

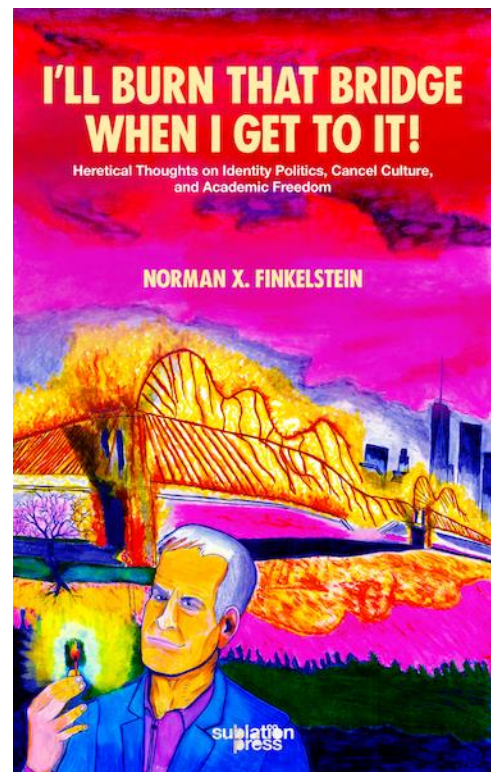
**A Perfect Storm of Vitriol:
A Review of Norman Finkelstein's
I'll Burn that Bridge When I Get to It! (2023)**

Either truth or falsehood: towards spiritual independence or towards spiritual servitude. And he who is not sufficiently courageous to defend his soul — don't let him be proud of his "progressive" views, and don't let him boast that he is an academician or a people's artist, a distinguished figure or a general. Let him say to himself: I am a part of the herd and a coward. It's all the same to me as long as I'm fed and kept warm.

— Alexander Solzhenitsyn, "Live Not By Lies" (2004 [1974])
Index on Censorship 33:2, 203-207; 207.¹

It is not your responsibility to finish the work;
but neither are you free to desist from it.
— Rabbi Tarfon, *Pirke Avot (Chapters of the Fathers)* 2:16

Norman Finkelstein's *I'll Burn that Bridge When I Get to It! Heretical Thoughts on Identity Politics, Cancel Culture, and Academic Freedom* (2023) is an important book that ought to be read by anyone trying to figure out what the hell has happened to "progressive" America these past few years. As Finkelstein explains in the Foreword, the book grew out of the controversy sparked by the 2020 publication in *Harper's* of "A Letter on Justice and Open Debate" in which "prominent public intellectuals across the political spectrum [...] decried the excesses of cancel culture" [xi; referencing: "A Letter on Justice and Open Debate," *Harper's Magazine*, 7 July 2020, <https://harpers.org/a-letter-on-justice-and-open->



¹ <https://doi.org/10.1080/03064220408537357>

[debate/](#)]. In Finkelstein’s view, “the irrefragable fact” is that “‘woke’ politics are intellectually vacuous and politically pernicious.”

I endeavor to demonstrate this in Part I by parsing the ur-texts of “woke” politics, and then by dispelling the dense mist that shrouds that ultimate “woke” product: the Obama cult. In Part II, I critically assess what’s become an article of faith in “woke” culture: that in the classroom a professor should teach only his own and not contending viewpoints on a controverted question; that he shouldn’t strive for “balance.” The last chapter of the book situates my own cancellation in broader perspective. [xii]

Implicitly, however, two other important projects inhabit *I’ll Burn that Bridge!* The first is an intellectual autobiography — or, rather, an *apologia pro sua vita* — that darts in and out throughout the book. The second is an underlying tribute to Finkelstein’s parents, for it is from them that Finkelstein (born 1953) acquired his values as a Jewish, New York, radical intellectual in the second-half of the twentieth century. As Finkelstein puts it at the end of Part I in a one-page memorial to “My Beloved Parents” (complete with a photograph of each):

Except for my Mother and Father, every member of both my parents’ families was exterminated during the [Second World War]. From as far back as I can remember, our home was saturated with politics. On Sunday mornings, seated around the breakfast table, we divided up among the five of us the sections of the *New York Times* while, later in the day, we sat around the television set watching *Meet the Press*, hosted by the redoubtable Lawrence Spivak. But politics wasn’t just intellectualizing words. When the nightly news flashed war images from Vietnam, my Mother would abruptly avert her gaze, hold her hand up to shield her eyes, and say: “Tell me when it’s over.” My parents stayed faithful to their decidedly unpopular political beliefs until their last breaths. They reserved their harshest epithet for those who

betrayed their principles for earthly reward. “Traitors!” they would mutter, with a mixture of disdain and disgust. [397]

