

Defend Ward Churchill - Bill Ayers

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Dear Colleagues,

In Brecht's play Galileo the great astronomer sets forth into a world dominated by a mighty church and an authoritarian power: "The cities are narrow and so are the brains," he declares recklessly. "Superstition and plague. But now the word is: since it is so, it does not remain so. For everything moves my friend." Intoxicated with his own radical discoveries, Galileo feels the earth shifting and finds himself propelled surprisingly toward revolution. "It was always said that the stars were fastened to a crystal vault so they could not fall," he says. "Now we have taken heart and let them float in the air, without support... they are embarked on a great voyage—like us who are also without support and embarked on a great voyage." Here Galileo raises the stakes and risks taking on the establishment in the realm of its own authority, and it strikes back fiercely. Forced to renounce his life's work under the exquisite pressure of the Inquisition he denounces what he knows to be true, and is welcomed back into the church and the ranks of the faithful, but exiled from humanity—by his own word. A former student confronts him in the street: "Many on all sides followed you with their ears and their eyes believing that you stood, not only for a particular view of the movement of the stars, but even more for the liberty of teaching—in all fields. Not then for any particular thoughts, but for the right to think at all. Which is in dispute."

The right to think at all, which is in dispute—this is what the Ward Churchill affair finally comes to: The right to a mind of one's own, the right to pursue an argument into uncharted spaces, the right to challenge the church and its orthodoxy in the public square. The right to think at all.

It's no surprise that this outrage against Professor Churchill occurs at this particular moment—a time of empire resurrected and unapologetic, militarism proudly expanding and triumphant, war without justice and without end, white supremacy retrenched, basic rights and protections shredded, growing disparities between the haves and the have-nots, fear and superstition and the mobilization of scapegoating social formations based on bigotry and violence or the threats of violence, and on and on. There's more of course, and this isn't the only story, but this is a recognizable part of where we're living, and a familiar place to anyone with even a casual understanding of history. Here the competing impulses and ideals that have always animated our country's story are on full display: rights and liberty and the pursuit of human freedom on one side,

domination and war and repression on the other. The trauma of contradictions that is America.

Ward Churchill is under a sustained, orchestrated, and determined attack because of his political beliefs and statements and activities, and nothing more. No one doubts his productivity or his accomplishments. But the attack on Churchill is neither isolated nor innocent— the high school history teacher on the west side of Chicago gets the message, and so does the English literature teacher in Detroit and the math teacher in an Oakland middle school: be careful what you say; stay close to the official story; stick to the authorized text. If someone of Ward Churchill's stature and standing for so many years at the University of Colorado can suffer this kind of campaign, what chance do I have?

Every committee, every investigation, every report plays out under a shadow of the star chamber; everyone must choose who to be and how to act in response. For this reason I support Ward Churchill unequivocally, unapologetically, whole-heartedly. I urge my colleagues and my students and everyone who values education as a grand enterprise geared toward enlightenment and liberation to speak out forcefully and fearlessly now on behalf of the liberty of teaching and learning, on behalf of the right to think at all.

Sincerely,
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