

features

Education, Solidarity, and Revolt: A Conversation with Richard Ohmann

Marc Bousquet

M: A couple of days ago, we gave talks on an evening panel at CCCC. What we didn't know at the time was that U.S. warplanes were in the air delivering the first bombs in the invasion of Iraq. What language do you think we should use to describe the hostilities? "Conflict" seems too clinical and abstract. "War" seems to give it greater dignity and legitimacy than we might want to give it. Do you have a sense of the language we should use?

R: I don't see anything wrong with calling it the war on Iraq as a lot of people do. For the reasons you just alluded to, "takeover" might be a good way to talk about it. I hope it won't turn out to be the "massacre" of Iraq, or the "slaughter" of Baghdad. At some emotional level I wouldn't mind seeing the U.S. military set back, but that's not going to happen. It would be more bloody if it did happen, and I can't hope for that.

What I think your question is getting at is the difference between the "we" of your question and a lot of other people out there, who are in favor of the conflict.

Almost everybody at a convention like CCCC is going to be opposed to the politics of the war party—that is the Bush administration plus a lot of Democrats—and to the war in Iraq. I noticed, at another panel, that when one speaker said something boldly anti-war the audience burst into applause.

I think that says something about the "we" of the question and how little time "we" spend thinking about people who are in favor of the war, the now very large majority who say, "well

When the phrase "homeland security" was put out, I thought "Fatherland" immediately, sure. With the racialism involved in that, it made me think the audience for this is coming from an imaginary place in Kansas where Dorothy grew up. But it did not seem to apply here in New York. One of the great things about New York is that it doesn't feel like a homeland at all. It feels like a confluence of people from everywhere, and they speak 200 languages here and another 200 in Los Angeles and almost that many in Chicago.

I'm definitely in favor of war now that it's started" and who believe in "getting it over with" and "we have to cheer on our young men and women in the military." Those are a very large majority, I think. Maybe I'm wrong, but I think that they are.

M: So you'd want to clarify who "we" are in any given act of speech.

R: This group, "they," they have come to use the language of pragmatism and efficiency, "it's a job to be done." Or "we've got to kick this guy Saddam out." It's a pragmatic necessity. The administration use the language of righteousness: "there is a terrible tyrant and he has been an outlaw for 15 years." They use a language of the proper schoolmaster bringing this rascal to discipline, combined with a rhetoric of the poor suffering people of Iraq.

However, I'm struck by the extent to which a large part of the U.S. population took that rhetoric in, thought about it and came up with something that wasn't exactly what the Bush Administration was saying. There were many people who said we shouldn't bypass the United Nations.

M: You mean even patriots can resist imperial ambition?

R: The Bush language has proved very reckless. I think that our policy makers have entered a new stage in the theorization or perhaps enactment of empire. No matter how much of a patriot you are, do you want the U.S. to be the current version of Rome and to take the world by force? And to take all the consequences that come along with that?

But I'm befuddled by the other side's willingness to openly use the concept of empire. They simply inflect it differently, and then persuade people that empire-building is the right thing to do.

I must say that the media kept the news of the suffering of the Iraqi people from the American public pretty successfully over the last twelve or thirteen years. Surely if all of Baghdad were burned down in a firestorm that would get through. But I fear that the suffering of this war will very easily be forgotten, will fall out of sight. Foreign news is boring to America apparently, except while a war is on. As soon as the war is over, Iraq will disappear as Afghanistan has virtually disappeared, and if North Korea comes next, well, that will be interesting for a while, and then it will disappear.

M: You made reference to the sort of false "we" of the pro-war rhetoric. I wonder if you'd also like to see greater complication of the "we" constituted by the anti-war movement? An anti-war movement is one of the occasional points in which liberals and the left tend to find a moment of alliance. Is that alliance an opportunity? Is it something that can be extended beyond opposition to the war? Is it something that has risks for the left?

R: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. It's a complicated alliance. It was a huge opportunity during the Vietnam War. I think that even the temporary and partial resistance of the present anti-war movement has offered a real alternative to the narrative of American empire that I was just mentioning. The anti-war movement of the 1960s wouldn't have been possible without a lot of common feeling and common action between liberals and the left, because there almost wasn't

a left. At the time there were liberals and pacifists and Christians who joined in that movement and were stirring up thought which appears more or less radical depending on context. I'd like to see that happen again, but I'm a little worried. I'm not sure that, that the process would run the same course as before.

