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# Teaching to Strike: Labor Relations in and out of the Classroom<sup>1</sup>

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[T]rue literary activity cannot aspire to take place within a literary framework. . . . Significant literary effectiveness can come into being only in a strict alternation between action and writing; it must nurture the inconspicuous forms that fit its influence in active communities better than does the pretentious, universal gesture of the book — in leaflets, brochures, articles, and placards. Only this prompt language shows itself actively equal to the moment.

—Walter Benjamin

Even though this essay originated in response to the strikes at Yale during 1995-96, I won't be discussing them in any sustained way. Instead, I want to devote the space allotted me to draw out some of the general implications that the events at Yale may have for us as teachers of literature and culture, that is to say, as functionaries in what Louis Althusser termed the educational Ideological State Apparatus (ISA). In doing so, I'll move back and forth between two distinct, though not necessarily opposed or contradictory, conceptions of what we are and what we do. In brief, I'm going to be claiming that we are at once *cultural intellectuals* charged with the duty of training citizens in a nominally democratic polity, and also *workers* with a legitimate interest in improving the conditions under which we are compelled to labor. The biblical ban on serving both notwithstanding, we really do answer to god and to mammon. To pretend

otherwise — as I was taught to do as an undergraduate and a graduate student, and as any number of silly, benighted, but ultimately just self-serving Yale professors and administrators have continued to insist by maintaining that the Yale graduate students are being mentored into professional maturity, hence, that they cannot really be workers — is just to ignore the obvious, material situation of teachers in post-secondary educational institutions. It is certainly apposite at this point to remind readers that the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) has officially ruled that graduate students are indeed workers, that not only was Yale's position to the contrary incorrect but the punitive actions taken against activists of the Graduate Employees and Students Organization (GESO) were illegal.<sup>2</sup>

Let me take up mammon first, since I understand it somewhat better, having had to work for a living my entire adult life — and even a little before that. To gain access to a ruling-class education, I had to do a fair amount of manual labor in my teens and twenties. Granted, one tends to romanticize this aspect of one's background; nonetheless, I believe that a decisive ingredient in understanding our position as workers — and a powerful instrument in being able to resist the ideological blandishments with which, typically, teachers in the humanities attempt to recruit their students into what we still anachronistically term “the profession” — is to have hailed from a working-class milieu and been compelled to labor in various proletarian occupations at one time or another. For many years the only jobs I was licensed to perform were ill-paid, often physically demanding, and for the most part required little if any mental exertion. In those years, I understood the difference between workers and bosses perfectly well, and by virtue of that experience, I think, I now can get my head around that same distinction as it is embodied in the hierarchies (real and imagined) of post-secondary education. Here, then, is my workerist construction of the labor relations by which we are constrained, starting at the bottom and working up to the top level:

Graduate students = temp workers hired out of the union hall  
 Junior faculty = probationary full-time employees  
 Tenured faculty = older employees with some seniority rights  
 Department chairs = shop stewards  
 Deans = foremen  
 Provosts, vice-presidents = middle managers  
 Presidents, chancellors = CEOs  
 Trustees = boards of directors

You'll notice that the structure of this hierarchy is exactly that of the modern capitalist corporation, not (despite all the stupidities spouted last spring by Annabel Patterson, Margaret Homans, et alia) that of a medieval guild, where the lowest tier of workers is the apprentices/graduate students. Yale University styles itself — and is, I gather, in legal status — that older type of corporation. But as Michael Moore, of *TV Nation* and *Roger and Me* fame, recently observed at a rally in support of GESO when he nominated Yale as “corporate criminal of the year,” it — and every other college and university I know of —

is in most respects a corporation in the sense that IBM, GM, and AT&T are. Indeed, as innumerable commentators have stressed, higher education is becoming more and more corporatized with each passing year. In the era of downsizing and capital's overt attacks on labor across the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), as firms restructure to accommodate themselves to a period of increased inter-capitalist competition, post-secondary education marches to the very same tune, responding to identical imperatives. "Leaner and meaner" — the cliché applies with equal force to limited liability companies and colleges and universities, both public and private.

