

Reflections on Critical Work as an Academic Anthropologist

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Despite the rhetoric that the academy provides a marketplace of ideas that prepares young people to function in a democratic society, higher education over the course of the twentieth century has increasingly become an appendage of the American corporate economy. In their now classic book, *Schooling in Capitalist America*, Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis (1976:201-202) assert that “colleges and universities play a crucial role in the production of labor power, in the reproduction of the class structure, and in the perpetuation of the dominant values of the social order.” Indeed, the multitiered system of higher education tends to replicate class, racial, ethnic, and gender relations in the larger society. Sociologist Joe Feagin (1986:209) identifies four levels in the stratified system of higher education in the United States: (a) the community college, (b) the four-year state college, (c) the state university, and (d) the elite university or college. In his model, as an individual proceeds from the lowest level to the highest level, he or she sees a decrease in emphasis on rules and scheduled course work, a decrease on the emphasis on job training, an increase on independence training and careers, and an increase in the percentage of White students. Although education is often presented as the ticket to upward social mobility, in reality it often reproduces the distributive system rather than makes any systemic inroads into it. The American system of higher education constitutes a highly centralized, pyramidal structure in which the elite institutions dominate and set the agenda for the levels below. Indeed David Horowitz, a former radical turned neoconservative, once wrote:

although there are over 2000 colleges and universities in America, 75 percent of the Ph.D.'s [sic] are awarded in a mere 25 of them, institutions which constitute a Vatican of the higher learning, the ultimate court in what can and what cannot be legitimately pursued within the academic church. Most of these select universities—Harvard Yale, Princeton, the University of Chicago, John Hopkins, Stanford, MIT, Cornell—that have emerged as dominant institutions by the advent of World War I. Together with such latecomers as the University of California, they form a relatively tight-knit intellectual establishment. [Horowitz 1972:305]

As is the case for the nation as a whole, the system of higher education in my adopted state of Arkansas appears to reflect class and racial divisions in the state. It is common knowledge in the state that most upperclass Arkansans probably send their

children to colleges and universities outside of the state. As a quasi-Third World state, Arkansas—the “Land of Opportunity”—lacks any elite institutions on par with Harvard, Stanford, or The University of Chicago. Many upper-middle class Arkansans choose to send their children to the only two “local elite” colleges (as opposed to “national elite” colleges such as Amherst, Williams, and Vassar) in the state—namely Hendrix College (a United Methodist institution) and Lyons College (a Presbyterian institution). The system of state universities and community colleges also reflects the stratified nature of higher education in terms of funding appropriations and teaching loads. Within the University of Arkansas system, the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville and the University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences have been designated flagship campuses whereas a “metropolitan university” such as the University of Arkansas at Little Rock constitutes a second-class institution. The University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff (an historic black institution) and the University of Arkansas at Monticello (an institution in southwest Arkansas with approximately 3,000 students) are considered third-class institutions.

Virtually every institution of higher education is ultimately controlled by its board of trustees, which is often comprised of national, regional, or local elites. Of the 727 trustees of the 30 leading universities in the mid-1960s (14 of which were private and 16 of which were public), one third were listed in *The Social Register* and 45 percent were corporate directors or executives. One half of the top 200 industrial corporations and financial institutions were represented on the boards of these 30 schools (Domhoff 1967:79). As Syzmanski (1978) observes,

by staffing the boards of trustees of American colleges and universities, leading business people are able to directly control higher education. They select the higher officers of the colleges and universities and establish the basic educational policies which guarantee that faculty and administrators do the bidding of the upper class and that students are manipulated in the interests of the corporations. [250]

