

## A Conversation with K. C. Johnson

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**Abstract** In ubiquitous writings, a Brooklyn College professor has repeatedly drawn attention to the excesses of radical ideologues in higher education. He took his own provost to task for indoctrinating students in a politically myopic policy, inaptly named: “global citizenship.” He was most articulate of those who sought redress for the witch hunt involving Duke lacrosse players. His purview is broad, and he makes the best of enemies. It’s about time that *Academic Questions* got around to chatting with K. C. Johnson.

***Iannone:* Please tell us something of your background, your education, your field, your subjects of study, your teaching experience.**

***Johnson:*** I am from Scarborough, Maine, a small town just south of Portland, the state’s largest city. I received my B.A. and Ph.D. degrees from Harvard in U.S. diplomatic history. My dissertation was on a group of senators and U.S. foreign policy in the 1920s and 1930s, so my scholarship has always straddled the line between US political, diplomatic, and constitutional history.

I teach courses in all three fields, at both the B.A. and M.A. levels at Brooklyn, plus an occasional course at the CUNY Graduate Center.

***Iannone:* How did you come to teach at Brooklyn College?**

***Johnson:*** Brooklyn’s History Department shrunk by almost 50% in the 1980s and 1990s. The year before I came to the school, eight professors retired; the department was given authorization for two new lines. One of the two was in twentieth-century US history. At the time, I was teaching at Williams; I applied and got the job.

***Iannone:* You have expressed an especial commitment to teaching in city schools like Brooklyn. Why is that?**

***Johnson:*** My parents were both public school teachers, and I grew up in a household with a deep commitment to public education. Brooklyn not only is part of

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one of the largest public university systems in the country (CUNY), but it also provides an opportunity to help train the next generation of the borough's public school teachers.

***Iannone:* What is the importance of history and of American history in particular to young people today? We hear of frightful ignorance on their part. Would you agree, and if so, to what do you attribute that?**

***Johnson:*** With American troops on the ground in Iraq and Afghanistan, and a nation living under constant threat of a terrorist attack, it would seem self-evident that college students should learn about the history of American politics, foreign policy, and government institutions. Unfortunately, I fear, many in the academy have allowed ideological or political prejudices to influence professional judgments. As a result, students too often receive a portrayal of the American past as the drama of dominant groups exploiting vulnerable and powerless ones, filtered through the analytic triumvirate of race, class, and gender.

This change dates from the 1960s, when scholars active in the civil rights, feminist, and antipoverty movements sought what they termed a “usable past.” After first expanding the discipline into such previously neglected topics as African-American, women's, and social history, this mindset has taken an exclusionary turn to justify eliminating fields such as political, legal, or diplomatic history that some ideologues perceive as focusing on “dead white men.”

While students increasingly don't even have the opportunity to study American political, legal, diplomatic, or military history in college, no guarantee exists they will encounter such material in high school, either. Led by NCATE, the accreditation agency for teacher training, between 2002 and 2006, education programs around the country championed such vague criteria as a “disposition to promote social justice” as a requirement to become a public school teacher. Those students who didn't accept the race/class/gender approach, therefore, couldn't become teachers. And the students taught by those properly “disposed” would, therefore, too often enter college with a one-sided, highly distorted view of the American past.

***Iannone:* You had quite a battle to get tenure, didn't you, despite having sterling credentials? Please tell us of the strengths you brought to the tenure process and the problems you had getting your department and school to recognize them.**

***Johnson:*** I had a strong record of scholarship (three books plus an edited book, several peer-reviewed articles) and good teaching evaluations. Unfortunately, I had taken two public positions that alienated a powerful faction within the department. First, I had protested, on grounds of imbalance, a college-sponsored “teach-in” on the events of 9/11 that contained no supporters of either U.S. or Israeli foreign policy. Second, I had strongly opposed making a job offer to a female candidate that I (and several other members of the department) considered unqualified on the basis of poor scholarship.

The Board of Trustees (and the union contract) recognize three criteria for tenure and promotion—scholarship, teaching, and service. In my case, the college added a fourth criterion—“collegiality,” which came to be defined as disagreeing with the positions taken by some well-connected, tenured members of the department and the then-department chairman—and argued that it was more important than the other three criteria combined.

***Iannone: How did things end up?***

***Johnson:*** The CUNY Chancellor, Matthew Goldstein, and the CUNY Board of Trustees overruled the decision by Brooklyn College, and awarded me promotion to full professor and tenure.