M: At the panel you were asked about the possible necessity of developing different tactics for opposing "brief" or "abrupt" imperial actions like this one, as opposed to the Vietnam War which did require and present an opportunity for an action over the long term. Do you think that we need such new tactics? And if so what would they look like?

R: That's a good question. And of course a huge difference is that Vietnam was a six or eight year long seminar on power in the world. This war is not likely to have the same duration or pedagogical consequences.

I don't know any new tactics. I don't know what the new tactics would look like. Even big demonstrations aren't very effective unless they can build up into a mass movement over a period of time.

M: Let's talk about homeland security. And I'm interested in any thoughts you have about the language of "the homeland." When I moved to New York almost 20 years ago, one of the first things I saw all over the lower east side was the anthem of Missing Foundation, an anarchist punk band that went, "This is 1933. This is Hitler's Germany." I wonder if the developing realities of homeland security doesn't prove Missing Foundation correct in some ways.

R: When the phrase "homeland security" was put out, I thought "Fatherland" immediately, sure. With the racialism involved in that, it made me think the audience for this is coming from an imaginary place in Kansas where Dorothy grew up. But it did not seem to apply here in New York. One of the great things about New York is that it doesn't feel like a homeland at all. It feels like a confluence of people from everywhere, and they speak 200 languages here and another 200 in Los Angeles and almost that many in Chicago.

I felt that "homeland" was rhetorically there not only to crudely mobilize jingoistic feeling but to encourage people to buy a story about a homogeneous past and present and to take away the multiculturalism and multiracialism and so on. I tend to see much of what's happened in the last 30 years as an attack on the 60s culture, and I think that's deeply true of this effort.

M: So you see cities like New York as rejecting the ideology of homeland or even destabilizing the idea of "homeland" just by existing.

R: Yes, I do.

M: On the other hand I'm not so sure that New Yorkers are unwilling to embrace the concept of "security."

R: Well, that's quite true. Here, I don't believe I think so differently from most of my fellow citizens. It's going to be a tough time when terrorists are pretty angry, whether rightfully or wrongfully. It makes you think once or twice a day, "Oh, this could be the moment when

somewhere in New York City, somewhere in a container on a ship they're going to detonate something in a flash that's brighter than a thousand suns." Or it will happen right down on 7th Avenue.

M: It's almost a return to that cold war structure of feeling, you know, the conditioning represented by nuclear armageddon.

R: And of course September 11th shows us that anything is possible for the Bush administration. The opportunism is absolutely astonishing. On 9/11, my first feeling was "I hope everyone is all right." My second feeling was, "damn, these people have ruined 30 years of our work trying to undermine American imperialism." And, boy, it sure worked that way; the Bush administration took up their opportunity in a big way. I know that things also are going to be done to bring the country closer to some sort of fascism.

M: In 1976, you wrote that the "humanities are not an agent but an instrument." By which you meant in part that they are not to be praised, but employed, that the uses of the tool varies with the tool user. What are some of the different uses to which the left and right out have put literature and culture in this country?

R: The left, of course, has been a cracked or fragmented dissident platform. Nonetheless, it was behind the social movements of the 60s and the cultural diversity that came with them. They were advances on what we had had before. The conservatives set out to attack 60s movements on a number of different fronts, including culture.

Actually the right wanted to make culture a much more separate phenomenon than we did. Their view was that the good culture was what we had before these barbarians took over the university, and let's just try to get it back. I don't know if their strategy has worked. It got some grant money over the years but in the Massachusetts school system where I work I don't see the right's version of culture as having any purchase at all. The English and Language Arts curriculum in the schools might have come out of Wesleyan or CUNY or left-leaning places like that. By contrast, the canon that existed for high school students 50 years ago was essentially drawn from the Harvard admission test of the 1880s. That canon is not dominant anymore. The right's sense of culture didn't tend to be terribly successful, though it retains power as a form of harassment.