Lest you think this comparison far-fetched, let me relate what the dean of the graduate school at my own university, SUNY at Stony Brook, reportedly said about a plan, defunct for the moment, but doubtless on his agenda for the future, to institute differential stipends for doctoral students in the sciences (who would get more) versus those in the humanities and some of the social sciences (who would receive proportionately less). When challenged by graduate student union representatives on the injustice of reducing stipends in English from just under \$10,000 per year to \$5,000, his reply was precisely that of the crassest capitalist entrepreneur: "If that's what they'll come for, then that's what we should pay them." The underlying rationale for such a comment is surely transparent; nonetheless, I offer here some further anecdotal evidence of the university's increasing integration with the practices of corporate organization and the stern discipline of profit maximization.

At my own institution, as at most others, the local university bookstore is run by a national chain (Wallace's in this case, although the dominant enterprise nationally is Barnes & Noble). Our provost issued a directive a couple of years ago, invoking the pleasant fiction that in doing so he was merely striving to make purchasing textbooks more convenient for students (in particular those with physical disabilities), that enjoined all faculty to place a copy of their textbook orders with the university bookstore. In the past, some had chosen to deal exclusively with the local independent bookseller located on the edge of the campus, partly to support what had been for many years the only decent general bookstore for miles around, but also because service in the university bookstore had historically been execrable. The results of this caving-in to the logic of corporate monopoly are yet to be determined, save in one particular: the local independent has closed its doors — a loss surely to be felt by students and faculty alike, who will now be left to purchase their non-course books at the local Borders, where the selection is much more limited, and which, by the way, is much further from the campus. So much for the argument from convenience.

To offer further evidence: at Oregon State University, food services in the student union have been given over to a series of Pepsi subsidiaries, including Taco Bell, after many years of being run by the university itself. The administrator charged with overseeing this corner of the university, when criticized by one of the faculty for his decision, reacted defensively (and utterly predictably), by saying that: 1) formerly these services were run at a loss (the extent of which was not specified); and 2) the university was just giving the students what they

wanted anyway. The spurious appeal to democratic values — giving the students what they want — repeats the same line that corporations themselves adopt when challenged to meet even minimal standards of social responsibility. Tobacco companies are currently trying to defend their criminal behavior in promoting nicotine addiction over many years in these very terms: freedom of choice for the consumer. But if one or more corporations enjoy a monopoly in a market (as is the case at Oregon State), the concept of “choice” has clearly been emptied of all content. As Marx once observed of capitalist labor relations, freedom to choose one’s employer is in effect but the freedom to starve in the streets.

Finally, one wonders what bribes had to be spread around for the following to have been instituted. At Tufts University, when students phone the registrar to learn what grade they have earned in a course, they are compelled first to listen to an advertisement for Coca-Cola prior to obtaining the information they are requesting. Doubtless, the university receives some remuneration for making its airwaves available to this corporate giant, but is it the business of any institution of higher education to become a willing shill for a product that rots the teeth, will dissolve nails left in it overnight, and whose exact chemical composition remains to this day a well-guarded secret, locked in a vault in the company’s headquarters in Atlanta, Georgia? Such is the obsequiousness of contemporary university administrators towards their capitalist patrons that to ask these questions is considered bad form, when it is not simply dismissed with contempt for its naïveté. In this environment, it is small wonder that remarks like that of my graduate dean cited above seem commonsensical: the mentality of corporate managers permeates their discourse because they are increasingly beholden to capitalist enterprises. The administrators ought perhaps to ponder the old proverb: If you sup with the devil, you need to have a very long spoon.

To return to my chart, one should bear in mind that in an era of increasingly fierce competition among individual firms, no one in the hierarchy is entirely secure in his or her position, although some enjoy comparatively more protection than others. The most secure (in some instances more secure than the administrators, who don’t always hold faculty rank in a department and who, if they do, typically have no more interest in returning to the shopfloor than does a foreman promoted off the line) are probably the tenured faculty, who cannot easily be fired or even demoted. (This is true for the moment, but may not be in the long term. Tenure could be abolished altogether, as for example the trustees of the University of Minnesota seem bent on doing, and as the administration of the City University of New York has effectively done under the cover of a trumped-up state of financial exigency.) Just as unionized workers with lots of seniority tend to be among the most conservative forces in any struggle over downsizing, sacrificing their junior members and accepting two-tier hiring as the price of protecting their own interests, so tenured faculty, especially those who see retirement on the not-too-distant horizon, are often the most vociferous defenders of existing structures of workplace exploitation. Hire more graduate students and adjuncts to teach the lower-division service courses, and pay them less if that’s what it takes — such is the message (not