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Beyond the careful, thoroughly-documented analysis of contemporary identity-politics-cum-cancel-culture, one of the great strengths of *I’ll Burn that Bridge!* is that it situates the current moment in a variety of useful contexts, few of which will be entirely familiar to the ordinary reader. As Finkelstein puts it: “Cancel culture is as old as culture itself. Every society establishes boundaries of what’s acceptable. If one finds, or places, oneself on the wrong side of them, one gets cancelled” [1] — that is, turned into a “non-person” [355].

Historically, “cancellation” has gone by other names. During the McCarthyite era of the Cold War, for example, the phenomenon was known as “blacklisting.” Erstwhile cancellees — who constituted most of Finkelstein’s “heroes and heroines” when he was growing up — included Paul Robeson, Pete Singer, and Annette Rubenstein [2-3; see also 385]. More recent non-persons include Noam Chomsky who “[f]or decades [...] was the most effectively cancelled intellectual in the United States” [3].

Finkelstein’s own academic cancellation is one of these contexts. By his own admission initially a Maoist who left “Maoist politics behind in the late 1970s, when the Gang of Four was overthrown and Maoist ideology expeditiously junked,” Finkelstein became a “disciple,” if not a “groupie,” of Noam Chomsky [356] who has devoted most of his scholarly effort to a series of analyses of the “Image and Reality of the Israel-Palestine Conflict,” as the title of his 1995 book puts it. According to Avi Shlaim, an Israeli-British professor of international relations at Oxford University specializing in the history of Israel-Palestine conflict speaking in a 2007 interview:

Professor Finkelstein specializes in exposing spurious scholarship on the Arab-Israeli conflict. And he has a very impressive track record in this respect. He was a very promising graduate student in history at Princeton, when a book by Joan Peters appeared, called *From Time Immemorial*, and he wrote the most savage exposition in critique of this book. It was a systematic demolition

of this book. The book argued, incidentally, that Palestine was a land without a people for people without a land. And Professor Finkelstein exposed it as a hoax, and he showed how dishonest the scholarship or spurious scholarship was in the entire book. And he paid the price for his courage, and he has been a marked man, in a sense, in America ever since. [As of 2007 h]is most recent book is *Beyond Chutzpah: On the Misuse of Anti-Semitism and the Abuse of History*], follows in the same vein of criticizing and exposing biases and distortions and falsifications in what Americans write about Israel and about the Middle East. So I consider him to be a very impressive and a very learned and careful scholar. [“It Takes an Enormous Amount of Courage to Speak the Truth When No One Else is Out There’: World-Renowned Holocaust, Israel Scholars Defend DePaul Professor Norman Finkelstein as He Fights for Tenure,” *Democracy Now!*, 9 May 2007, https://www.democracynow.org/2007/5/9/it_takes_an_enormous_amount_of]

Perhaps Finkelstein’s most (in)famous book is *The Holocaust Industry: Reflections on the Exploitation of Jewish Suffering* (2000). As Finkelstein notes, when *The Holocaust Industry* was first published it was received in many quarters with howls of righteous indignation [497], despite praise from well-known and influential scholars. In another 2007 interview, Raul Hilberg, “the founder and dean of Holocaust Studies” [361], said:

[Finkelstein’s] conclusions are trustworthy. He is a well-trained political scientist, has the ability to do the research, did it carefully, and has come up with the right results. I am by no means the only one who, in the coming months or years, will totally agree with Finkelstein’s breakthrough. [361; see also 508–510 and “It Takes an Enormous Amount of Courage to Speak the Truth When No One Else is Out There”]

In line with Hilberg’s prediction, Finkelstein writes, “ridicule of the Holocaust industry — the real thing, not my book — has entered popular culture” — even among Jews and Israelis [497-498].

But it was a series of confrontations with Harvard Law School professor and self-proclaimed champion of the State of Israel Alan Dershowitz in 2007 that ultimately cost Finkelstein both tenure and his teaching position at DePaul University of Chicago and left him unemployed and “what’s worse, unemployable” ever since [59]. The ostensible basis for Finkelstein’s cancellation was his alleged “lack of professional civility” [496].