M: You have talked about literacy, the literacy discourse, as a function of the modernization discourse or maybe an epiphenomenon of the modernization discourse, as tending to produce a disciplined, productive and individuated subject.

So I'm going to ask you to answer your own rhetorical question from the mid 1970s, "What would writing look like if it had been invented for purposes of solidarity and revolt?"

R: When I wrote about that topic the first time around, I was impressed by accounts of European literacy from below, through the committees of correspondence in France and England, and by the ferment of militant class formation that came along with this rapid augmentation of literacy. I don't think it applies in the same way exactly, but one of the democratic things that the revolution did in Cuba as well, is to say literacy is going to be a

benefit and a weapon in this revolution.

Writing as it is taught in schools should be more conflictual.

M: Can't literacy be reinvented to that purpose, to the purposes it had for the sort of mutual literacy acquisitions practiced by workers' groups in the early 19th century all along the Atlantic basin?

R: Well, you're closer to this question than I am. I would say yes and I would say that the much abused word "power" does actually apply very well to the way people feel when they

I think any collective effort to enhance the capability of people in some technology such as literature or such as computer technology is going to be successful to the extent that people see some relationship between the effort they are putting in and a better future for themselves. That might work to a certain extent in neighborhoods where getting more literacy can be represented as an ability to fight landlords in certain ways that we couldn't before. But I think probably on the whole, literacy movements depend on a wider sense of affiliation in the society.

are able to execute literacy. It's a pleasure for a lot of people. Not all people, but a lot of us. The ease of availability of literacy or transmission of products of literacy electronically is on the whole educationally good. People write more and the sense of an intrinsic satisfaction and benefit offers something that can be built up into a critical force.

M: When you speak of Cuba, it seems you're suggesting that in order to make a revolutionary literacy you first have to make a revolution.

R: Yes, it could be. The London radicals of the 1790s are a different kind of example. It may be too late in history now for that kind of example to repeat itself. I don't know.

I do think that any revolutionary process that you and I would identify as such would need democratic literacy as part of the process. As in Nicaragua and Cuba, I think politics and literacy movements would have to intertwine. That's got to be the way it will happen now.

M: You have written more generally of literacy as an activity of social groups. And you can take that a number of ways. You can talk about literacy as a mode of solidarity—or as a mode of community policing, depending on how you want to spin it. In Cuba, you see massive increases in literacy developing in large part as a modality of membership in the revolution. This is literacy as a way of belonging, with desirable and undesirable consequences, I suppose. I wonder if you had thoughts about that as a set of possibilities for those of us on the left concerned with literacy issues.

R: It's easy to see that at a certain stage literacy worked in Cuba like a modality of participation in the revolution.

By contrast almost every literacy program in the U.S. seems to work for a little while, then runs out of steam. The original inspirational figure or charismatic leader goes on to do something else and the storefront literacy center closes down.

There isn't a kind of permanency because U.S. literacy efforts move against the dominant political stream while the Cuban literacy movement went with it. I think any collective effort to enhance the capability of people in some technology such as literature or such as computer technology is going to be successful to the extent that people see some relationship between the effort they are putting in and a better future for themselves. That might work to a certain extent in neighborhoods where getting more literacy can be represented as an ability to fight landlords in certain ways that we couldn't before. But I think probably on the whole, literacy movements depend on a wider sense of affiliation in the society.

M: So despite the wishful thinking of educators, the literacy doesn't produce the revolution, revolution produces the literacy?

This could be our teachable moment. It was wonderful to be teaching in 1968, 69, 70, and it's possible that this military adventure in Iraq and the attempt to establish a U.S. empire could lead to a cycle of rethinking as it did for a lot of Americans back then. But you have to remember: we didn't have a revolution back then.

R: That's pretty stark, but yes, I think so. God

bless all the people who are in the literacy trenches, and while I do think it's better to have a kind of ideology of empowerment and democracy especially to inspire people doing those hard jobs, I don't think that the main thing literacy acquisition is about can be accomplished without a wider social movement. To the extent that *most* people want literacy because they think the bosses want them to have it—literacy as a credential and precondition of employment—that's beyond the control of literacy workers.