***Iannone: Why do you think there was such a battle?***

***Johnson:*** Canadian sociologist Kenneth Westhues has analyzed the concept of “mobbing” in the academy. Westhues borrowed from the work of psychologist Heinz Leymann and ethnologist Konrad Lorenz; the latter’s work described how chickens “ganged up” on a weaker member of the brood, eventually killing it through shunning, depriving it food and water, or pecking it to death. Westhues documented the frequency of mobbing in higher education, almost as if it is the academy’s assassination technique of choice. As one scholar noted, “Mobbing is normally carried out politely and non-violently. The participants are so convinced of the rightness of their exclusionary campaign that they usually leave ample written records, proudly signing their names to extreme deprecations and defamations, without noticing how thin or non-existent is the supporting evidence. The object of the process is the same as among chickens; crushing the target’s identity and eliminating him or her totally from respectable company.”

The targets of mobbing usually are individuals—faculty members who for some reason have crossed an invisible line and need to be shunned and expunged from the academic brood.

Westhues cited three conditions for academic mobbing: (1) new leadership at the college; (2) weak leadership at the departmental level; (3) deep divisions within the department. All three existed in my case.

***Iannone: To what do you attribute your ultimate success?***

***Johnson:*** I benefited from a number of factors. Several members of the department—some of whom did not have tenure, and therefore acted at great risks to their own careers—stood by me. I received strong support from a coalition of 24 prominent historians, who expressed disdain at Brooklyn’s decision to base tenure decisions on ideology rather than scholarship and teaching. I had lots of help—from NAS, from ACTA, from people at FIRE. I had a great lawyer, Bob Rosen, and very strong evidence (damaging e-mails from members of the department who targeted me). And I had a case that members of the media could easily understand.

***Iannone: What things about recent changes at CUNY are you happy with?***

***Johnson:*** CUNY has been undergoing a renaissance in recent years, thanks to the work of both Chancellor Goldstein and the Board of Trustees. The CUNY Honors College has brought Ivy-League-caliber students into the system, improving the quality of the student body overall. The Chancellor and Board correctly eliminated remediation at the senior colleges. And the administration has courageously resisted the demands of the CUNY faculty union, whose chief goal appears to be returning to the failed policies of the 1970s and 1980s. Goldstein has opposed union demands to restore open admissions and remediation to the senior colleges; he also has resisted the union’s attempts to have adjuncts (who are also union members) receive the equivalent of tenure after five or seven years of service.

***Iannone: What things trouble you about policies at Brooklyn?***

***Johnson:*** In recent years, academic policy at Brooklyn has been set by our provost, Roberta Matthews, who believes that colleges and universities should train

“global citizens”—or people “sensitized to issues of race, class, and gender.” The basic goal appears to be using academic jargon as a mask, fundamentally to transform the purpose of a college education away from giving students instruction in the traditional disciplines of the liberal arts and toward training a new generation of social activists.

**Iannone:** How would this “global citizen” program operate and why is it opposed to true education? Is there some cunning in adopting grand terms like “global citizen” that average taxpayers might not see as objectionable and might even see as admirable?

**Johnson:** The use of such unobjectionable phrases as “global citizen” or “learning community” to mask the true agenda is one of the most deeply disturbing aspects of modern education. In theory, how could anyone object to our students learning more about the outside world? In practice, however, the program is little more than a license for indoctrination.

Take, for instance, the following two programs. One student focuses on an interdisciplinary international studies program, with courses exploring the history of Islam, the economic development of the Asian Tigers, and language training in Chinese. The second student takes an array of courses that portray American society as oppressive, concentrating on women’s studies and African-American studies offerings.

Even though the first student would have focused on international topics and the second never would have progressed outside of the United States, it is the second who would be deemed a “global citizen,” because the student’s courses would focus on issues of race, class, and gender, whereas the first student’s classes examined more traditional themes, such as religion, language, and economics. This is an Orwellian conception of globalization.

**Iannone:** Do you see those things being a problem in the academy at large these days?

**Johnson:** Yes. The Brooklyn experience is hardly unique, although the college has sometimes tried to implement its agenda in a more heavy-handed fashion than at most institutions. The “global citizen” initiative is one such example, the attempt to use the “collegiality” criterion so transparently was another. Brooklyn was also the site of a high-profile dispositions battle, after an Education professor targeted students who criticized her for stating that “white English” is the “oppressors’ language,” and for showing *Fahrenheit 9/11* on the meeting before Election Day.

**Iannone:** I know you have been involved in another battle. You have written a book about the case of the three Duke lacrosse players accused of rape. The alleged rape took place at a team party at which a young black woman performed as a stripper and later claimed that she had been raped. The three players were indicted in April of 2006 and released on bail. The case never came to trial but the publicity went on for months until the players were finally cleared of all charges on 13 April 2007. What is your view of what happened there?