College and university administrators have evolved into a social stratum situated between the board of trustees and the faculty and students. Like any privileged social stratum, the administration earns a significantly higher income than, and enjoys certain perks not available to, ordinary faculty members. According to Beverley (1978),

administrators are required to act as a force over and above faculty and non-teaching professionals instead of, as traditionally, the representatives of faculty who were willing to take on the bureaucratic shitwork. . . . Organizations like the prestigious Carnegie Commission, which combine high-level academic administrators and representatives of capital and government, attempt to “program” the

number and nature of high education institutions in accord with the changing demands of the labor market. [76-77]

Universities have increasingly come to function as resource bases for corporations, not only in terms of training manpower, socializing future workers for dull office jobs, and research and development but also in terms of developing marketing strategies for them. According to Boggs (1993:98), "the appearance of Clark Kerr's 'multiversity' in the early 1960s reflected the extent to which educational institutions were being designed to fit the needs of corporate capitalism and, by extension, the requirements of domestic, military, and foreign policy." Indeed, universities have increasingly been undergoing a process of entrepreneurialization as a response to funding cutbacks by state and federal governments and corporate-based foundations. According to Ovetz (1993), "universities have not simply tightened and transformed their partnerships *with* business, but have *become* businesses themselves through various forms of profit-making ventures based on university resources, faculty, and a pool of cheap and unpaid student labour" (71). Universities often buy and sell their stocks on the market to maximize their operating expenses. Furthermore, they are often directly and indirectly involved in business ventures that developed out of research activities.

Recent policy plans and administrative practices presented as means of increasing productivity in student credit hours and publications are increasingly transforming faculty members into intellectual workers. The faculty itself is divided into three tiers: (a) the adjunct faculty that is comprised of an increasing number of low paid part-time workers who lack fringe benefits; (b) the full-time junior faculty that faces increasing workloads and hurdles in their efforts to obtain tenure; and (c) the tenured professors whose traditional security is becoming increasingly eroded as a result of salary freezes and retrenchment policies. In 1972 the Carnegie Commission recommended the use of adjunct faculty as a way of regaining "flexibility" during a period of declining or shifting enrollment (Abel 1983:124).

At the same time that the faculty finds itself undergoing a process of proletarianization, there has been a tremendous increase in the number of administrators. In the case of Columbia University, during the growth period of 1948-1968, the student body increased 100 percent and the faculty 50 percent, yet the administration grew by 900 percent (Ollman 1983:49). This trend has continued through the 1990s. For example, at the University of Arkansas – Little Rock, there have been several new positions created for associate vice chancellors, associate and assistant deans, and other administrative positions. Conversely, there has been a decline in the number of members of the student body as well as full-time faculty. Part-time faculty, however, are hired in greater numbers.

Across America, the power of the administrations of institutions of higher learning has grown tremendously at the expense of faculty and student traditions of self-government. Faculty senates and committees generally act as mere advisory

bodies to the administration. Jerry Farber (cited in Berlowitz 1976) has compared the power of university and college governance structures with that of the “kiddie steering wheel in daddy's car” (20). Berlowitz (1976) makes the following astute observations about the nature of faculty governance bodies:

the impotence of university governance structures, such as college senates or faculty senates, is revealed by the reluctance of people to serve on such bodies and by the ritualistic behavior of those who do serve. The only exception to the former consists of those who seek such positions for the small rewards available to those faculty and students who do an outstanding job in maintaining the sham, or more accurately Goffmanesque, performance of “consensus formation.”... Hours are spent in meaningless debate on procedure—all with an air of importance. ...Administrators and senior faculty are always present to intimidate any junior faculty or students who might raise questions. [21]

I am personally reminded of the time that I was ruled “out of order” by the president of my institution's university assembly when I, as a nonvoting spectator, called into question a motion introduced by the dean of students for establishing dress standards. Despite strong linkages between higher education and the corporate economy, colleges and universities still provide a space for critical thinking that other private companies and government agencies make virtually impossible. Higher education still contains pockets of faculty and students who are interested in critical perspectives and who learn to think for themselves. Howard Zinn (1993), a renowned radical historian, describes this intellectual space in the following way:

the educational environment is unique in our society: it is the only situation where an adult, looked up to as a mentor, is alone with a group of young people for a protracted and officially sanctioned period of time and can assign whatever reading he or she chooses, and discuss with these young people any subject under the sun. The subject may be defined by the curriculum, by the catalog course description, but this is a minor impediment to a bold and imaginative teacher, especially in literature, philosophy, and the social sciences, where there are unlimited possibilities for free discussion of social and political issues. [89]