On the other hand, I think that the adjuncts that are doing literacy work are able in one way or another to keep open the horizons and possibilities that otherwise wouldn't be available, that's a pretty good accomplishment. You can't have expectations that are too high without having burnout. I'd like to keep the revolution in view as a necessity and as a horizon of possibility, but as far as the intense fusion of energies that takes place occasionally in something like revolutionary Cuba—you can't force that along very much.

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M: I would like you to talk about where you see university educators in the class struggle. Are they in fact members of the working class, but class traitors by way of taste and function, or are they on the other hand in Bourdieu's version, "the dominated fraction of the dominant class"?

R: I think Bourdieu's way of putting it is apt as long as it is politicized, and understood that the professional managerial class dominates in very specific ways. These theoretical issues seem to

me absolutely critical to the question of what we do next.

If you look at the professions at the time of their foundation, you see people who were gathering themselves together, associating themselves with certain institutions, clustering geographically in suburbs, traveling to the same places, building connections with each other. They were establishing a territory. They really exercised dominion and enjoyed some autonomy: the ability to decide what work they would do, in what way, according to what system of incentives and rewards. Their project had a distinctive impact on society. Workers in unions do something similar that is partly equivalent. But for workers it is all in negotiation with the bosses.

In my view the professions didn't have to fight against the bosses. Basically they took advantage of a historic opportunity a hundred and some years ago. How to build the cities, how to create water supplies, sanitation, railroads, the whole complex of applied science in a number of areas, law—these were knowledges and practices called into being by the industrialists.

When some of these professions began to work together along with certain bureaucratic and technical and managerial strata to rein in the powers of corporations, I'm sure that felt like class conflict rather than a little unruliness on the part of the dominating fraction.

I don't care whether whether the professions should be seen as a contradictory class position or as a highly skilled part of the proletariat. I think arguments can be made for both, but they quickly lose my interest.

What is probably most important about the professions is that their institutions seem to be very durable, partly because they offered great advantage to their members and partly because they seemed to offer certain benefits to other people too. Such as whether they have sanitary cities or not.

M: Durable institutions, but increasingly “flexible,” that is, industrial, working conditions.

R: When I set out to write about this in the 1960s—and I was concerned to attack professional privilege in various ways—at that time, it looked to me as if the professions would

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be around until hell froze over or capitalism ended, whichever came first.

And I was so wrong about that. They'll

still be around for a long time to come but already our own profession, for instance, has run into serious obstacles. It is failing to do what any profession must do to remain “professional”: it has to control admission to the workforce in its field, to control its research process, its transmission of knowledge through curriculum and so on. There are parallel processes in accounting and engineering: like law and medicine they have become two-tiered professions, with the top tier more or less dancing to the tune that business calls and the other tier preparing

my income tax return for a few hundred dollars. Most of the professions have had major setbacks.

M: What consequences for solidarity do you see in the partial autonomy of the PMC?

R: Responding to agile capitalism by saying, “okay we’re going to circle the wagons and have medicine be a profession the way it was back in 1963.” That’s a fantasy.

On the other hand, if the professional managerial class is dissolving, dispersing or thinning out, then these people will have a lot more in common with workers in other fields. The idea of organizing with restaurant workers may not be so repellent to professionals as it has seemed in the past. And that’s probably the most optimistic thing I’m going to say in this entire interview.

M: So while you see the professions and perhaps also other labor aristocracies, like airline pilots as having emerged by taking advantage of historical opportunities, you feel they nonetheless have been forced by this moment in history to rediscover solidarity.

R: All that knowledge that we were guarding, supposedly for the public good, is now being appropriated in various ways, privatized, commodified. The way to fight that is not by saying we have to get back our own little hoard of knowledge again, but rather by trying to control the resocialization of knowledge.

M: There is a real set of debates that has been going on over the nature and direction of academic organizing. On one hand, for many faculty unions, you have a very traditional, almost business unionist model, even a Toyotist entrepreneurial unionist model where the function of the union is to help the campus or corporation compete with other campuses or corporations.

By contrast there is at least a tendency, especially in the early organizing phases, for graduate employee unions and unions of adjunct labor to organize more on an IWW sort of basis. Do you see the circumstances you described as favoring movement towards a different model of academic unionism?