True, I accused Professor Dershowitz of plagiarism and fabrication, and I accused Jewish organizations and lawyers of extorting monies in the name of “needy Holocaust victims.” But plagiarism, fabrication, extortion — these are technical terms, subject to proof or disproof, not ad hominem attacks. It is not as if I didn’t adduce copious evidence to support my allegations; indeed, haven’t these allegations since been resoundingly vindicated? [496-497]

The real basis for Finkelstein’s cancellation, however, was power.

The charge of incivility, [as John Stuart] Mill noted, is often directed at the weak by the strong, even as the strong are just as prone to incivility — the difference being, the weak get ostracized for their crassness, the strong lauded for their righteous indignation. [497]

(The incident is the subject of 2009 documentary, *American Radical: The Trials of Norman Finkelstein*).

Although Finkelstein does not put it this way, in a sense he and the other cancelled non-persons are among America’s “political prisoners” sentenced to an invisible gulag of invisibility in much the same way that Alexander Solzhenitsyn was sentenced to a visible gulag of invisibility. And while it might be argued on obvious grounds that America’s gulag is kinder and gentler than was the Soviet Union’s (see, for example: Richard Grenier, “The New Treason of

the Clerks,” *National Review* 42:14 (23 July 1990), 42-45), one might also argue that America’s gulag is nonetheless crueler — at least for an intellectual — because it hides behind the gaslighting claim that there is in fact no gulag.

The career that Finkelstein devoted to debunking the spurious scholarship around the Arab-Israeli conflict and the slings and arrows that Finkelstein has borne because of that career, then, form the implicit personal context in which Finkelstein now debunks the spurious scholarship that pervades contemporary identity-politics-cum-cancel-culture. (Indeed, the parallels between the two projects are obvious.) This career and these costs are also the implicit context behind Finkelstein’s repeated invocation of Julien Benda’s 1927 *La Trahison des Clercs* (*The Treason of the Intellectuals*). For Benda’s thesis is that “[f]or the intellectual class, expertise has usually been a service rendered, and sold, to the central authority of society,” as Edward Said once summarized it [Edward Said, *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard, 1983), 2]. Or, as Finkelstein puts it, Benda

posited that, if you’re faithful to the values of Truth and Justice, it must inevitably come to pass that you’ll be ostracized — or, in the current idiom, “cancelled” — by society: “A clerk who is popular with the laymen is a traitor to his office.” He gestured to Socrates and Jesus. A true clerk, according to Benda, accepts Jesus’ dictum: “My Kingdom is not of this world.” Had Benda lived longer, he could have added to his martyrs’ pantheon Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, both of whom, it is now forgotten, were reviled at the time of their respective assassinations. [1-2]

As Part II of *I’ll Burn that Bridge!* makes clear, however, Finkelstein does not believe in an unlimited notion of academic freedom that would protect academics from all cancellation. On the contrary, deploying an implicit 2 x 2 analytical grid with “Intramural Behavior” (“on the job”) vs “Extramural Behavior” (“after hours”) on one axis and “Matter” (“Content”) vs “Manner” (“Form”) on the other axis, Finkelstein examines a number of historic academic freedom cases in the conjunction with major theoretical statements on academic freedom in order to carefully establish what he sees as the center and the limits of academic freedom

properly understood. For example, says Finkelstein, “[t]hose who uphold a professor’s absolute right to untrammelled extramural speech cannot but slip into the untenable position of defending the indefensible.”

If [Harvard University President Larry] Summers had said at the faculty Christmas party that the position of women in science should be “prone,” or [Nobel laureate Tim] Hunt had posted on his Facebook page that he prefers his female students to be amply endowed, can it be doubted that the line would have been crossed, and that they would, deservedly, be booted out of academic life? [459]

This is so because “the primary purpose of academic freedom [...] is to facilitate the pursuit of Truth, which [...] is an intrinsically collective enterprise.” Since this intrinsically collective enterprise is unavoidably undermined by the justifiable ostracism of an academic for “outrageous extramural utterances,” such utterances must necessarily be beyond protection of academic freedom [459].