often expressed openly, of course) that tenured faculty convey to the bosses, who are only too willing to implement it, and for two very good reasons: 1) it not only is *much cheaper* than employing more professors but also 2) these temp workers don't enjoy the kinds of protection available to regular faculty and so don't create as much trouble for the administrators as do regular faculty — until, like the Yale graduate students, they organize collectively and engage in irritating, disruptive activities like grade strikes. I assume you are all aware that while we are here at this convention, a group of adjuncts, part-timers, and TAs is meeting across town to establish a national union of those most exploited members of the teaching corps. Bottom line: ain't no other way to do it. Let's face it: we're workers, and we need to recognize that the artificial — ultimately feudal — hierarchies by which we have been asked to define ourselves inside the university are in no one's but the bosses' interest. Given this choice, I know which side I'd rather be on.<sup>3</sup>

Enough, then, of mammon, now for the god bit. I've alluded several times to the conventional ideological conditioning one receives as an undergraduate and graduate student of literature and culture. Recently, this ideology of the enduring, historically unchanging value of literature — which one thought had had a stake driven through its heart by the theory boom of the 70s and 80s and by the rise to prominence of cultural studies — has received a new lease on life. Prominent senior professors (including recent past president of the MLA Sandra Gilbert and former *enfant terrible* of the theory world Frank Lentricchia) have loudly proclaimed their allegiance to it. In a breathtaking gesture of bad faith, they have excoriated those among us who think (as Gilbert and Lentricchia themselves once professed to think) that the study of literature and culture is imbricated in a complex structure of socio-political relations that cannot, without considerable violence, be set aside in the act of interpreting cultural texts. The return from the dead of the "let's just read literature and appreciate its pleasures" crowd is arguably the most striking, and to me most puzzling, phenomenon of the 90s. They even have their own national organization, the Association of Literary Scholars and Critics (spawned by the notorious National Association of Scholars [NAS] and bankrolled by right-wing foundations similar to those that support the NAS itself). Its officers include Roger Shattuck (he of the infamous comparison equating cultural value with gonads, both being in essence immutable in his view), Christopher Ricks (high priest of arcane allusion), and the ever-resourceful John Ellis, who decided one fine day that a career in *Germanistik* would consign him to obscurity, whereas attacking theory would likely bring him to the attention of some movers and shakers. He was right, of course.

One need not go on much about this curious revanchism in the academy, except to say some things about how to combat it in the classroom, for there the decisive battle will be joined. On that terrain, we enjoy some natural advantages over our adversaries. First, our cultural repertoire, while it may not be identical to that of our students, is a good deal closer to theirs than is, say, Roger Shattuck's or Christopher Ricks's. A former senior colleague of mine (now retired), when I described an especially bad lecture in our department as "the Mr. Rogers version of Shakespeare," looked puzzled and responded,

“Who’s Mr. Rogers?” I said he was the guy with the sweater (now enshrined in the Smithsonian) who came on after *Sesame Street*, to which my insouciant interlocutor replied, “What’s *Sesame Street*?” It’s difficult to imagine someone so singularly out of touch with contemporary American culture gaining much sympathy from undergraduates today. On the whole, we’re better equipped to talk to our students about their own enthusiasms than are those who think literary study is an invitation to outdo Eliot’s notes to *The Waste Land*.