R: When I asked one of my professors at Harvard why philology had disappeared from literary studies there, he said, the philologists all died. What I mean is that I don’t think the privatizers are going to succeed in abolishing tenure. But the tenured may just die off.

A smaller and smaller proportion of university faculty will be tenured and that’s too bad. But it may help in the long run to stir militancy among those who are not on the tenure track and lead to a search for other forms of job security and other kinds of alliance.

M: You’ve mentioned the question of commodification of knowledge and culture and there are real differences about how to analyze and confront that phenomenon. I wonder whether you would characterize differences between your own set of commitments and a more traditional Frankfurt School approach to these questions?

R: Well, the the Frankfurt School was terrifically inspirational to me when I began studying and teaching about mass culture 35 years ago. But in addition to a deeply rooted prejudice in favor of high culture, that model is too top-down, too much geared towards ideas of

manipulation to explain what we're experiencing or what the main experience of consumer culture in the U.S. has been for the past 100-plus years. British cultural studies does a better job of that, in combination with Gramscian Marxism. It seems clear that any theory of mass culture has to assign a lot of power to the agency of people who do not follow orders from the dominant class, though they work within conditions set by it.

M: Would you talk about the emergence of the Marxist Literary Group and the Radical Caucus?

R: The Radical Caucus was formed in the cauldron of the MLA 1968 uprising. Suddenly a bunch of people were eating deli sandwiches in hotel rooms, saying "the next meeting will be at 1:15," going out to leaflet or whatever, and then having the next meeting. That was the Radical Caucus. It didn't exist before 1968. I imagine more thought went into the formation of the Marxist Literary Group, just a little bit later. These were very fluid groups, with many members in common.

Radical Caucus people were trying to bring their activism into the classroom, the University, and the MLA. Then feminism and the other liberation movements fought their way into the humanities partly through MLA activities that came out of Radical Caucus. Some of our early forums at MLA brought in Tillie Olsen, Kate Millett, and other feminists who weren't really academic people.

The Marxist Literary Group wanted to establish the seriousness of oppositional thought within the institution, to widen MLA's ideological horizons so that Marxism would be there. But when MLG organized its first MLA events, they seemed at least sometimes to stage a mimicry of standard MLA events that was self-defeating—with a chasm between the people in dark wool suits who had the authority and the fame and the knowledge and so on, and all the other people.

Radical Caucus had (and still tends to have) a spontaneous element. We used slang and contractions and so on. We said stuff like "off the pigs!" There were serious strategic differences, but also more superficial, stylistic ones. I don't know that any serious differences persist now.

M: Can you say a little bit about the MLA takeover? Who got the idea to be parliamentary? Somebody read the rules and became procedural.

R: Yeah, that was me, I guess. (laughter) I had heard in passing from a high official in MLA of the possibility that someone might amend the report of the nominations committee. So at the business meeting, which was normally a gathering of perhaps 18 people, but in 1968 drew about 600, I moved that we amend the nominations committee report to make Louis Kampf the nominee for second vice president. By such tactics we produced a couple of dissident MLA presidents—Louis, then two years later Florence Howe.

We also passed about five anti-war resolutions in 1968. There were a couple of feminist resolutions that the Radical Caucus had nothing to do with. Chomsky played an important role when we set up a forum outside the regular MLA program.

M: So you had a kind of shadow MLA going with Chomsky?

R: There were many meetings, lots of political meetings. There were meetings about whether to hold the MLA in Chicago the next year or not. This was shortly after the Daley police riot at the Democratic convention. Dick Poirier was a big advocate for having the convention somewhere else. We got it moved Denver the next year instead, and that was when and where the adjunct labor struggles began.

M: Do you have a class analysis of that moment?

R: We were professional managerial class people. I think a lot of our anti-war anger was very closely allied to academic humanism.

M: Shortly thereafter came the founding of *Radical Teacher*?

R: A while later. The Radical Caucus continued as an active organization, not primarily by putting on MLA sessions, but by having conferences of its own, usually around New England and New York. Little conferences, but inspiring because often they were about the politics of everyday work in the profession. There had never been a forum allowing us to talk about the politics of the classroom and about what became the canon wars.

