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A Discipline Where Only Management Gets Tenure?

Marc Bousquet

As I write this in the first week of March 2003, five thousand of Yale's employees have walked off the job together in a planned and deliberate show of solidarity across job descriptions—professional metaphysicians in solidarity with plumbers, pipefitters, software engineers, and administrative assistants. It represents the latest act in a collaboration well into its second decade between three intelligent, activist, unions, all of whom have different demands that they hope to realize in the action (pension for one, salary for another, recognition to begin the bargaining process for another), but who collectively realize that their power comes from understanding that their interests are united even where their demands are diverse. What these workers understand is that their "community of interest" is with each other, while their employer—in its own community of interest including other university employers such as Columbia, Brown, and Penn—continues to hope that a Bush-packed National Labor Relations Board might revoke the right of graduate employees to unionize.

I'd like these short remarks to reflect the collegial spirit, earnest commitment, and on-the-ground canny political wisdom of the job actions going on at Yale and a dozen other North American campuses at this writing. In passing, I'll discuss newsworthy events of the past thirty days or so by graduate-employee unionists at Iowa, Oregon, Temple, Penn, University of British Columbia, and Wisconsin, as well as the continuing struggles of contingent faculty on dozens of campuses in Chicago, Cambridge, and California. But my goal in doing so is not to report the news, which you can read for yourself at the websites for the Coalition of Graduate Employee Unions (www.cgeu.org), the huge coalition sponsoring equity for contingent faculty in the annual Campus Equity Week events (www.cewaction.org), and at *Workplace: A Journal for Academic Labor* (www.workplace-gsc.com). Instead my goal is to join in the spirit of my co-discussants and try to navigate some of the contradictions and complexities attendant upon our mutual hope to realize the best social potential of academic work. In that connection, I'm very grateful to Lynn Worsham and *JAC* for sponsoring this dialogue. The goal of my contribution is to explore the large terrain represented by the two points on which all three of us appear to agree: 1) our support for unionism and 2) our understanding that unionism and movement solidarity are processes, complex and continuing challenges like any human relationship (such as domestic partnership).

I'm particularly glad and honored to have Evan Watkins' response, which I think takes our discussion in the direction that the rhet-comp discourse ultimately must turn, to a labor theory of agency as a "point of departure for political understanding and action." In emphasizing that labor collectivity is our jumping-off point, and "not a conclusion," he is very rightly asking us to observe the complexity of the challenge faced even by organized academic labor: some form of solidarity may well be the only answer, but what form in which circumstances? How to achieve it? Pointing us to the recent debates on the left regarding the complex models of agency flowing from theorizing the new social movements, he asks us to hold onto social class as a category of analysis, but to see social transformation as the product of an imaginative and likely contingent alliance brought together by "figuring connections among the multiple powers of action potentially available to differently positioned groups teaching composition."

This standpoint asks us to question the limits we place on our imagination of solidarity. On one vector, this might mean questioning the centrality of urban factory workers to our understanding of what it means

to be a member of “the working class,” especially insofar as we hope the working class to serve as a revolutionary historical agent. In the present moment, we are pressed to account for the potential contribution to social change represented by service workers, cultural workers, professional workers (“the knowledge class”), even career managers, such as many WPAs.

This is a welcome insight in connection with the academy, because it provides a way of thinking about the deeply contradictory role of educators. Much of Watkins’ own work is a contribution to thinking about education in relation to the view held by many classical Marxist and feminist-materialist accounts, of educators as performing the feminized “work of reproduction,” or what Bowles and Gintis have memorably described as “a people-production process,” having the function within contemporary capitalism of producing a steady stream of workers with very specific skills, habits, and beliefs. This function notwithstanding, many critical educators have imagined ways in which the institutions of education can take advantage of capitalism’s contradictions to participate in the creation of an oppositional consciousness (in direct relation to Marx’s observations regarding capitalism’s contradictory creation of “its own gravediggers” through, for instance, the splendid organizing opportunity for workers represented by industrialization).