Despite his radical pedigree and politics, and despite his wrongful cancellation, Finkelstein is quite “conservative” in a number of ways. For example, he defends the Western canon as “[r]ich in insight, brilliant in exposition, rebellious in spirit” [382] while recognizing that it needs ongoing diversification “to be more inclusive of historically marginalized groups” [379]. “But it ought to be remembered,” Finkelstein maintains, that many of the towering progressive figures of the past such as Douglass, Du Bois, Robeson, and King “all took great pride in having mastered the Western canon.” So do contemporary progressive figures such as Cornel West. Perhaps most importantly, however, “[i]t ought also to be remembered that — contrary to woke wisdom — the classics of Western civilization have often shined a bright light on its underside and been visionary of an enlightened future” [379]. Indeed:

It might surprise how much of the canon deeply subverts the status quo, then and now. One would be hard-pressed to name a single Western classic that rates highly acquisitiveness, the accumulation of things, as life’s purpose, while it’s not difficult to

draw up a lengthy list scorning it. Even as he posits a “natural right” to property, [for example,] Locke puts stringent limits on this right: “enough and as good” must be “left in common for others,” and property left to “spoil ... is more than his [the owner’s — NGF] share and belongs to others.” [381]

It is therefore perhaps not surprising to learn that Finkelstein’s “bathroom reading” includes “Marxist literary critic Annette Rubenstein’s sprawling study of English literature from Shakespeare to Shaw” [355] — a work that, in Rubenstein’s own words, grew out of an attempt “first to learn in concrete detail, and then to teach in convincing summary, the part played by the great writers in man’s continuing fight for freedom” [Annette Rubenstein, *The Great Tradition in English Literature from Shakespeare to Jane Austen* (New York: The Citadel Press, 1953), xiii].

Finkelstein is similarly traditional in his conception of the educator’s calling. In contrast to the fashion “nowadays on the political left to ridicule the notion of ‘balance’ in the classroom” [406], Finkelstein avers that:

A lectern is not a soapbox, a classroom is not a political rally, a professor should not serve as a conveyor belt for a party line. His responsibility is to stimulate, not to dictate. [...]

So long as a hard consensus doesn’t obtain on a great issue of the day, and so long as the received wisdom is subject to a compelling, vital counter-argument, a professor should feel obliged to make the best case for all sides, however he personally has, in the privacy of his study, resolved those “contradictory views,” so as to enable students to do the mental heavy lifting — the weighing and balancing — for themselves. [406, 409]

In short, “[a] professor must play *both* combatants in the classroom — the advocate and the devil’s Advocate — while the student spectators actively engage, wrestle with the contending affirmations” [409, emphasis original].

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The primary flaw of *I'll Burn that Bridge!* is that it needs better organization and better editing. Reading it can be a slog and not always a pleasant experience. As one reviewer aptly wrote, “the book [...] has a sprawling and meandering character, consisting variously of memoir, brutal polemic, dense argumentation, forensic dissection of texts, scores of long quotations, [and] innumerable long footnotes” that give the book a “kaleidoscopic nature” and an “intimidating length” that might “bewilder the reader” [Chris Wright, “The Inspiring Outrage of Norman Finkelstein,” *Common Dreams*, 28 January 2023, <https://www.commondreams.org/opinion/the-inspiring-outrage-of-norman-finkelstein>].

In Part I, “Identity Politics and Cancel Culture,” for instance, it is not until page 351 near the end of Chapter 6 that one finally finds the deeply buried lede about the political consequences of contemporary identity-politics-cum-cancel-culture. As Finkelstein writes in one epic, three-page-long paragraph that is worth quoting in full, both to bring Finkelstein’s thesis to the fore and to exhibit his writing style:

The Obama cult is rooted in and the fully ripened fruit of *identity politics*. How, then, should *its* legacy be reckoned? **Identity politics has distracted from and, when need be, outright sabotaged a class-based movement that promised profound social change.** It counsels Black people not to trust whites, as their racism is so entrenched and so omnipresent as to poison their every thought and action. It conveys to poor whites that they, no less than the white billionaire class, are beneficiaries of racism, so that it would be foolhardy of them to ally with Black people. It fractures, splinters, fragments a natural and necessary alliance of the have-nots by splicing [*sic*] and dicing them into, literally, an infinitude of subgroups, each of which insists on parity representation in any coalition, creating a cacophony of demands and preempting any possibility of that broad unity and solidarity which, alone, can defeat the organized, ramified power of wealth. Marx hopefully anticipated that capitalism would flatten the