The history of the Radical Caucus also became interwoven with the short illustrious history of the New University Conference. Some Radical Caucus activities in its rethinking of culture and pedagogy took place New University Conference meetings.

Then in 1974, at a meeting of the Radical Caucus, somebody proposed that we start a magazine. We revived the name “Radical Teacher” from an ephemeral but influential NUC periodical of about 1970.

M: Radical Teacher helps connect the work of the University faculty with the work of K-12 educators.

R: In the past the relationship of K-12 and higher ed faculties has been prickly and sometimes hostile.

Those feelings have deep historical roots. They’re not very good nourishment for an alliance. Now, I think, there might be greater hope of some kind of alliance politics. As you know the Radical Caucus had a conference to try and explore connections between the two groups. Nothing much came out of that. But I feel that there are more possibilities now than there have been for a while.

One of the main impediments is actually the differently situated labor politics of the two.

You can't just say, all right we're gonna get our unions together and form one big union. But I think with the recent increase in desperation, alliances become more possible. Certainly in Massachusetts the combination of high stakes testing in public schools and the defunding of higher education has brought a lot of college and secondary people together in opposition. I bet that is happening elsewhere too.

Almost all school teachers are unionized. They're national, strong—maybe in some ways bureaucratizing and coercive—but they're good strong unions.

The academic unions, where they exist, don't have the same kind of national solidarity, and they leave out most academic workers other than professors. That's not true of K-12 unions, and it's a big difference.

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M: I'd like to ask you about the function of criticism at the present time. You know you have commented before that criticism is not alienated labor or at least not as alienated as it might be.

R: I wonder if that is true.

M: Yes, maybe it's not. And you've also said criticism "is not really satisfying" despite whatever it is that appeals about it that brings at least a number of specifically-situated people to begin a life of criticism. I wonder what you have to say about the discontent of the professional critic, why does criticism fail to satisfy in the most general terms?

R: Yeah, we could have a conversation from which I would learn, if we had a couple of hours to devote to that. But when you say a professional critic you mean somebody who is also a professional teacher, a scholar-teacher. That's part of the answer: most criticism is done as a professional obligation and some of it under considered pressure. You had better do it or bad things will happen to you and you won't keep your job.

There's a phrase that William Arrowsmith coined as far as I know many, many years ago, "the conscript scholar." Colleges and universities are full of conscript scholars. I think many of them say, well okay, after I get my job or after I get tenure, then I'll be free and happy. But of course there is certain process of internalizing the discipline. So criticism feels like an obligation to many people forever. Some are disgusted and say, "Why do I need to turn large amounts of my mind and energy into this these narrow channels?"

Having said all of that, I still think that as long as there is writing to be done that's connected with enlightenment and struggle, there will be satisfactions aplenty whether you're doing it for tenure or not. And how can the left survive without huge amounts of committed criticism?

M: So let's talk a little bit about the role of the university and late capitalism. There is plenty to say about the university's role in the commodification of knowledge or the commodification of the work of knowledge workers. To me, one of the most distressing trends of response to the commodification of knowledge is the attitude of mourning, which is to say: "here we are, commodifying knowledge which would otherwise serve transparently as a path to freedom." You know, a sort of idealistic mourning.

R: The question of mourning, the question of attitude that you raise, gets to the point of an important political question. People like me and perhaps you too, when we talk about the commodification of academic labor and academic learning with students, have a tendency take it as given that something fine has been polluted. When I visit universities, I'm often talking to graduate students and adjuncts who are angry and afraid of what is happening with their life chances—their chances to do the kind of work they expected to do and make a decent living at it—I know I tend to stoke anger and resentment and imply that mourning is justified. In some limited way, things *were* better, in the sense that 40 years ago, if you started out in graduate school, at the end there was going to be a tenure-track job, no question about it. If you look back, it was a happier time to be in graduate school in a lot of ways.

But that attitude doesn't do any good now. What perhaps does do some good is pitiless clarity of vision, and rebellion. Try to see what is happening and why it's happening, and if there are somehow liberatory possibilities in the moment, fine. If it's just bad news, then just tell the bad news.