Watkins’ observations regarding “the complexity of class processes” therefore have the force of reminding us of the possibilities of contradiction: if teachers can sometimes exceed their charge of ideological reproduction and the sorting of worker bodies through grading, might not managers and WPAs also navigate contradiction and exceed their function? It is in this spirit that we might get the most usefulness out of Harris’ remarks, which offer a narrative of the personal and institutional lived contradictions of the WPA. As I remarked in the original essay, the urgency of these contradictions is extremely apparent in the WPA discourse more generally: what Roxanne Mountford calls a “schizophrenia” between the WPA’s affective connection to composition labor and the compulsory “change in values” associated with serving as “representative of institutional interests” (see my previous more extensive remarks surveying the WPA literature in this connection [519-20, n.3]). It is precisely because of this urgency and schizophrenia that symptomatic formulations purporting to resolve contradiction such as Harris’ claim for an “identity of interest” between composition’s “bosses and workers” acquire currency. And this claim, that workers—even unionized workers—and managers have an identity of interest, is the core principle of the

work regime widely understood for the past three decades throughout academic sociology, labor studies, management theory, and so on as “Toyotism” (because of that firm’s leadership in revolutionizing management techniques, catapulting it from a very minor manufacturer to the third largest car manufacturer in the world, while contributing to a massive increase in overall worker exploitation, in getting manufacturing unions to accept increasing non-union subcontracting and multiple tiers of labor, for example). In fact, Toyotism originates as a form of managerialism crafted specifically for unionized workplaces such as auto manufacturing and the academy (nearly half of all full-time faculty are unionized).

While I have used the term in the narrow sense of referring to the practices of soft managerialism (especially the creation of partial worker autonomy and participatory management techniques with the aim of maximizing worker loyalty to the company with whom he or she feels a primary identity of interest, rather than other workers), rhet-comp and the university more generally can be very usefully approached by the other techniques associated with Toyotism. These include particularly: just-in-time scheduling, aggressive casualization, and a steeply tiered labor pyramid in which upper strata are guaranteed a “job for life,” while lower strata live a permanently temporary existence. The academy’s adoption of Toyotist techniques also includes the planned and intentional “management by stress” (for instance: causing units and persons to act entrepreneurially and compete for research funding, raises, course relief, and professorial lines—even compelling persons to compete for the continuation of their employment; the scene of perpetual “retrenchment,” in which faculty are “invited” to collaborate in the reduction of lines, staff, and faculty from the “weaker” departments, is a Toyotist innovation). Many faculty unions can be seen in relation to the formation in Toyotized firms and industries of “enterprise unions” who are willing to see their goal as helping their firm (or campus) compete with other firms and campuses, rather than preserve the dignity of other workers. In my view, the bundle of developments that have been variously called “academic capitalism” and the “managed university” can usefully and fairly be described through a Toyotist lens.

This very brief rehearsal of Japanese management theory might help us to highlight the one area of disagreement I have with Watkins, in connection with what he describes as the possibility of developing “an analysis that takes as its object a means of figuring connections among the multiple powers of action potentially available to differently positioned

groups teaching composition.” Indeed, this claim effectively distinguishes all three discussants. Our differences regarding this possibility can probably be described on a spectrum: strong skepticism on my part, qualified speculation by Watkins, and enthusiastic endorsement by Harris. That is, Harris sees an essential “identity” between “differently positioned” workers and bosses, even borrowing from the language of academic Marxism the language of “class consciousness” to suggest a fundamental unity between bosses and bossed under the sign of “composition.” Watkins, by contrast, wants to apply theorizations of social movements that seek complex and contingent alliances between groups “differently positioned” by race, gender, and geography (as well as class)—the writing of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, or the dissident economists he cites—to the various “positionings” produced by composition. I concur with the general sense of Watkins’ claim, that the interests of “different groups” of composition workers such as professorial faculty, graduate students, and nontenurable instructors might sometimes be collectively advanced by their separate actions. Different groups of comp workers are likely to find many quilting points to unite their efforts, some planned and some fortuitous, just as the feminist movement might sometimes advance the labor or Civil Rights movement, either in deliberate alliance or by serendipity.