distinctions and divisions riddling the working class, so as to create a mighty homogenized force bound by a common interest in overthrowing the system. The objective of politics, Mao Tse-tung famously exhorted, was to “unite the many to defeat the few.” Whereas, **identity politics divides the many so as to, designedly or not, enable the few.** It conjures a hierarchy of oppressions, in which each group vies with the others for the position of most oppressed — Kimberlé Crenshaw says Black women are most oppressed, Angela Davis says it’s transgender people, Ibram X. Kendi says it’s poor transgender Black women. **The victors in this inverted Oppression Sweepstakes, where you win by being the biggest loser, get to leap to the head of the queue as most worthy of preferential treatment, while, simultaneously, fomenting new resentments among those shoved further and further behind.** Then, **identity politics puts forth demands that either appear radical but are in fact politically inert** — Defund the police, Abolition of prisons — as they have no practical possibility of achievement; or that leave the overall system intact while still enabling a handful, who purport to represent marginalized groups, to access — on a “parity” basis — the exclusive club of the “haves.” **This, in effect, performance politics has spawned a disgusting den of thieves** who brand themselves with radical-sounding hashtags, churn out radical-sounding tweets, and insinuate themselves into positions of prominence, as they rake in corporate donations, cash corporate paychecks, hang out at the watering holes of the rich and famous, and thence can be safely relied upon not to bite the hand that feeds them. **In a word, identity politics is a business** — in the case of Black Lives Matter “leaders,” a most lucrative and

dirty business. The enterprising BLM Inc leadership — Tamika Mallory, Patrisse Cullors, Shaun King et al. — are the **lineal descendants of the Civil Rights era “poverty pimps” who exchanged loyalty to the Democratic Party machine for War on Poverty largesse**. A Rev. Al (Sharpton) paper doll chain, these BLM grifters pretend to represent bereaved families of Blacks murdered by police but, in fact, lock them out, as well as the grassroots organizations actually fighting police violence. In the meantime, they amass huge personal fortunes denouncing racism, capitalism, sexism, transphobia, homophobia, misogyny, etc., on *Democracy Now!* in the morning; making commercials for Cadillac, cutting multimillion dollar book and video deals, charging \$15,000 per sixty minutes on Zoom to deliver moronic pabulum, in the afternoon; and dressing (or undressing) to the nines at the Grammys and Oscars at night. **On the opposite side, the movement behind Bernie Sanders endeavored to build a broad coalition on the premises that the system no longer functions for the overwhelming majority of the American people;** that to make it work requires a radical redistribution of wealth; and that even as all the “have-nots” would benefit from “our revolution,” those who have suffered most would benefit more. In the end, this vision was defeated, although it did plant the seed for a radical agenda in the future. In part, this setback resulted from the infancy of the movement, which still hadn’t figured out how to cobble together that grand coalition in which everyone’s legitimate rights are respected, none neglected, without alienating any of its constituent parts. **But it must also be said, without fear or equivocation, that identity politics in its many guises — from the cold calculation of the Democratic Party to**

weaponize biological difference to the preening and posturing of radical-chic hustlers — played a most pernicious role in wrecking the most hopeful movement to come along in generations, and has become a fundamental hindrance to the radical transformation of our radically unjust society. [351-354, italic emphasis original, bold emphasis added]

A few pages later, in the “Conclusion to Part I,” Finkelstein elaborates further:

It is no accident that, as the appeal of a class-based politics has gained traction in recent years, ruling elites across the political spectrum have embraced identity politics to deflect from the class struggle. [...] **Identity politics is an elite contrivance to divert attention from this class chasm. The Republican Party is now anchored in — although it’s rarely described as such — *white* identity politics as it persuades white have-nots that “the other” is the enemy. The Democratic Party has sought to carve out a base among “the other” by persuading them that the party of the white working class “basket of deplorables” is the enemy. Their common objective has been to obscure the economic springs of the current misery and futureless future of the overwhelming majority of Americans. A billionaire, Donald Trump, became the improbable voice in the Republican Party of voiceless, frustrated white workers.** He stoked their status anxieties by warning them that, after losing everything else as the economy went into freefall, the last “privilege” that they could lay claim to, that of being white — and, therefore, in white America still standing by dint of this birthright one notch above non-whites — was in jeopardy; that this white birthright was being snatched from them by the Democratic Party, which privileged and promoted nonwhites who now stood poised to displace them and

leave them behind at the bottom of the heap. The more that bicoastal Democratic Party leaders displayed open contempt for Trump, the more tightly white workers clung to him as a fellow victim of their holier-than-thou, snooty, arrogant, bigoted woke politics.

