

Cornel West Blames 'Zionists' For His Failure to be Given Tenure at Harvard

by Hugh Fitzgerald



Cornel West, the “philosopher” and “political activist,” is angry that Harvard has refused to turn his non-tenured position into a tenured one and grant him that tenure. He appears to think there can be no doubt about the remarkable contributions he knows he has made to “philosophy” and “public discourse,” so the only plausible explanation for Harvard not granting him tenure is that he has dared to speak about what he calls that “taboo” subject – Israel and its “occupation.” A report on this preposterous personage, and his latest self-pitying diatribe against Harvard and the “Zionists” whom he claims have blocked his demand for tenure, is in [Elder of Zion](#).

Never one to shy from controversy, Dr. Cornel West once again finds himself at the center of a firestorm after Harvard

University refused to consider him for tenure – a decision he links to his support for Palestinian rights.

Harvard “refused to consider him for tenure” because his position was never supposed to be a tenured one. When he accepted Harvard’s offer, the position was clearly described as “non-tenured.” Nothing was hidden; West knew, when he accepted the job, that it was without the possibility of tenure. It is West who is now trying, by making false charges about Zionists “who don’t want me to receive tenure” – to turn that non-tenured position into one with tenure. Harvard in fact, given his non-tenured position, has treated him extravagantly well. It has just offered him a ten-year contract and a raise to accompany a prestigious chair. Since West is now 67, it is likely that a “ten-year contract” will have the same practical effect as tenure.

West, 67, previously left the Massachusetts school in 2002 following a public spat with then-President Lawrence Summers, before returning in 2016. He says Harvard’s administration told him there was no possibility for a tenure review but offered him more money or a prestigious chair. He believes there were three possible reasons for Harvard’s decision: his academic work, his age or his politics.

The academic, who will participate in the prestigious Gifford Lectures in 2024, quickly rules out the first two possibilities, citing his previous tenure 36 years ago at Yale and professorships at Harvard and Princeton with the highest possible honors for a faculty member, as well as over 20 books published under his name.

Cornel West has been a master at exploiting affirmative action in faculty appointments at American universities, as well as the recent appearance of its gone-viral variant, the “Diversity and Inclusion” movement, for his own benefit. If he had been judged purely on his “scholarship,” the melancholy

conclusion is that despite his having written “20 books” – some of which he did not write but co-edited, while still others are scarcely more than pamphlets – he should never have received the academic appointments he has landed with such ease. It is embarrassing that almost all of his written work consists of his jejune fulminations about race – does he have another subject? – that some describe as “philosophy” and call West a “philosopher,” presumably entitled to be mentioned in the same breath as such genuine philosophers at Harvard and Princeton – both places where West has taught – as W. V. Quine, Saul Kripke, and Robert Nozick. Few faculty members wish to speak out about this; in the current climate, speaking one’s mind about West’s scholarly record can only get someone in trouble, so they remain quiet, but no doubt many are outraged at West’s transparent attempt to turn a non-tenured position into a tenured one, and his intolerable attempt to claim that he is only being blocked from receiving tenure because of his anti-Israel stance.

If the powerful “Zionists” were out to get West, why did they ever allow him to return to Harvard after he had left the university in 2002, amidst a flurry of charges West made against the then-President of Harvard, Lawrence Summers? Summers had had the gall to question the value of West’s “scholarship,” and to suggest that he stop the pamphleteering and write a serious book befitting the holder of a University Professorship. Summers also dared to ask him about his commitment to his job, given all the other, non-academic activities West was engaged in, from recording hip-hop albums to political speechifying. Why didn’t those supporters of Israel prevent the university from rehiring him in 2016 or from offering him, as it just did, a ten-year contract and the prestige, and pay raise, of a named chair?

To get a sense of how many fingers West has in how many pies having nothing to do with his academic responsibilities, here is some of what he has been involved in:

From 2010 through 2013, West co-hosted a radio program with Tavis Smiley, called Smiley and West. He has also been featured in several documentaries, and made appearances in Hollywood films such as The Matrix Reloaded and The Matrix Revolutions, providing commentary for both films. West has also made several spoken word and hip-hop albums, and due to his work, has been named MTV's Artist of the Week. West co-hosts a podcast, The Tight Rope, with Tricia Rose. In 2020, he was listed by Prospect [a British mass-market magazine] as the fourth-greatest thinker for the COVID-19 era.

