Content, Culture, Character

Paul Lauter

The recent strike at Yale University helped put university-labor relations on the front page of the *New York Times*. But it also provided a kind of material symbol for the work to which this collection is devoted. According to the *Times*, Yale has "faced nine strikes since 1968, more than any other university" (Greenhouse), and that probably doesn't count job actions by its TA union, the Graduate Employees and Students Organization (GESO). At the same time, we might observe that the last three presidents of the United States are Yale graduates: two Bushes and one Clinton. Now, no serious historian would want to draw too much from this captivating coincidence. Nevertheless, I'm inclined to ask whether there might be some relationship between the poisonous labor relations of Yale and its success at producing Chief Executives. And since I'm obviously going to argue that there is, I want also to put onto the agenda some thoughts—generated by Marc Bousquet's analyses—about what it's possible to do about this seemingly obscure connection.

Yale teaches. But where the important teaching takes place, at Yale or at any university, is not so clear. In classrooms, to be sure, but as Jules Henry pointed out many years ago in *Culture Against Man*, even in classrooms much of the learning is produced by what he called the "noise"—that is, the cultural dynamics that are played out within classrooms quite independent of the ostensible subject matter. One of the examples he used involved a visit to an elementary school. When he arrived, the teacher asked "which of you good little children wants to hang Mr. H's coat?" Needless to say, all the children began waving their hands enthusiastically—not to have done so would have marked them as rebellious or even anti-social. Of course, then the teacher had to select a child, which she could have done in the first place without asking for volunteers. What Henry sees being taught by the "noise" of this little exercise is competitive conformity, a mainstay of American social norms.

WORKS AND DAYS 41/42, Vol. 21, Nos. 1&2, 2003

If classrooms are so taken up with "noise," how much more so the many hours students and faculty, not to speak of bosses and workers, spend outside the classroom—in offices, book stores, computer labs, dining halls, athletic fields, fraternities and secret societies, even libraries. These are all, every one of them, sites of teaching and learning. Let me quote on the subject of education a classic text—one, incidentally, that would never have been studied when I was a graduate student at Yale—Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. As you will remember, Augustine St. Clare is given to small lectures on the subject of slavery; indeed, early on Miss Ophelia tells him that "one might almost think you were a *professor*, to hear you talk." He is perhaps at his most eloquent in an argument with his brother, Alfred, over the beatings Alfred's son habitually delivers to his servant, Dodo. Alfred believes, as he says, that "We must set our face against all this educating, elevating talk, that is getting about now; the lower class must not be educated." "That is past praying for," Augustine responds, "educated they will be, and we have only to say how. Our system is educating them in barbarism and brutality" (Stowe 289). How, we might ask, is the Yale system educating people? And, out beyond the precincts of New Haven, the business-university complex as it is now operating?

A somewhat different instance, drawn from the annals of the one American president who had been a long-term member—a "lifetime member," as he never tired of telling people—of the AFL-CIO. In the earlier days of the Reagan administration, the Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization (PATCO) went on strike, hoping to enforce its demands for a significant increase in wages and, probably as important, a reduction in stressful hours, by closing down the nation's air passenger system. PATCO was, by the way, one of the few unions that had supported Reagan in the election. Nevertheless, Reagan responded to the strike by issuing an ultimatum: back to work in 48 hours or you're fired. Few went back; most were fired. I think it's fair to say that Reagan's action set not only the pattern for government negotiations with federal unions, but the tone throughout the Eighties for management dealings with organized labor more broadly. It taught a lesson, that is to say: not only would the Administration not tolerate an outlawed strike by government workers, but it would back up management efforts to roll back such union power as still existed in the AFL-CIO of Lane Kirkland and company in 1981.

Teaching and learning are funny things: we teach, Emerson said, "by what we are." Which returns us to Yale, the bargaining table, nine strikes and three presidents. But the real subject here isn't Yale, even with its connections to union-busting New York law-firms, and to smooth-it-away New York PR mavens. The real subject, I think, is the role of universities in the new American economy, or perhaps more fully, the roles of differing kinds of post-secondary institutions in educating those who will own, run, work within, serve at the edges of, or perhaps ultimately subvert that new economy.

