

After first bowing to Zionist McCarthyism:

City University of New York restores honorary degree to playwright Tony Kushner

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The executive committee of the City University of New York trustees voted on May 9 to reverse the decision taken by the trustees a week earlier to deny an honorary degree to playwright Tony Kushner.

The degree was to be bestowed by John Jay College of Criminal Justice, one of the 23 institutions in the 260,000-student City University.

At the meeting of the trustees on May 2, Kushner was on a slate of 40 honorary degree candidates whose approval was considered a formality. When Board member Jeffrey Wiesenfeld denounced Kushner for his alleged hostility to Israel and Zionism, however, the board quickly tabled his nomination. It was the first time in 40 years that such an action had been taken. Kushner, who was being honored for his body of work, was excluded because, according to Wiesenfeld, he had written that “ethnic cleansing” had been employed in the establishment of the state of Israel.

An uproar quickly followed. Kushner, the celebrated author of “Angels in America,” for which he received a Pulitzer Prize in 1993 and which was revived to great acclaim in New York last year, issued a statement saying he had been slandered and calling for an apology. The playwright, who calls himself a socialist, is well known for his criticism of Israeli policies.

The outrage over the snub to Kushner was palpable, especially in artistic, academic and intellectual circles. The spectacle of one of the city’s most well-known theatrical and artistic figures being turned down for an honor by the City University, where generations of immigrant and working class youth have been educated, met with wide indignation. It was also seen as a public relations fiasco for the city’s tourism and entertainment industries.

In this atmosphere even Ed Koch, the former New York City Mayor who has always been highly regarded in right-wing Zionist circles, denounced the trustees’ action and called for Wiesenfeld to resign. The *New York Times* weighed in with an editorial. Several previous recipients of City University honors announced that they were returning them to express their solidarity with Kushner.

By last Friday, Benno Schmidt, the chairman of the board of trustees, announced that a special meeting of the executive committee, which is empowered to reverse decisions of the larger board in what are deemed special circumstances, would meet on Monday. Schmidt himself was out of the city when this meeting took place, and the six other members took only 20 minutes to try to put the debacle behind them. CUNY chancellor Matthew Goldstein praised Kushner’s “extraordinary body of work” and said a mistake had been made, urging that it be reversed.

There are some lessons to be drawn before this incident is swept under the rug, however. The entire episode shows something about the way that institutions of higher education are governed in the Second Gilded Age. The unelected representatives of the corporate and political establishment usually go about their business—much of it centered on cutbacks and tuition hikes—with little debate or controversy.

Goldstein was quoted as saying “the basic misstep” at the original board meeting “was there wasn’t a counterpunch” to Wiesenfeld’s attack on Kushner. “I’m not sure why the appropriate people didn’t chime in at that time,” he said. Goldstein, who was present at that meeting, as was Schmidt, did not elaborate on whether he was among the “appropriate people”.

It is clear that the first instinct of these trustees is to go along with acts of political censorship or the silencing of critical and left-wing views. They only reversed themselves in order to quiet the outrage that mounted by the day.

Mr. Wiesenfeld, an appointee of former Republican Governor George Pataki who is now in the midst of his second seven-year term, has, it turns out, acquired a reputation over the years for noisy right-wing interventions. He labeled a teach-in scheduled in the weeks after the 9-11 attacks “seditious,” and denounced the assignment of a book by former *New York Times* reporter Chris Hedges to Baruch College freshmen. Just last week, after his action against Kushner, Wiesenfeld told *Times* columnist Jim Dwyer that Palestinians “are not human” because they allegedly “worship death for their children.”

Wiesenfeld is a man who speaks for a small but extremely wealthy and influential layer of right-wing Zionists who are accustomed to getting their way when it comes to setting the parameters for discussion on the Middle East and Israeli-Palestinian relations. This is by no means the first time that such tactics have been used in relation to critics of Israel, with special venom reserved for Jewish critics. The late historian Tony Judt, for instance, was barred about five years ago from giving a talk that had been scheduled in space rented from the Polish Consulate in New York, after the Anti-Defamation League called the consulate to complain about Judt’s political views.

And a hysterical—and unsuccessful—campaign was mounted by right-wing Zionist organizations to pressure Brandeis University, which describes itself as the only nonsectarian Jewish-sponsored college or university in the US, to withdraw an honorary degree that it conferred upon Kushner in 2006.

It should be noted that the CUNY trustees’ original meeting, at which the action to exclude Kushner was taken, was held one day after the killing of Osama bin Laden, organized by the White House. The atmosphere of unrestrained jingoism found its smaller but significant echo among the trustees, who either approved of barring Kushner or were afraid they would be labeled unpatriotic if they were too outspoken on such issues as academic freedom and civil liberties.

Despite the board’s reversal, the whole incident demonstrates yet again that there is no genuine

constituency within the ruling elite for the defense of democratic rights.

In this instance, however, the Zionist lobby and its supporters suffered a well-deserved rebuff.

One factor is undoubtedly the high regard for Kushner. The playwright has been in the headlines for artistic as well as political reasons in recent months. The revival of “Angels in America” has been followed by a new play, “An Intelligent Homosexual’s Guide to Capitalism and Socialism With a Key to the Scriptures,” which just opened at New York’s Public Theater.

The McCarthyite methods used by the Zionist lobby and its supporters are a sign of growing weakness and desperation. The targeting of Jewish critics of Israel is a particular modus operandi that is designed to politically and intellectually ostracize and intimidate their opponents and perpetuate the pernicious myth that Israel is identical to the views and the interests of the Jewish people.

Increasingly, these methods are tending to backfire. Despite their very wide and continuing support within the American ruling class and both Democratic and Republican parties, it is becoming more and more clear that the ultra-orthodox fanatics and the neoconservative backers of the Israeli state do not speak for the majority of American Jews, let alone the American people. A younger generation, no doubt also responding to the events in Egypt and elsewhere, is saying that Wiesenfeld and his ilk do not represent them.

This issue is broader than the attack on Kushner, however. The US ruling class and the Obama administration in particular more and more openly copies the illegal and brutal methods of their Zionist ally, and clearly the attack on Kushner is by no means the last that will be heard on the subject of censorship and attacks on democratic rights.



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