When I read that Cornel West has been crowned “as the fourth-greatest thinker for the COVID-19 era,” I was immediately put in mind of Tariq Ramadan, whom TIME magazine once listed as one of “the 100 most influential people in the world.” We know where Ramadan has ended up,. Where will Cornel West, that spinning top of similar vacuity, finally come to rest? Once again from Haaretz:

He does not believe his public support for Sen. Bernie Sanders or Black Lives Matter was a deal breaker, noting that his stance on those topics is mainstream enough to not be viewed as alienating. “Then I thought of the Palestinian issue and the Israeli occupation – now that is a taboo,” West says.

What West seems not to understand is that the time he spent on the Sanders campaign, traveling all over the country to speak as a Sanders surrogate, was yet another of his many activities that had nothing to do with his professorial duties, and prevented him from properly fulfilling his teaching duties. That was the gravamen of the charge, too, made in 2002, long before the 2016 presidential campaign , by the President of Harvard – that West was spending too little time at his job, and too much time in all sorts of other activities. And since 2002, his off-campus commitments have only grown. He has

campaigned for Al Sharpton, Bill Bradley, and Bernie Sanders. His many media interviews and Op/Eds about BLM and the responsibility of the “capitalist” USA for the plight of black people, his occasional appearances at protests, his radio show with Smiley, his hip-hop albums, his movie and television appearances – all these too take time and energy away from preparing for classes, meeting with students, and producing the scholarship that is reasonably expected of someone holding a coveted University Professorship. He has also made many appearances on YouTube; they are instructive, but not in a good way. One of them, representative of Cornel West’s audiovisual oeuvre, can be viewed [said](#) they looked with “strong disfavor upon his characterization” of Summers and that “such an analogy carries innuendoes and implications ... that many on the Princeton faculty find highly inappropriate, indeed repugnant and intolerable.”

Although I’ve given above a summary of Cornel West’s non-academic pursuits, I think a fuller list of those activities is useful. Some will no doubt be impressed, but the discerning will be appalled. Here is a look into the life of Cornel West, in all its hectic vacancy:

West appears as Councillor West in both The Matrix Reloaded and The Matrix Revolutions and also provides the voice for this character in the video game Enter the Matrix. In addition, West provides philosophical commentary on all three Matrix films in The Ultimate Matrix Collection, along with the integral theorist Ken Wilber.

He has made several appearances in documentary films also, such as the 2008 film Examined Life, a documentary featuring several academics discussing philosophy in real-world contexts. West, “driving through Manhattan, ... compares philosophy to jazz and blues, reminding us how intense and invigorating a life of the mind can be.” He also appears in conversation with Bill Withers in the Bill Withers documentary, Still Bill.

The “life of the mind”? I have looked into some of his writings, and viewed his YouTube appearances, and I can find no trace of the “life of the mind.” Where is the evidence that Cornel West knows anything about the “life of the mind”?

West has made frequent appearances on the political talk show Real Time with Bill Maher.

A character based on West and events in his career appeared in the Law & Order: Criminal Intent episode “Anti-Thesis”, significant for introducing the recurring villain character Nicole Wallace.

In May 2012, West guest-starred in the sixth season of the American television comedy series 30 Rock, “What Will Happen to the Gang Next Year?.”

On the musical front, West recorded a recitation of John Mellencamp’s song “Jim Crow” for inclusion on the singer’s box set On the Rural Route 7609 in 2009.

In 2010, he completed recording with the Cornel West Theory, a hip hop band endorsed by West. He has also released several hip-hop/soul/spoken word albums. In 2001, West released his first album, Sketches of My Culture. Street Knowledge followed in 2004. In 2007, West released Never Forget: A Journey of Revelations, his third album which included collaborations with the likes of Prince, Talib Kweli, Jill Scott, Andre 3000, KRS-One, and the late Gerald Levert. West appeared on Immortal Technique’s song “Sign of the Times”, which appeared on the 2011 album The Martyr. In 2012, he was featured on Brother Ali’s song “Letter to My Countrymen”, which appeared on the album Mourning in America and Dreaming in Color.