What do I mean by a "new economy," or, indeed, "university"? I don't need to drag out clichés about today's knowledge industries. To be sure, many of the sillier aspirations of the dot.coms of the 1990s have washed out to sea, and even a few of the more outrageous frauds of that era have collapsed into Confederate dollars. But it remains true—indeed, it now haunts this greedy administration—that knowledge technologies have enabled a startling expansion of productivity. It's obviously *not* just that antediluvian folks like me now actually use credit cards to buy stuff on line, but that a huge number of jobs, dull and not so dull, miserably and not so miserably compensated, are now controlled or increasingly performed by computers. The rate at which skills have been transferred to machines is astonishing; equally astonishing, perhaps, has been the ability of American managers to rationalize and control those processes.

Universities are significant contributors to these processes. To see how, we need first to deconstruct the term "university." For there is no single entity we can designate as *the* "university." After all, the differences between, say, Yale and Southern Connecticut State Universities, or between Trinity College, where I teach, and the SUNY College at Old Westbury, where I once did, are . . . well, meaningful. There is no single entity called "higher education." There are, rather, distinct and often competitive groups or—forbidden word—classes of institutions whose mission, as certainly as the separate high schools and tracking systems of the post-World-War-II era, is to differentiate, that is, stratify the work force: to teach those in positions of authority the class-appropriate ways of dealing with other classes, and to teach others where and how they fit into the distinct, if somewhat permeable, class structure of American capitalism. What goes down at Yale or at Southern Connecticut—or at San Jose State, Santa Clara, or Berkeley—has mainly to do with the precise places such very differing "universities" occupy in the training, development, and acculturation processes of 21st-century capitalism.

For most of their 150 or so years of existence in America, universities have been the handmaidens of capitalist enterprise. But never before, I think, have they so fully shaped themselves on corporate models or been so deeply integrated into American business practices and culture. Increasingly functioning as profit centers, training facilities, sales venues, and shapers of culture, all universities have, on one hand, transformed their labor systems on the worst corporate models even as, on the other hand, they have remolded their teaching and acculturation functions along the lines of the most disreputable high school designs (including overcompensating coaches and multiplying deans). Marc Bousquet's essays have gone far to demystify the changed and strikingly reactionary labor systems that now characterize the higher education industry. Twenty-five ago, we talked somewhat vaguely of the "proletarianization" of the university workforce. We pointed to the increasing employment of adjunct or what's now in Pickwickean fashion called "casual" labor, the then-novel use of "non-tenure-track"

appointments, and the deployment of retrenchment procedures as dangers to the basic character of higher education institutions (Lauter). Little did we know just how fully those transformations would evolve—nasty raptors from those innocent-looking dino eggs of 1972. It will probably take another quarter century fully to replace continuing notions of "collegiality" rattling around in universities with a conscious understanding of the labor system, just as it took double that time in the 19th century to replace the social relations implied by the apprentice system—master and man working at the same bench—with the reality of factory organization—boss and "hand," separated in the plant, at home, in church, at school, in dollars, power, and culture. But at least now we have an analytic leap forward.

I do not need to talk here about the training functions of higher education nor about how they serve as hatching stations for a variety of capitalist eggs. Others have written about these roles extensively and well (e.g., Lafer). My concern is how culture is fostered and transmitted in the quite varied institutions designated as colleges or universities. Universities teach by what they are. When a great university with an $11 billion endowment helps impoverish an already indigent city by using outsourcing to push down dining hall wages, it teaches who counts and who decides in today's urban world. When a great university stiffs its retirees at $7,450 a year while setting up its CEO for a $42,000 a month pension, it teaches who is important. . . and who is not (Phillips-Fein). When the American city in which a great university carries out its advanced bio-medical research has a higher infant mortality rate than Costa Rica, lessons about priorities are being delivered. When 60-70% of the teaching hours at a great university—and at many not at all great universities—are carried out by transient faculty, many of them paid below the poverty line and provided with no benefits, offices, or job security, a redefinition of teaching as a "service industry" is being implemented.

What is being taught in these and the many other instances one could cite from universities around the country is culture—the culture of particular classes. What, it seems to me, that the nine Yale strikes and the University's aggressive resistance to the unionization of its graduate assistants has been teaching is the correct role of elites, particularly political and increasingly global elites, in determining the distribution of resources in the new world economy. This new dispensation provides, at best, marginal roles for forms of collective organization by workers, whether these are designated as blue collar unions or called by more honorific titles, like professional associations. But it offers somewhat different models—one might call them hard right (George W.) and soft right (Bill C.)—for leaders. In either instance, the major determinants are the interests of corporate America at home and abroad. What one sees, then, being produced in and by elite universities—not only in the course catalogue, in the very internationalization of curricula in languages and content, and as I'm arguing in the institutional "noise"—is, surprise, surprise, elite culture. It is a culture that

absorbs managers into the values of corporate leadership, engrosses senior faculty in the values of university managers, and drenches students in the culture of what, in this best of all possible worlds, will become their own futures.