The other unlikely champion of the dispossessed was a septuagenarian “privileged white male” Jew from Brooklyn. Bernie Sanders sought to build a coalition from the traditional working-class constituency of the Democratic Party, and eventually a slice of Trump’s base, around an Old Left class-struggle politics that would also resonate for other components of the Old Left coalition such as African-Americans, who would benefit disproportionately from his redistributionist platform. **In the face of this wholly unanticipated challenge from within, the Democratic Party weaponized identity politics to stop Bernie’s class-struggle agenda. During his 2016 and 2020 primary bids, Bernie was alternately cancelled into oblivion or viciously reviled in woke venues.** [370-372, italic emphasis original, bold emphasis added]

In short, for all its “progressive” pretensions, identity-politics-cum-cancel-culture is a deeply regressive, reactionary force that serves the interests of the 1% and not the interests of the 99% — while at the same time enriching the ostensible guardians of the wretched of the earth! (The pigs of George Orwell’s *Animal Farm* (1945) spring to mind.) While this regressive, reactionary politics might be understandable — even expected — from the so-called “right,” it is inexcusable — whether in politics, academia, the media, or popular culture — from a so-called “left” that ostensibly celebrates political and moral giants such as Frederick Douglass, Abraham Lincoln, W.E.B. Du Bois, Rosa Luxembourg, Charlie Chaplin, Paul Sweezy, Paul Robeson, Pete Seeger, Martin Luther King, Jr., Annette Rubenstein, and Noam Chomsky.

At one end of the conventional political spectrum, Finkelstein's argument is similar to the critique by the Trotskyist World Socialist Web Site (wsws.org) of the *New York Times's* "1619 Project." (See, for example, *The New York Times' 1619 Project and the Racist Falsification of History* (2021) edited by David North and Thomas Mackaman that collects essays and interviews first published online at <https://www.wsws.org/en/topics/event/1619>.)

At the other end of the conventional political spectrum, Finkelstein's argument is similar to those of Shelby Steele and the so-called modern "black conservative" movement that Steele helped launch. (See, for example, Steele's books *The Content of Our Character: A New Vision of Race in America* (1990) and *White Guilt: How Blacks and Whites Together Destroyed the Promise of the Civil Rights Era* (2006); his documentary film *What Killed Michael Brown?* (2020) made in conjunction with his son Eli; and his 1998 essay "The Loneliness of the 'Black Conservative'" published as part of *A Dream Deferred: The Second Betrayal of Black Freedom in America* (1998) and also available online at <https://www.hoover.org/research/loneliness-black-conservative>.)

At a more general level, Finkelstein's critique implicitly affirms an observation that Machiavelli makes in *The Prince* about credulousness and power:

For men, universally, judge more by the eyes than by the hands, because it is given to everyone that they see, but to few that they can touch. Everyone sees what you seem to be, but few touch what you are, and those few will not dare to oppose themselves to the opinion of the many who have the majesty of the state defending them. And with respect to all human actions, and especially those of princes where there is no judge to whom to appeal, one looks to the end. Let a prince then win and maintain the state — the means will always be judged honorable and will be praised by everyone; for the vulgar are always taken in by the appearance and the outcome of a thing, and in this world there is no one but the vulgar. [Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, trans. Leo Paul S. de Alvarez (Prospect Heights, Ill.: Waveland Press, 1980

[1532]), 109 (Chapter 18, “In What Modes Princes Ought to Keep Faith”)]

Moreover (and not insignificantly for the book’s other agendas), in his effort to overturn the tables in the “disgusting den of thieves” that “performance politics has spawned,” Finkelstein has implicitly cast himself as a sort of secular Jesus whose temple is the academy. As the Good Book says:

And Jesus went into the temple of God, and cast out all them that sold and bought in the temple, and overthrew the tables of the moneychangers, and the seats of them that sold doves, And said unto them, It is written, My house shall be called the house of prayer; but ye have made it a den of thieves. [Matt. 21:12-13 KJV]

(Elsewhere Finkelstein implicitly positions himself as a modern Martin Luther King, Jr. — and through King, a modern Moses. See below.)