**Johnson:** This was the highest-profile case of prosecutorial misconduct in modern American history. District Attorney Mike Nifong—presented with an accuser who never told the same story twice to law enforcement and whose stories were mutually contradictory and not supported by any evidence—nonetheless secured indictments against three Duke lacrosse players. He did so by violating

myriad procedures, including withholding exculpatory DNA evidence and ordering police to construct a lineup confined solely to suspects.

More remarkable, however, in this process, he gained the support from many community activists and a sizeable portion of the Duke arts and sciences faculty—who saw the lacrosse players as the “perfect offenders” for purposes of advancing a race/class/gender worldview. The most prominent example of this pattern came on 6 April 2006, when 88 Duke faculty members—the “Group of 88”—took out a full-page ad in the campus newspaper stating definitively that something “happened” to the accuser and thanking protesters who had branded banners reading “castrate” and “time to confess” while blanketing the campus with a “wanted” poster containing the players’ photos.

***Iannone:* Do you think the boys deserve some blame in having a party with strippers and liquor, especially since some of them were underage? They were to some extent representative of Duke, as members of one of its teams. If you had been in an advisory capacity, what would you have said of their party plans?**

***Johnson:*** The decision to hold the party was unbelievably stupid—as the captains have subsequently admitted, if in less blunt language. That said, college students frequently do unbelievably stupid things during spring break (when the lacrosse party occurred).

In this case, two of the indicted players (Reade Seligmann and Collin Finnerty) were sophomores who played no role in planning the party. They attended briefly, found it dull and somewhat distasteful, and as a result left. Their behavior, it seems to me, had nothing worthy of condemnation.

***Iannone:* Why do you think Nifong pursued the case so relentlessly when so much of the evidence was weak? And do you think he will be punished for his actions?**

***Johnson:*** In a word: politics. An appointed DA, he was facing a primary electorate evenly divided between white and black voters. The black candidate opposing him was very weak; the white candidate opposing him was strong (Nifong trailed her by 17 points in a poll taken the day he first commented on the lacrosse case). He was out of money, having loaned nearly \$30,000 of his own money to keep the campaign afloat. By playing up the charges, he would boost his standing in the black community and also consolidate support among far-left forces in the white community.

Because of his behavior in the case, Nifong was disbarred after a June 2007 disciplinary hearing on charges brought by the state bar. He has resigned as district attorney and is reportedly facing criminal charges initiated by lawyers for one or more of the Duke students.

***Iannone:* Should it bother us that black voters can evidently be appealed to in this fashion? Have the race/gender/class people succeeded to some extent in getting people to look at reality through their distorted political lenses? And why do you think the young woman pursued the case?**

***Johnson:*** The pervasiveness of black racism was one of the most troubling aspects of the case. A student from the nearby, largely black North Carolina Central University, where the accuser took classes, said he wanted the players charged whether or not a crime occurred, to make up for the injustices of the past. A black editorialist at the local paper complained about people getting

upset regarding a case of innocent white boys. A former leader of the city of Durham Democratic Party rejoiced that Nifong's victory showed that "rich white boys" couldn't butt justice. All of these remarks passed without rebuke from local leaders—black or white.

As for the accuser: the Attorney General stated when he dismissed all the charges that she is a deeply disturbed individual, with serious psychological problems. She made the rape allegation at a time when she faced the prospect of involuntary commitment to a mental institution. Once she made the charge, she had little or no incentive to recant: she was fed, clothed, and housed by a "victims' rights" group, so she effectively profited from her malfeasance.

***Iannone:*** This sounds almost like witness tampering. But we heard that there were some nasty, perhaps racially tinged remarks made to her during her time at the party. Do you know anything about that and might that kind of thing be part of why she acted as she did?

***Johnson:*** The Attorney General's investigation established that as the party dispersed (and long after both Seligmann and Finnerty had left), the second dancer, Kim Roberts, made a racially charged taunt to one or more Duke students. One Duke student responded with a racial epithet. The accuser, by that point in the evening, was passed out in the front of Roberts' car (drunk, on drugs, or a combination thereof). So nothing untoward was done to her.

How did an alternate image arise? First, in a barrage of interviews given late March, Nifong publicly suggested that evidence existed of repeated racial slurs in the house. (No such evidence existed.) Then, in the height of journalistic irresponsibility, a major August article on the case asserted that both Roberts and the three captains *agreed* with Nifong's account.<sup>1</sup> In fact, all four had given statements to police explicitly denying that any racial arguments occurred before Roberts' remark as the dancers were leaving.

***Iannone:*** What do you make of the response of Duke, the administration, the faculty, the student body, the surrounding community? Some of them were willing to convict before the evidence was even out there.