At less elite institutions, the lessons differ, of course. San Jose State students continue overwhelmingly to choose computer science and other "career" majors, rather than math, physics or chemistry, business rather than economics or politics, much less English. Despite the implosion of the Silicon Valley economy—wherein only a few will survive, much less thrive—more students choose computer science than all the other scientific departments combined. For them, a second language—even the one spoken at home—is of less importance than another *computer* language. For these students, machines are the name of the future, and the university their port into it. While elite, research universities increasingly spread outward into business and communities, often taking on decisive roles in running them as enterprises, at second-tier institutions, businesses increasingly take over institutional functions for the sake of profit. A bank has offered in effect to "purchase" the admissions department of a large California State University, providing computers, supplies, personnel costs, and the like. The trade: only this bank will be able to advertise, offer accounts, open ATMs on campus. But the big payoff—and here we are talking major league business—this bank alone would become the supplier of loans for students at the university. Here, mechanical skill, a certain docility, and the expectation that institutions will shape and control your life are the lessons; *not*, certainly, that you will control, indeed have been trained to expect control, of such institutions.

Which brings us back to Bush, Clinton and Bush, the most recent CEOs of the firm called "America." They certainly took the lessons their university taught, either in its more predatory or its somewhat reformist mode. What's obviously missing in this curriculum are the alternative norms once provided by working-class organizations like unions or by left-wing political movements, as in the 1960s. From my point of view, the importance of developing unions on campuses has as much to do with their cultural functions as with their ability to gain better wages, benefits, and working conditions. For people being paid at $16,000/ year or $2,500/ course, those are not goals to sneeze at. But I think unions also offer the opportunity to open up alternatives to the orthodoxies of business that, despite all the false rhetoric of right-wing pundits about liberal hegemony, are in fact the dominant values on campuses today. Unions, perhaps above all the processes of unionization, provide opportunities for discovering what terms like "solidarity," as distinct from "entitlement," might mean. They help call into question pieties about the virtues of business values that should have been put to sleep by scandals like those of Enron, Worldcom, and the rest. And they offer opportunities for people to discover how power really works by participating in efforts to change institutions. Unionizing TAs, adjuncts, and faculty will not,

in and of itself, reverse the directions in which higher education is now rolling, but they will help sustain an alternative, dissident culture in this moment of high Bush.

But culture, while it is sustained and transmitted by institutions, is finally an creation of human beings. It is not some abstractions named "Yale" or "San Jose State" or "Northern Kentucky" that have produced the system of exploiting and degrading the workforce that we see everywhere in American higher education. It is, rather, the people who have run these institutions and corrupted them—sometimes with reasonably good motives, like maintaining a curriculum, but more often, alas, out of the desire for such managerial shibboleths as "flexibility," for power and control. It is people who have produced such absurdities as "non-tenure track" appointments; it is people who pay adjunct faculty at a fifth or a tenth of what "regular" faculty get. In articulating this perspective, I am not trying simply to generate guilt. Rather, I am trying—perhaps as Thoreau did in relation to his "civil neighbor," the tax gatherer—to insist that the people called "administrators" take responsibility for their own actions, and for the actions of the institutions they manage. It is not that I think managers will suddenly become reformers, but it is time they were driven out from behind the institutional excuses, the pleas about the budget, the mystifications of the market into the fresh air of conflict over priorities, values, and—what can one call it?—character.

Works Cited

Greenhouse, Steven. "Yale in Deal With 2 Unions, Ending Strike. *New York Times*, September 19, 2003, Late Edition - Final, Section B, Page 1, Column 5.

Henry, Jules. *Culture Against Man*. New York: Random House, 1963.

Lafer, Gordon. *Organizing Graduate Students*. New York: Foundation for the Study of Independent Social Ideas, 2001.

Lauter, Paul. "Retrenchment—What the Managers Are Doing," and "A Scandalous Misuse of Faculty—Adjuncts." *Canons and Contexts*. New York: Oxford UP, 1991.

Phillips-Fein, Kim. "Yale Workers Win." *The Nation*. <www.thenation.com/doc.mhtml?i=20031006&s=phillipsfein>.

Stowe, Harriet Beecher. *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. New York and Toronto: New American Library, 1966, p. 289.