Second, while I continue to hold onto some private heresies concerning the distinctiveness of aesthetic objects, it is nevertheless clear to me — and, I hope, to most of you — that the turn to a sociological concept of culture has been generally salutary<sup>4</sup> and that its overall demystification of cultural value holds a kind of populist appeal for students. If we take the view that, to recall Terry Eagleton’s ditty, “Chaucer was a class traitor” and “Shakespeare hated the mob,” we’re likely to get further in persuading students that their studying literature has some purchase on the real world — and is therefore worth doing — than if we insist that not knowing Homer and Dante is a sign of their vulgarity and well-nigh irremediable cultural inferiority. The overwhelming majority of undergraduates today will not migrate into the upper echelons of this society, so helping them to obtain a measure of ruling-class toning is just a shuck — and mostly they know it. Our convictions about literature as an ideological apparatus thus give us the basis for a pedagogy students can actually use to understand the world in which they live, an advantage not likely to accrue from teaching them to appreciate the elegance of Elizabethan sonnets or to gloss the allusions in *The Rape of the Lock*.<sup>5</sup>

Third, and finally, by understanding our own situation as workers rather than as members of a priesthood charged with passing on the artistic mysteries to future generations, we are much more likely to comprehend and be capable of speaking to those entirely legitimate desires of our students that center on career and material security. The principal goal of students who persevere in higher education is certification — of skills, of intelligence, of some disciplinary knowledge or other that will gain them access to a decent job, if not immediately then over the long term of their working life. Why, after all, do we ourselves stay in this racket? Well, the pay is decent (for some), the hours and the nature of the tasks performed not too onerous (for many), and the vacations generous (for most). What at least some among us are enraged about these days are the diminished material advantages of a career in higher education. Such is, remember, the general situation of most people compelled to work in corporate America. In recognizing that we have more in common with clerical and custodial staff (as the Yale graduate students have done) than with doctors, lawyers, and investment bankers (which is the company in which we imaginatively place ourselves when we call our work a profession), we take the first small step towards identifying with our students and thus towards a more democratic pedagogical practice.

All that said, the tough questions about how and what we teach our students remain.<sup>6</sup> I want to close with the following admonition. The right to strike is, with some few exceptions, guaranteed for all workers in the United States by the National Labor Relations Act of 1935, the so-called Wagner Act;

it is a right workers earned through long years of violent, bloody struggles against the capitalist class and its paid lackeys. Even Yale University will now have to concede, however unwillingly, that graduate students holding teaching assistantships are workers, not apprentice bosses. But the logic of the NLRB decision (not lost on Yale) is that if this segment of the teaching staff can unionize, so (pace the Yeshiva decision) might the rest of the university's teachers. Employers in every corporation where unions have little or no historic presence are plainly scared that their workers will start forming unions. Witness the brutal way in which the self-styled "progressive" bookstore chain Borders has responded to the threat of unionization among its own employees.<sup>7</sup> On the whole, workers understand the facts of economic life with great lucidity. They know when they're getting the short end of the stick, and sooner or later, they realize that their interests lie in collective organization, in not accepting whatever the owners are pleased to give, and in demanding decent wages and working conditions and long-term job security. In short, workers typically don't need to be taught to strike, because they know strikes are the principal means at their disposal for compelling owners to return some of the surplus appropriated from the workers' own labor.

But for some the temptation is not to recognize that they are workers at all. Teaching to strike begins by showing people that they are, most of them, workers and not owners, that no matter how often they are promised substantial material rewards and the compensation of increased status for ignoring this fact, the implacable logic of capitalist accumulation will in the end determine the limits of what the owners are pleased to grant them. To convey this basic lesson in what it means to live in a capitalist world, we all have to get our heads straight about which side we're on. The students who voted overwhelmingly to have GESO represent them sorted that one out sometime back. And if it can happen at Yale, I daresay it can happen anywhere.

## Notes

1. This paper is an emended and expanded version of a talk delivered at a special session of the Modern Language Association Convention, held in Washington, D.C., December 1996; the session was devoted to the significance of the Yale strikes for literary studies. It retains traces of the occasion for which it was originally written.

2. Since writing this sentence, events have proven just how bloody-minded Yale is determined to be, while demonstrating the equal resolve of GESO not to be cowed. The university chose to ignore the NLRB ruling, and GESO has had to refer the matter to the courts, naming individual administrators and faculty in their suit. At this writing, GESO is preparing for an NLRB-sanctioned recognition election that will include (as the original, non-sanctioned vote in favor of the union did not) graduate students in the sciences. The lawsuit is pending.