***Johnson:*** What happened at Duke was one of the darkest episodes in the history of American higher education. In the witch-hunt atmosphere of late March and early April 2006, dozens of Duke professors exploited the lacrosse case to advance their personal, pedagogical, or ideological agendas—at great cost to their own institution's students. The Group of 88 and campus allies such as History professor Peter Wood and Cultural Anthropology professor Orin Starn abandoned the academy's erstwhile respect for due process and dispassionate evaluation of evidence as an event unfolded before their own eyes that they were certain confirmed their extremist race/class/gender worldviews. Then, as Nifong's case collapsed, the Duke faculty activists not only refused to reconsider their actions, but also continued to denounce the lacrosse players and the Duke students who supported the players, while ignoring myriad new facts, showing them to be wrong, that had emerged after the 6 April 2006 Group-of-88 ad.

<sup>1</sup> Duff Wilson and Jonathan Glater, "Files From Duke Rape Case Give Details but No Answers," *New York Times*, 25 Aug. 2006.

**Iannone:** It was disturbing to hear that some saw the case as a chance for racial revenge, whether or not the young men were guilty. How would you answer that?

**Johnson:** This attitude was most prevalent at an 11 April 2006 forum at NCCU, a historically black college in Durham. The pervasiveness of these attitudes demonstrated the failure of most of the black leadership locally. With extremists in their midst demanding the prosecution of the Duke students for past crimes against African-Americans, the more moderate black leadership remained silent.

**Iannone:** Were/are there any heroes in the case?

**Johnson:** In a case that was so charged on lines of race and (to a lesser extent) gender, it's ironic that almost all of the people who have most clearly distinguished themselves were either African-American men or white women—each of whom said they behaved in this case as they would have in any situation. Four people especially stood out.

**Jim Coleman:** An African-American professor at Duke Law School, he was critical in two respects—first by leading a thorough but fair investigation of the lacrosse players' personal behavior and then by becoming the first major legal figure to demand Nifong's recusal, in June 2006.

**Moezeldin Elmostafa:** An African immigrant who swore out an affidavit bolstering Reade Seligmann's alibi before the electronic aspects of Seligmann's alibi had been established. For his trouble, he was arrested on a bogus charge dug up by the DA's investigator, resulting in a quick verdict of not guilty.

**Beth Brewer:** Chief spokesperson and organizer for the Recall Nifong campaign in the fall, she had little background in political activity but nonetheless devoted countless hours to the recall campaign, simply because she considered it the right thing to do.

**Kerstin Kimel:** The Duke women's lacrosse coach, the first person affiliated with Duke to speak out publicly on the men's players' behalf, and a critical person behind the scenes in keeping people on an even keel last spring—a time in which Duke didn't even offer counseling services to any members of the lacrosse team.

**Iannone:** Given what happened in this case, would you support the reinstatement of some degree of *in loco parentis* on college campuses today?

**Johnson:** In theory, yes. But the problem is that under current University structures, this approach would give more power to the offices of student life, which would almost certainly use it to advance their "diversity" agenda, rather than to act responsibly.

**Iannone:** We've been fighting the battle for at least a couple of decades now. Why have we not been more successful? My own feeling is that there has been too much complacency on the part of conservatives and traditionalists, that the recent academic developments were just passing fads that would peter out, that what happened in the academy had no relevance to and could not affect our society at large, which continues on the whole to be successful, that students weren't affected by them, and so on.

**Johnson:** I agree completely. I think that few people outside the academy understand how the personnel process works. Non-academics assume that the race/class/gender/ "diversity" agenda of the last two decades is a passing fad, and there will be self-correction.

Unfortunately, the reverse is true. As Mark Bauerlein pointed out in his 11 December 2004, *Chronicle Review* essay, as departments become taken over by

practitioners of “groupthink,” they become *more*, not less, extreme. So there’s every reason to believe the academy will become more one-sided in the next decade.

***Iannone:* What sorts of actions do you think traditional or conservative-leaning faculty should be taking on campuses today? Do you see hopeful signs?**

***Johnson:*** I believe in the system of checks and balances. That system, too often, no longer exists in the faculty. So there needs to be greater involvement in the academic process by trustees and alumni; and greater attention paid to academic issues by the media. As Justice Brandeis remarked, sunlight is the best disinfectant. Actions like those of the Group of 88 cannot withstand public scrutiny—but too often, the media, parents, trustees, and alumni choose to look the other way.

***Iannone:* What do you think of some of the remedies suggested by conservatives, such as eliminating tenure? Not that it’s really feasible to do so, but theoretically, could you see that helping to restore the academy to its true mission?**

***Johnson:*** I support a limited post-tenure review. It seems to me that professors should have to demonstrate that they are continuing to engage in research; and, if not, find other careers. Such an approach is hardly a panacea, but at least would ensure that poorly qualified figures hired for their ideological compatibility rather than their academic talents are not guaranteed lifetime jobs.

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