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There are several secrets to an effective reading of *I’ll Burn that Bridge When I Get to It!*

The clue to the first secret lurks at the end of Part I’s deeply-buried lede and in a few other spots throughout the text. It is the phrase “radical chic.” As Finkelstein observes in a footnote, the phrase harkens back to an essay by Tom Wolfe that was first published in the 8 June 1970 issue of *New York* magazine as “Radical Chic: That Party at Lenny’s” [Tom Wolfe, “Radical Chic: That Party at Lenny’s,” *New York*, 8 June 1970, https://nymag.com/docs/07/05/070529radical_chic.pdf.] Wolfe published a revised version along with a complementary companion essay called “Mau-Mauing the Flak Catchers” in his 1970 book *Radical Chic and Mau-Mauing the Flak Catchers*. In these essays, says Finkelstein, Wolfe famously eviscerated the way in which “[w]hite wannabe radicals and the [Black] Panthers entered into a mutually lucrative business partnership” in which “[w]hites fastened onto the Panthers to burnish their revolutionary street cred, while Panthers guilt-tripped whites in an extortion racket” [219n182]. (Wolfe’s “Radical Chic” is organized around a party given in support of the Black Panthers by conductor and composer Leonard Bernstein — the “Lenny” of the essay’s subtitle — and his

wife Felicia Montealegre Bernstein. Wolfe uses the term “mau-mauing,” an allusion to the anti-colonial Mau Mau Uprising in British Kenya, to refer to various intimidation tactics used by black activists to win concessions from white authorities.)



Finkelstein’s book is in many ways an update of Wolfe’s thesis for the 21st century. A “Radical Chic 2.0” or “Radical Chic Redux,” as it were. Indeed, a less reflexive and perhaps more apt title for the book would be something like “Radical Sheet in the 21st Century: The Party that’s Looney.” Or alternatively: “*Enough Already with this Bullshit!*” — an expostulation that caps Finkelstein’s lengthy evisceration of what he views as the pseudo-progressive Obama presidency and the pseudo-intellectuals who constituted it [289, emphasis original]. And though Finkelstein pokes fun at identity-politics-cum-cancel-culture by adopting a *nom de plume*, “Norman X. Finkelstein,” that “crowbars” an “X” into his name *à la mode Kendi* [228], a perhaps more pertinent *nom de plume* would have been “W.E.B. Norman Wolfe” in recognition

of the two key authorial ancestors that lurk behind the book: the implicit-and-almost-invisible Tom Wolfe and the more explicit-and-omnipresent W.E.B. Du Bois.

(At one point, for instance, Finkelstein characterizes Du Bois in terms that seem simultaneously apropos of Finkelstein himself:

Here, then, in a nutshell, is the Du Boisian temperament and sensibility: facing up to the facts as they present themselves; unapologetically but also judiciously analyzing them; not concealing inconvenient facts (or source material) that might appear to contradict his thesis; and, ultimately, not losing sight of the bigger picture, in its historical and moral dimensions, while articulating it, if the occasion warrants, in outrage, ridicule, and mockery. He is the staid scholar but also, having earned it by his exemplary life, the prophetic voice. [169])

The upshot of all this is that the first secret to an effective reading of Finkelstein's book is Wolfe's book. Read it first and read it well — not an easy task given that it is now something of a regionally-specific period piece.

The second secret is to read Finkelstein's book non-linearly. Start with a close reading of the Foreword, the Conclusion to Part II, and Chapter 1 (in that order) to get an overall sense of Finkelstein's project and his authorial stance. With this in hand, skip to page 351 and read to the end of Part I. Then return to the beginning of Part I and read through to the end of the book.

The third secret is to read Finkelstein's book slowly and carefully, and to do whatever secondary research is required to make complete sense of it all. For one of the great strengths of the book is that it situates contemporary issues in a wide range of richly documented contexts, few of which will be entirely comprehensible to the ordinary reader. Moreover, *I'll Burn that Bridge!* is its own way also something of a regionally-specific, ethically-specific period piece. All of this is probably best done in two passes: a first pass focusing the main text in order to get the overall argument, and then a second pass that takes in the numerous digressions in shaded boxes and the extensive footnotes.



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I'll Burn that Bridge When I Get to It! is not a perfect book, but it is eminently worth reading nonetheless because it is an important, irreverent, and frequently funny contribution to one of the central, multi-faceted debates of our time. (The running comparison of Barack Obama to Elmer Gantry is priceless.) Finkelstein's analysis and polemic are edifying, regardless of whether one agrees with Finkelstein in whole or in part or not at all. And Finkelstein's erudition is impressive — so much so that it seems simply wrong to think of addressing Finkelstein in any manner other than "Herr Doktor Professor." Indeed, one is reminded of the Laurie Anderson lyric "when my father died it was like a whole library burned down" [Laurie Anderson, "World Without End" (1994)]. Could it have been a better book? Sure. But as Donald Rumsfeld might have said: we go to war with the books we have.