Unfortunately, conservative forces in business and the Religious Right have become extremely concerned about the emergence of “dissenting and alternative communities” in American colleges and universities (Aronowitz 1992:159). Zinn himself has come under attack from such groups as Accuracy in Academia, a surveillance arm of the Moral Majority. In reality, however, conservatives tend to

greatly overestimate the number of “tenured radicals” on U.S. campuses. In its poll of 5,000 faculty members in two-year and four-year American colleges, the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching found that only 5.8 percent of their respondents reported themselves as holding “left” political views (Mandier 1989). In contrast, 33.8 percent of the respondents identified themselves as “liberal,” 26.6 percent as “middle-of-the-road,” 29.6 percent as “moderately conservative,” and 4.2 percent as “strongly conservative.” According to Ollman (1983),

American universities require a little critical thought, which means a few critical teachers, which means, too, a little academic freedom for them to work, in order for universities to function as they are meant to and have in a capitalist society. The presence of some radical professors helps to legitimate the bourgeois ideology that comes out of universities as “social science” and the universities themselves as something more than training centers. So a few radical professors are necessary to make the point that real freedom of thought, discussion, and so on exist and that people in the university have the opportunity to hear all sides in the major debates of the day. [51]

By the 1960s universities came to dominate intellectual work. Some radical intellectuals managed to acquire tenure by publishing in obscure journals, books with limited circulation, and presenting papers at conferences. As Russell Jacoby (1987:147) argues in *The Last Intellectuals*, the professionalization of critical discourse has led to “privatization or depoliticization, a withdrawal of intellectual energy from a larger domain to a narrow discipline.” The process of acquiring tenure and obtaining promotion has effectively prevented many radical academicians from becoming public intellectuals and social activists. Boggs (1993:2) contends that “scholarly work tends to be narrowly conceived, technocratic, and self-consumed, obsessed as it is with ‘manageable’ problems that are not likely to threaten conservative professional norms or social priorities.”

Even the positions of tenured faculty, radical or otherwise, face a growing threat from a declining world economy. Faculty, staff, and students have had to pay the price for an increasing lack of state subsidization and a growing trend in administrative mismanagement.

In the face of these developments, what measures may faculty take to preserve any remaining cultural autonomy and ultimately expand upon this vital sphere to develop an authentically democratic society? Over a decade ago, Johns (1979/80:78) suggested two strategies for transforming the university: (a) the creation of a “strong organization—along the lines of a union” uniting faculty, clerical and maintenance workers, and students; and (b) the formation of linkages between faculty, staff, and students, and any progressive social movements in the larger society. As Boggs (1993:147) so aptly observed, “since intellectuals do not constitute a class formation

as such, in order for the full weight of their influence to be felt they must be organically attached to larger social forces and movements.” The insistence of many faculty members that they as “professionals” cannot consider collective bargaining is ironic in the light of the fact that, as Lewis (1980:77) notes, “the word ‘university’ is derived from the medieval word *universitas* or guild and which can be translated in modern times by the word *union*.”

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Editor's Note:

This article was accepted for publication in the Spring of 1994, but due to circumstances out of the control of the current Editorial Board, did not appear. A similar, though expanded, article by Professor Baer, entitled "On the Nature of Our Workplace as Academic Anthropologists: Implications for Critical Teaching and Research" has also been published in Volume 24, Issue 3 of *Practicing Anthropology*. The Kroeber Anthropological Society apologizes to Professor Baer for this delay, and thanks him for his patience.