos.

Consider that the architect of Alberta's anti-DEI and post-secondary austerity initiatives, former NDP Finance Minister, Jannice McKinnon, was herself a University of Saskatchewan professor of history (French, 2020). Who are the university presidents, provosts, vice presidents, and deans but academics themselves? What about the members of performance review committees who acquiesce to audit culture standards? In some instances, the vulnerability of precarious academic staff, like term lecturers and sessional instructors, is entrenched by tenured scholars who oversee hiring decisions. Afterall, neoliberalism requires neoliberal subjects to function, since this menacing system cannot survive through coercion alone. Within the college and university systems it is academics themselves who play a part in advancing a corporate agenda, not abstract administrators, board members, and conservative governments acting in a vacuum. Returning to Kumahiro's call to action, universities are “for raising critical consciousness about the kinds of

intersectional global issues” discussed throughout *Knowledge Under Siege*. For Kumahiro this requires academics to mobilize their knowledge for social change vis-à-vis community engaged scholarship, along with the hard (and often dull) work of institutional governance. We must socialize a particular kind of academic to accomplish this goal.

Throughout *Knowledge Under Siege*, space is provided to established and emerging scholars who reflect critically on post-secondary institutions and the cultures they breed. These contributions warrant serious attention. Whitney Blaisdell insists that we must “separate what universities do from what they ought to do” (p. 29), referring to our institutions as “beautiful dystopia” (p. 29). Citing John Dewey, Blaisdell reflects on the importance of education as serving community interests. For Indigenous child advocate and scholar, Cindy Blackstock, this means expressing scholarship in “ways people can understand, listen to, and get behind” (p. 24). What I appreciate about Blaisdell’s chapter is her careful description of universities as real, physical places that are meant for advancing education *and* functions as a sanctuary for Northern residents fleeing climate-induced forest fires. Her university is much more than a marketplace of ideas. Tom Sperlinger builds on this observation, arguing “[many] themes are not heard within universities, with increasingly start consequences in the Anthropocene” (p. 222). This requires a new paradigm of innovation, one that does not hinge upon a competition for students and research funding (p. 230). A thriving university community, for Sperlinger, involves: a broader social network, physical infrastructure inviting to civic organizations and people, followed by a constituency that is composed of adjacent neighbourhoods, students, local residents, and scholars. Universities must be embedded in their local communities, not isolated as privileged bubbles.

Interventions by Indigenous scholars and students in *Knowledge Under Siege* provides richness to these unorthodox accounts of what universities are for, or could be. Maori professor, Linda Tuhiwai Smith, confronts the complex and often contradictory nature of universities at a time when students and academics are calling for the decolonization of post-secondary institutions. A “university is not a singular thing”, Smith reminds us, and it is critical that Indigenous students be given an opportunity to carve out spaces for their own cultural practices alongside European protocols and conventions. How is this ambitious project feasible within colonial institutions, where Indigenous perspectives continue to be marginalized, as Sheila Cote-Meek observes (p. 150)? Again, this means establishing a movement to ensure that universities build knowledge for everyone, where “traditional” Indigenous worldviews and practices influence institutional protocols and ways of operating. Tammy Ratt’s chapter makes a similarly powerful case for Indigenous knowledge within universities. Her claim is that Indigenous post-secondary institutions, like the First Nations University of Canada, are critical at forging Indigenous-led and culturally responsive education as both an act of inclusion and of community engagement. For Ratt, the “university can also be viewed as a fire... Just as fire provides light, warmth, safety, and protection, it is also used to hear the ancestral rocks in Sweat Lodges for healing” (p. 272).

Christopher Newfield’s chapter funnels these challenges into a forecast of what the future holds for universities. What he imagines ranges from idealism to dystopian. In one scenario “the vast majority of higher ed institutions... will become quasi-automated, offering a combination of ed-tech hybrids of ‘AI’-powered online courses managed by a shrinking army of adjuncts” (p. 213). This bleak reality is feasible considering the exuberance university administrators and some academics demonstrates for AI and technology-mediated solutions to a struggling post-secondary sector. “Learning will be limited, sustaining a post-truth society”, Newfield predicts (p. 213). Consider this as the realization of *Project 2025*. In another scenario, optimism prevails. All levels

of education “link learning to practice”, where university graduates “have direct experience with implementing ideas collaboratively with other people” (p. 216). World problems like climate chaos, mass poverty, hardened borders, and wars are “addressed by a much wider proportion of the public than in the case today” (p. 216). Think of Newfield’s projection as the intersection of emancipatory potential envisioned by the book’s contributors. Malinda Smith’s concluding chapter frames this future as one in which universities are “spaces of the imagination... central to sustaining democracy” (p. 291). Realizing such an aspirational goal requires resistance from academics themselves, because, as Spooner and McNinch conclude, “an academy kept all too domesticated with busy-work under an all-encompassing audit culture” must lift its “collective head as witnesses to the world.” (p. 280). Failing to actualize this potential means that we will be “helpless in the face of ruthless tyranny” (p. 284).

Readers of *Knowledge Under Siege* should see the book as a call to action. It challenges tenured faculty to break out of their comfortable slumber, and to engage in meaningful ways with community, and to think seriously about incorporating different ideas and worldviews into an otherwise conservative space. Students also have a central role actualizing this vision. Without these interventions, a dystopian future lies before us.

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