At the end of his book, Finkelstein asks rhetorically "Am I bitter? Yes. Am I defeated? No" [510]. For Finkelstein has stayed true to his principles. "I am often asked," he writes elsewhere, "whether I regret any major decisions I made in the past."

I can honestly say no. At each critical juncture in my accreting cancellation, I was acutely aware, my answer to this or that question would significantly decide my fate in life. Which is to say, each reply of mine came after careful deliberation; contrary to popular opinion, I am not impulsive; stubborn, yes, impulsive, no.

Indeed, as Finkelstein see it, the arc of his life proves “dead wrong the cynics who imagine, or console themselves, that everyone has a price” [358].

In an email to me, Finkelstein expanded on this theme:

I am bitter because I was denied the right to teach for 15 years. Now I am able to occasionally adjunct, which is my supreme pleasure in life. I currently teach the laws of war at Hunter College one night per week for three hours (no breaks; no electronic devices allowed in class). It’s quite exhilarating, albeit I probably enjoy it more than the students enjoy me! The second source of bitterness is the personal betrayals from those I expected — and had a right to expect — more. When Amy Goodman (a very old friend) cancelled me over, at most, a silly joke; when the *Nation* wrote that I was as big a liar as Alan Dershowitz; when the *Progressive* called me a “Holocaust minimizer” ... — well, that was hard to take. As for the rest, I have always subscribed to Benda’s credo: “A clerk who is popular with the layman is a traitor to his office.” There have been occasional moments when — to quote Medhi Hasan — I was a “rockstar.” Truth be told, I was not comfortable in that position. I don’t believe I ever actively courted “cancellation,” but I also know that I never sought (at least, after adolescence) popularity. My goal throughout my life was to stay true to my parents’ martyrdom; to never be tempted by fame and fortune if it came (as it always does) at the price of my convictions. The rest is small change. My books never get

reviewed; they are never cited in scholarship. Yet, I am confident that I have justified my existence. I did my best; which is the best that I could do. [Personal communication, 16 March 2023]

When all is said and done, Finkelstein's book is both a tome and a tomb. Indeed, there is something vaguely ominous about a semi-autobiographical book that is titled "*I'll Burn that Bridge When I Get to It!*," that concludes with the author's bitterness-making wrongful cancellation, and that opens and closes by recounting Martin Luther King, Jr.'s premonition of his own death in Memphis where King "eerily delivered what turned out to be his own eulogy" [2] from "the mountaintop" where he had "glimpsed the Promised Land of Truth and Justice" [510-511] (a la Moses [Deut. 34:1-4]). For the net effect is to suggest that Finkelstein is herewith delivering his own eulogy from his mountaintop on the verge of — Heaven forbid — his own death.

According to this self-eulogy, the bulk of contemporary "progressive" America has chosen to serve Mammon and not Truth. As such, it has become a force for Evil rather than a force for Good. In the academy, in the media, in cultural institutions, and in the Democratic Party: posturing political and moral pygmies of the "progressive" intelligentsia — such as Barack Obama, Hillary Clinton, Ibram X. Kendi, Samantha Power, Kimberlé Crenshaw, Judith Butler, Tanehisi Coates, Robin DiAngelo, Patrisse Cullors, Elizabeth Warren, Shaun King, Sydney Ember, Al Sharpton, Amy Goodman, Jim Clyburn, and all the rest — have become "the enemy within."

True to the values and example of his "Beloved Parents," Finkelstein reserves his "harshest epithet for those who betrayed their principles for earthly reward." "Traitors! [his parents] would mutter, with a mixture of disdain and disgust" [397]. True to Julien Benda's credo, Finkelstein rails against the "*intellectual organization of political hatreds*" [Julien Benda, *The Treason of the Intellectuals*, trans. Richard Aldington (New York: Norton, 1969 [1928]), 27, emphasis original]. And thus, like Tom Wolfe before him, Finkelstein subjects the radical-chic-mau-mau-intellectual-political complex of our day to that best of all disinfectants: sardonic sunlight.

This self-eulogy is also a testament to a personal tragedy, the residue of which is a mournful afterglow. For where, in another, more perfect world, would linger the satisfied grin

of a Cheshire cat, in this world — this America, with its invisible gulag of cancelled non-persons — there remains only bitterness. For one simply cannot agree with Finkelstein that his book is “laced with vitriol” solely because “so much of ‘woke’ culture deserves contempt” [xii]. From many a page there emanates a persistent murmur: “I could’ve been a contender ... I should’ve been contender ... By God, I am a contender, you hollow assholes!”