But insofar as Watkins sometimes means to push this analogy to democratic social theory to include composition management on the same plane as other “groups” of composition workers (that is, just one “differently positioned” group among many), I do have some concerns. The concerns don’t add up to outright disagreement: at least in theory and in individual tactical moments, there will of course be limited but real instances in which the interests of composition management and composition labor overlap. But the angles that attract my attention are empirical and strategic rather than theoretical and tactical: as a matter of everyday “labor pragmatism,” if you will, as well as long-term planning, does it make sense for composition labor to spend its time and organizing efforts (every minute stolen from family and good health) in helping the WPA to build business writing labs and pursue an agenda of “respect and recognition” for their tenured bosses, rather than, say, to winning tenure and a professorial salary, academic freedom, and so forth for themselves? My problem here is that the “groups” of composition management and labor are not just “differently” positioned, but instead *specifically* positioned in a definable and traceable relation of exploitation. That is, if everyone “in” composition, bosses and workers, were indeed a “class”

(and empirically they are no such thing, except in the sense of category, and in this case hardly more substantial a basis for solidarity than the scam of Conan Doyle's "Red-Headed League"), composition "bosses" would be observable as "class traitors," their tenure, salaries, and even faculty status itself predicated on the nontenurability, poor compensation, and subfaculty status of the "bossed."

So Watkins might be seen as observing that we should sometimes recognize that the pragmatism of composition management and the pragmatism of composition labor might on some occasions overlap. This is a reasonable claim.

But I would ask that we go a bit further to ask ourselves whether or not the pragmatism of composition labor does not far more usually and pervasively overlap, both daily and strategically, with what we might term the "pragmatism of the oppressed"?

That is for me the lesson of the alliance between the unions representing graduate employees, service workers, and maintenance employees at Yale. This pragmatic alliance amounts to a powerful working redescription of what it means to belong to the working class. Insisting that highly educated persons are workers too, the Yale alliance gets beyond the characteristic debate regarding professionals and other intellectuals (are they members of the working class, but traitorously allied with the ruling class by taste and function, or are they, in Bourdieu's formulation, "the dominated fraction of the dominant class"?) The impressive alliance between Yale's pipefitters and its pipe-smokers establishes a pragmatic community of interest between all of the persons who sell their labor in order to live.

Of course, this IWW-like moment of solidarity is a very contingent achievement. It has not been easy to accomplish or maintain over the years. And its relation to the history of academic unionism is definitely far more of a point of departure than a culmination: if one payoff of Watkins' point regarding the complexity of achieving solidarity is the notion that managers can sometimes be allies, a far more significant payoff is the observation that the support of fellow workers (and their unions and organizations) can't be taken as a given in any labor struggle. For instance, the movement to unionize tenurable faculty has no record of distinction with respect to the exploitation of part-time faculty and graduate students. While there are exceptions, such as the insurgent New Caucus in the CUNY union, or the recent move by AAUP to assist contingent faculty to organize, academic unions have been more likely than other unions to collaborate in the tiering of the workforce. (For that

matter, the same point needs to be made about modes of labor aristocracy more generally: craft unionism and the anti-internationalism of organized labor federations contribute just as much to systematic exploitation as the collaborative “enterprise unionism” of Toyotist manufacturing.)

The sense that the tenured faculty in general have failed—in their unions and professional associations, as well as in their roles as administrators—to elaborate a rhetoric and practice of solidarity with their own graduate students and fellow teachers, not to mention other workers, has driven the largest group of academic labor to the sort of creative coalition forming that Watkins really means to support: the construction of solidarity with other workers and other movements, resisting not just the behaviors of “academic capitalism,” but the whole system of inequalities and exploitation of capitalism more generally. In this vein last December, the Philadelphia City Council praised GET-UP/AFT, the organization of the University of Pennsylvania graduate student unionists for resisting what one of its members “called the ‘moneyed interests’ who make up the Board of Trustees,” describing the graduate student employees as “the ‘new generation’ of activists striving to make Penn a more democratic and responsible member of the Philadelphia community” (Janson). The Philadelphia City Council unanimously voted in support of a resolution demanding that Penn withdraw its appeal of the recent NLRB ruling granting Penn’s graduate employees the right to unionize. The City Council’s support of the graduate employees is not based on their sense that Penn graduate students are particularly victimized or exploited, but rather with the more meaningful understanding that the drive to accumulate that causes the university employer to underpay the graduate students and deny them benefits is the same drive that explains its larger irresponsibilities to the community: a “pragmatism of the oppressed” creates an alliance against the university employer by a whole range of persons with very different grievances against it.