M: Enlightenment without idealism?

R: We could usefully compare present conditions to the vision composed by nostalgia, of a university in which the professions disinterestedly built knowledges, seeking truth in the public benefit. But in an ideal world or post-revolutionary world, I don't think there would be professions anything like our present ones.

For now, we have to attend to the overall increase in the amount of post secondary learning that goes on in the commodity form, and how much of that learning is geared very directly to the needs of corporations. At community colleges, the president goes and talks to local corporate leaders and tries to plan the curriculum for two years down the road according to their needs for employes. The certificate programs you see in many universities of high repute, private as well as public—nearly everybody that goes into one of those is looking to buy some knowledge and trade it for monetary advantage, prestige, advancement in the job, and so on. That may be a better characterization of higher learning now than the one that applies to dear old Notre Dame or dear old Princeton. And Princeton and Notre Dame themselves are becoming more like those other places.

This is not something that has happened just to universities, as a separate set of institutions. It is something that has happened everywhere. Capitalism once again is proving its enormous ingenuity and power to colonize more and more areas of human activity and human need.

From where you and I are coming from politically, that's a straight out loss.

M: I wonder what you have to say about the university's role more generally in the extraction of surplus value. With the emergence of proprietary institutions as well as the increased use of flex labor in "non-profit" universities that nonetheless accumulate (in the form of endowments and spectacular stadiums), does the university play more of a direct role in capital accumulation than just the traditional "reproduction of labor" view, what Bowles & Gintis used to call "the people production process"?

Do you think higher ed still serves capital primarily through the reproduction of workers through skills training and as an ideology factory, or do we have to attend to their increased function as a direct employer?

R: All those same processes of worker reproduction keep happening under the roofs of university buildings, but much more is happening in addition. Basically I'm inclined to speak of managed universities as participating in a major round of privatization. Social reproduction is still really big at Princeton, but the proprietary institutions are becoming much more successful in higher education than they were in K-12. Proprietary higher education is the competition, increasingly, and as a result of that competition combined with fiscal woes, traditional universities imitate the proprietary institutions. A large part of what traditional universities do is in fact for profit—on-line courses, adult education evening classes, and certificate programs are income-producers, in contrast to the “non-profit” classics department.

M: So the traditional university accumulates. We just don't call it profit.

R: That's right. It accumulates and uses the surplus within the walls of the nonprofit corporation, the university.

M: And I think you probably agree that Yale is a good example of a place to ask the question whether all of that accumulation is necessarily a benefit to the local community.

R: And who's been asking that question besides the graduate student unions?

M: Especially GET-UP at Penn. Which leads to a question I wanted to ask you. Certainly there are differences in the way that academic unions historically have related to other workers. Yale and Penn and UI-Chicago are good examples of the ways in which different modes of relations to other workers are being explored. In an ideal world, what would the relationship between academic workers and other workers be?

R: How did Marx put it in one of the very few things he ever said about communism: “a critic in the evening”? In that kind of vision, everybody would be free to learn and seek pleasure through cultural activity. The utilitarian parts of knowledge could be delivered and understood and gathered in in relatively small units and sites—in churches, workplaces, various organizations. Even if the profit was taken out of it, there would still be a whole lot of adults going back to school for short times to learn things that they needed to know.

M: Do you want to talk about the emergence of rhet comp as a discipline?

R: The professionalization of that line of work has gone on in such contradictory ways. Comp is setting out to professionalize at exactly the watershed moment between the peak development of the cold war university and whatever it is that's come afterwards. So it was able to make some gains in the direction of traditional disciplinarity partly because the university was expanding at a terrific rate.

But there was something opportunistic about the process, maybe even more than in the formation of other professions. For instance, the successful professionalization of rhetcomp has

barely changed the conditions within which a majority of TAs and adjuncts are teaching composition.

M: You mean as managed labor.

R: Right. The whole academic profession is much weaker than it used to be. It has experienced a serious erosion of autonomy, and has failed to deal very well with the adjunct question, with casual labor.

As to recent victories I certainly think the labor resolutions in the Modern Language Association have been a good sign and even may have caused some institutions to do better things than they otherwise would have. But with professionalism rather than solidarity, even when you win some you don't win very much. I do not mean to suggest at all that we should give up. I think those battles need to be fought, fought, and fought until better ways of fighting come open.