3. The person who refereed this article for *Jx* registered the following objection to my overly generalized characterization of "the profession": "the



'profession' is extremely varied, and there is a great deal of difference between Yale and Kansas State, not to mention South-Southwest Oklahoma State College [a fictional institution one presumes]. This constitutes its own hierarchy, whereas the paper elides it into one structure. All universities are not alike, and professors at Yale have a vastly different status accrediting other professionals with some consequences (a recommendation letter or suggestion to a journal editor for a prestigious publication, or lack thereof, matters)." No argument from this quarter, but is this so different from working, say, for Chase Manhattan as opposed to the local finance company? One rubs elbows with a different class of clientele in each, at the same time that the tasks performed by persons holding comparable positions in these different institutions tend to be remarkably similar, as does the ideology binding shareholders, corporate officers, and salaried employees together in an invidious relationship that masks the realities of exploitation. I have more direct contact with my students than Annabel Patterson and Margaret Homans, and I'll wager I supervise more doctoral dissertations than both of them put together, but our job descriptions are essentially identical. At the level of actual labor, of course, those who teach in the less prestigious (or is it just less pretentious?) colleges around the country are more akin to the sweated factory workers spread across the globe in the era of flexible accumulation. And like sweated labor, those whose teaching loads are five and six courses per term tend to be less mystified about the conditions of their employment than those of us who occupy comparatively privileged positions in the imaginative hierarchy of educational distinction.

4. A senior member of Stony Brook's English department has recently taken the opposite position, asserting in a letter to the dean of Arts and Sciences that this kind of work is inappropriate to the discipline of English, and that those who think otherwise ought to be transferred to some other department to be replaced by staff with a more dutiful regard for the special qualities of literature as art. One can only guess at how widely this view is shared. I suspect it's for the most part confined to those whose training antedated the theory boom of the 70s and 80s, but my evidence for this claim is almost entirely anecdotal. On the other hand, the most recent MLA survey of frequently taught texts in standard curricula for English and American literature indicates that changes in course syllabi since the 1950s have been minimal — a few additions have been made, but for the most part the same authors continue to dominate. Whether Hawthorne, Melville, Shakespeare, and Milton are taught in much the same way these days is a nice question that the survey does not address.

5. The referee further objected at this point: "While I understand the sense of this, those on the right or moderates might say the same thing, but specify an entirely different way to do this [that is to say, make sense of the world they inhabit]. . . . Also, I don't think it is *prima facie* true that a cultural studies curriculum would differ, from a student's standpoint, from a priestly curriculum. Students simultaneously take such classes and internalize the measures of both — as Evan Watkins puts it, as long as we give grades, whether we teach a conservative or radical curriculum, we still circulate students through the same system." True enough, but I continue to believe, perhaps naively, that what we

teach makes a difference (else why would economists assign Samuelson rather than Marx?), and that *how* we approach our subject matters even more. Asking socio-historical questions of literary texts rather than limiting oneself to discovering what makes them aesthetically pleasing will not bring us to the brink of social revolution, but it can, in some measure, prepare students to recognize in literature a form of knowledge about societies past and present. Whether they draw conservative or progressive political lessons from that preparation will depend on many other factors, the majority of which we can neither predict nor control. About the progressive potential of cultural studies, and the general failure to realize it here in the United States, I have had my say in "We Lost It at the Movies."

6. The following discussion is informed by the Marxist Literary Group's roundtable panel on "Teaching Marxism," held the morning previous to the day I delivered my original talk on the Yale strikes. A longer version of my remarks there, which will appear in the journal *Mediations*, contains specific recommendations about what it means to teach marxism in the university and its potential contribution to progressive politics.

7. In brief, faced with an organizing drive among its employees, the corporation responded by firing the organizers. When Michael Moore supported the workers, first by confronting the chain over its anti-union campaign, then by donating the royalties garnered from sales through *Borders* of his recent bestseller, *Downsize This*, he was summarily denounced by the corporation and barred from future book-signings at its outlets. As I write, *Borders* employees, including those already dismissed, continue to struggle for decent wages and benefits by organizing a union, while the company responds with the same line (and utilizes the same illegal tactics) that Yale did with GESO. You don't have to be an old-fashioned marxist to recognize that the fundamental social conflict in our time remains that between labor and capital, however subtle the variations in its form.

### Work Cited

Sprinker, Michael. "We Lost It at the Movies." *MLN* 112 (1997): 385-99.