Then there is his political activism, that also takes him away from his academic duties.

West has described himself as a “non-Marxist socialist” (partly because he does not view Marxism and Christianity as reconcilable) and serves as honorary chair of the Democratic Socialists of America, which he has described as “the first multiracial, socialist organization close enough to my politics that I could join.” He also described himself as a “radical democrat, suspicious of all forms of authority” in the Matrix-themed documentary *The Burly Man Chronicles*.

[West claims that] “We are [now] experiencing the sad gangsterization of America, an unbridled grasp at power, wealth, and status.” Viewing capitalism as the root cause of these alleged American lusts, West warns, “Free-market fundamentalism trivializes the concern for public interest. It puts fear and insecurity in the hearts of anxiety-ridden workers. It also makes money-driven, poll-obsessed elected officials deferential to corporate goals of profit – often at the cost of the common good.”

West has been involved with such projects as the Million Man March and Russell Simmons’s Hip-Hop Summit, and worked with such public figures as Louis Farrakhan[23] and Al Sharpton, whose 2004 presidential campaign West advised.

In 2000, West became a prominent endorser of Ralph Nader, even speaking at some Nader rallies. Some Greens sought to draft West to run as a presidential candidate in 2004. West declined, citing his active participation in the Al Sharpton campaign. West, along with other⁴ prominent Nader 2000 supporters, signed the “Vote to Stop Bush” statement urging progressive voters in swing states to vote for John Kerry, despite strong disagreements with many of Kerry’s policies.

In April 2002 West and Rabbi Michael Lerner performed civil disobedience by sitting in the street in front of the US State Department “in solidarity with suffering Palestinian and Israeli brothers and sisters.” West said, “We must keep in touch with the humanity of both sides.” In May 2007 West

joined a demonstration against “injustices faced by the Palestinian people resulting from the Israeli occupation” and “to bring attention to this 40-year travesty of justice.”

In 2011, West called on the University of Arizona to divest from companies profiting from the Israeli occupation of the Palestinian territories.

West also serves as co-chair of the Tikkun Community. He co-chaired the National Parenting Organization’s Task Force on Parent Empowerment and participated in President Bill Clinton’s National Conversation on Race. He has publicly endorsed In These Times magazine by calling it: “The most creative and challenging news magazine of the American left.” He is also a contributing editor for Sojourners magazine.

West supports People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) in its Kentucky Fried Cruelty campaign, aimed at eliminating what PETA describes as KFC’s inhumane treatment of chickens. West is quoted on PETA flyers: “Although most people don’t know chickens as well as they know cats and dogs, chickens are interesting individuals with personalities and interests every bit as developed as the dogs and cats with whom many of us share our lives.”

In 2008, West contributed his insights on the current global issue of modernized slavery and human trafficking in the documentary Call+Response. West is a member of the Campaign for Peace and Democracy.

On October 16, 2011, West was in Washington, DC, participating in the Occupy D.C. protests on the steps of the Supreme Court over the court’s decision in the Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission case the previous year. Five days later, he was arrested during an Occupy Wall Street protest in Harlem against the New York Police Department’s stop and frisk policy.

In 2014, West co-initiated the Stop Mass Incarceration

Network, a project of the Revolutionary Communist Party USA. Later that year, he and RCP chairman Bob Avakian took part in a filmed discussion on "Religion and Revolution".

In 2016 West campaigned around the country for Bernie Sanders, often delivering speeches as his surrogate.

Had enough? I certainly have. The paragraphs immediately above were taken from the Wikipedia entry on Cornel West. But I left out a great deal about the activities of this carney-barker, this peripatetic mountebank offering his political and economic nostrums, which are warmed-over Bolshevism, with more than a dash of Farrakhan.

All these forays into hip-hop albums, TV and film appearances, and political speechifying are exhausting simply to read about. Neither his political nor his entertainment activities have anything to do with West's duties at any of the universities where he has taught. Some might call it a gross dereliction of duty.

First published in