M: The natural question to ask at this point is, "What is to be done?"

R: Yes. May I say, though, the story is also heartening. The profession of rhetcomp has changed in its fairly whole-hearted endorsement of the arrival of new populations in universities and in its new interest and respect for the cultures that came with those people. That's an important change.

Still, some movement needs to come from outside of the university to join or fuse with movements in the profession, before the balance and direction of the struggle can change a whole lot.

M: Let me ask you at this point about your poker playing.

R: Oh, thank God you've arrived at that subject.

M: You're far from the only Marxist in the academy who's an avid poker player.

R: Yes, Mike Sprinker was a regular member of our game and Fred Pfeil is. And MLG Summer Institutes host a kind of a ritual poker game. I don't know why that is. That's a good question. I will say that faculty people, faculty members or former faculty members who play in the poker room at my regular casino are A.) very few and B.) with the exception of me not Marxists.

M: *Politics of Knowledge* is coming out.

R: It's a book of essays primarily about higher education and institutions of learning in this country. Some have very particular concerns, such as academic freedom and accountability. One of them just appeared in the composition issue of *Workplace*, revolving around the relationship of "citizenship" to university work.

Throughout, I try to test the hypothesis that around 1970 the world began changing in ways that were comparable in scale to changes around 1900 that brought on corporate capitalism,

the dominant form of capitalism for almost three quarters of the twentieth century. Now it's modulating into something else and what's going on in education is related to those changes in capitalism.

I don't think we should regard the technology as having made an instantaneous global politics available to us but as having problematized both the politics of resistance and of domination too.

M: Recently with *Radical Teacher*, you have collaborated with *Workplace* to produce an issue on "Technology,

Democracy and Academic Labor." How did you get interested in the issue of the relationship between technology and democracy?

R: When I was beginning to teach about commercial culture and then to write about it—I should say when I was beginning to teach about capitalism—I had to face the question of whether technology drives history or is driven by it. This seemed to me a politically important question. With technological determinism or any of its variants, possibilities for democracy are circumscribed. But if you envision technologies as outcomes of planning, attention, and desire—I think Raymond Williams uses the term "intended technology"—then agency comes back into the picture.

Recently, I was also becoming interested in uses of computer technology in the regional district where I work on the school board.

M: A big portion of the sort of educators' techno-utopian discourse really represents a variant of the public sphere discourse. You know, "if we could only use technology to construct a perfect public sphere, all these great things would transpire—"

R: That's a good point. Yes. Since the people with the money tend to have more voting power in the direction of technology, just as they have with everything else we have situations like the one in education where technologies have already been developed in a certain direction and for certain purposes.

This is an especially challenging problem. How can we use or adapt or change computer technologies to try to achieve the aim that we want to have, democratically? There's no question that Internet communication has allowed certain kinds of political organizing that are worlds beyond what we could 30 or 40 years ago. Given the time, the speed, the intensity of messaging, organizers can gather very large groups of people and deliver a million signatures on petitions to the U.N. against hostilities in Iraq. All in a week's work.

But you have to ask yourself what kind of "organizations" these that we "join" and take part in online. Something turns up on the screen of my computer. Great. So okay, "we" are going to meet in every Senator's office and every Representative's office. And that happens. But who are "we"? I agree with the politics of the march that I'm going to march in or of the petition I'm going to sign. But that certainly doesn't address the question of what is going to remain after this movement has done what it can to stop the war.

We have to address a new stage, to take electronically mediated organizations to a new level. Beyond blackboard-like exchanges. I don't think we should regard the technology as having made an instantaneous global politics available to us but as having problematized both the politics of resistance and of domination too.

M: Well, I think that is enough for one day. Thank you so much for sitting down with me this afternoon.

R: Yes I enjoyed the conversation. You asked a lot of tough questions.

This conversation was recorded March 21, 2003 at Richard Ohmann's apartment in New York City. It has been edited for length. Special thanks to Stacy Taylor and Chris Carter, both of the University of Louisville, for transcription services and additional editing.



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