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KAFKA IN THE BRONX

ALI SHEHZAD ZAIDI
SUNY CANTON

If, in the unlikely event, you do not know what defines a toxic workplace, just ask sociology professor and anarchist scholar John Asimakopoulos. He has acquired considerable expertise on the subject since he began teaching at Bronx Community College, a constituent college of the City University of New York, in spring 2004. The circumstances of his firing and reinstatement illustrate the injustice and lack of transparency at BCC.

An only child of Greek immigrants, John came from a working class background. His father is a retired chemical factory worker who had been a farm laborer before migrating to the United States. His parents took pride in their hard-working son who completed masters in economics and political science at Rutgers and a doctorate in sociology at the CUNY Graduate Center. He accomplished this while working full-time and teaching as an adjunct, first at Queens College, and then at seven New Jersey colleges.

John had barely begun his first year at BCC as an untenured assistant professor when he had to appeal his non-reappointment by the social sciences department peer review committee. His appeal was sustained by a humanities division committee and by then BCC President Carolyn Grubbs Williams. In fall 2005, John came up for reappointment again. This time, the department committee approved his reappointment but the humanities committee did not. Not knowing what had incurred their displeasure, John told the humanities committee members that he felt like the protagonist of Kafka's *The Trial*. The allusion to the tedious and absurd institutional processes at BCC may have been lost on them. There followed an appeal to a college wide committee at which John commented that some members of the committee seemed to lack collegiality themselves.

President Williams again sustained his appeal at his second reappointment. By this time, John was perplexed for he had no idea what had irked the members of the humanities committee. His case for reappointment was solid. His students had given him an overall instructor rating of 3.9 (on a 1-4 scale), well above the department mean of 3.6. Three department colleagues had praised his teaching methods in their peer classroom observations. John had presented, at his own expense, three papers at conferences, including one at an economics conference in Ireland. He had published a book review in *Labor History* and had submitted an article that would be accepted shortly by the *Journal of Poverty*, more than might be expected of him given the sparse institutional funding at BCC and his twenty seven credit annual teaching load. He had done committee service and represented BCC in the CUNY faculty senate. By then, John had discovered the truth of sociologist Eugen Rosenstock-Huussy's observation that "[p]resent day teaching is a series of farewell parties to life."¹

President Williams denied John his third reappointment on December 14, 2006, letter that was delivered to him in class: "Your performance as an assistant professor has failed to meet the standards of collegiality as set forth by the CUNY Bylaws and the Statement of Academic Personnel practices." Williams cited as an example his request for travel funds beyond the two hundred dollars that his department had granted him to present papers at conferences – a naïve expectation, no doubt, given the Dickensian labor climate at BCC. Williams also cited John's anguish and bewilderment at the humanities meeting.

¹ Rosenstock-Huussy, Eugen. *Life Lines*. Norwich, VT.: Argo Books, 1988: 67.

Months earlier, in his May 2006 evaluation, Peter Morrill, social sciences department chair and John's supervisor during his first two years at BCC, had written to John: "Your relationships in the department have always been positive and have become more so during the year. I notice that you get along well with everyone, including the Chair, and have offered to help department members on many occasions." John filed a grievance with the faculty union, the Professional Staff Congress. First, he appealed the president's decision to the BCC administration, which predictably denied it, dismissing the evidence of collegiality contained in Morrill's May 2006 evaluation, ostensibly because Morrill was no longer the department chair. John then appealed BCC's decision to the CUNY administration which denied the appeal, stating that "it is beyond cavil that a lack of collegiality may appropriately form the basis for a decision not to reappoint a faculty member." The criteria for faculty reappointment are spelled out in the faculty union's contract with the CUNY administration, in the BCC Faculty Handbook, and in CUNY's bylaws: teaching, scholarship, and service to the college and the public.

The case went to arbitration. Richard Adelman, the labor arbitrator, requested that President Williams appear in person to explain her decision. When she did, Williams informed the arbitrator that John had been "angry red-faced" at the college-wide committee meeting. In response, John explained that he has rosacea, an incurable skin condition that causes flushing, a fact that was readily apparent to those present. The labor arbitrator reinstated John to his position at BCC.

In his decision Adelman found that Williams, in denying John's reappointment, had violated fundamental principles of CUNY's reappointment process, noting that "[t]he facts establish that Professor Asimakopoulos was not given adequate notice, indeed was not given any meaningful notice, of the shortcomings regarding his lack of collegiality, nor was he given an opportunity to correct any of these shortcomings." Moreover, Adelman noted that "President Williams had conceded that several of her examples of Professor Asimakopoulos' so-called lack of collegiality may not have been that" and that there are no standards or definition of collegiality in any CUNY document.

During the 2007-08 year of forced absence from BCC, John continued to write on labor history, despite having no salary, out-of-pocket health insurance costs, legal fees, and responsibility for half the cost of arbitration. But John had his job back and during that fruitful year we co-founded the Transformative Studies Institute and its interdisciplinary journal, *Theory in Action*. I had received my hand-delivered non-reappointment notice from President Williams while teaching on the same day as John. But that's another story.

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