Indeed, the willingness to creatively establish common cause appears to characterize the graduate employee unions (which represent an impressive fraction of composition labor). In February 2002, Temple University’s graduate employee union grappled with its employer and with deep opposition by state legislators to win same-sex partner health-care benefits that applied not just to their own membership, but to members of the faculty and administrative staff unions as well. In the same month, hundreds of University of Wisconsin TAs engaged in a “work-in” under the dome of the state capitol as part of a series of rolling actions by some

of the thirty-one thousand state employees protesting state legislators' attempts to roll back their wage gains. Also in that month, graduate student employees at the University of British Columbia (UBC) began a strike that is, at this writing, in its fourth week: as I transmit this to Lynn Worsham on March 8, UBC library and technical workers have joined the graduate employees on the picket lines in a concerted effort to confront an arrogant administration that *during the strike* raised the salary of the university president sixty-three percent (to \$350,000 CDN), while continuing to extort substantial tuition from teaching assistants whose average pay is around \$9,000 CDN.

The obvious historical agency represented by this labor pragmatism is why I suggested in the earlier piece that composition management could learn its "institutional critique" from composition labor. One doesn't have to be a Wobbly to know that the real source of power in the workplace is the workers, and their capacity to withdraw their labor from the enterprise. But why not go one step further and ask, On what strategic basis could the persons serving as WPAs contribute to labor's agency and the realization of labor's agenda? As before: certainly not by contributing to the "respect and recognition" accorded to a discipline that envisions tenure only for managers.

Perhaps we need to acknowledge that persons serving as WPAs can contribute to the labor struggle chiefly by working toward the *abolition* of the WPA, just as the demand of the graduate employee unionist to raise the price of flexible labor is ultimately a demand for the self-abolition of flexible labor: once the price advantage of contingent labor is removed by contingent labor's self-organization, the employer has no motive to hire flex workers instead of assistant professors. But the death drive of the WPA who would collaborate in achieving labor's aims also offers a resurrection: the abolition of the WPA qua manager yields the rebirth of the WPA qua colleague among colleagues. This last formation—the WPA as a professorial colleague, coordinating a writing program largely staffed by professorial colleagues—is as, Bill Hendricks points out, not a pipe dream, but something close to the reality on campuses such as his own where academic unions have made a priority the struggle against this form of labor hierarchism. A more widespread and determined commitment to composition as professorial work would also inevitably resolve the perennial status injury to compositionists by removing the material base of that status, the managed-labor relationship. Far more important, however, is the degree to which composition's opposition to labor hierarchism—should such ever emerge—could be part of a

genuine class consciousness, in which all of the persons who sell their labor to live can elaborate their opposition to all forms of systematic inequality.

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Postmodern Ethnographies

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The "lone ethnographer" that Bruce Horner refers to in his recent article in *JAC* is drawn from Renato Rosaldo's caricature of the "classical anthropologist style of analysis most influentially exemplified by Ruth Benedict in *Patterns of Culture*" (27), and this caricature depicts "perceptions of disciplinary norms that guided graduate training until the late 1960s" in anthropology (30). "Lone ethnographers" worked from a presumption that culture was a homogenous set of shared patterns of behavior isolated to a group of isolated people. "By defining culture as a set of shared meanings, classic norms of analysis make it difficult to study zones of difference within and between cultures. From the classical perspective, cultural borderlands appear to be annoying exceptions rather than central areas for inquiry" (28). Because culture was viewed by the "lone ethnographer" as a bounded set of patterned behaviors, these behaviors could be tainted by the presence and influence of the ethnographer, so detachment was mandatory.

My point in revisiting Rosaldo is this: Horner creates a useful distinction between the lone ethnographer and the critical ethnographer, but does not contextualize them in relation to other kinds of ethnography. The critical ethnography that Horner refers to collapses a variety of