Appreciation

Language and Class Formation: Two Vignettes for Richard Ohmann

John Trimbur

A sentence can unlock a world of trouble. That's what I think Richard Ohmann discovered during the sixties, on the way from ordinary-language philosophy, linguistics, and the new rhetoric (e.g. "Literature as Sentences" and "In Lieu of a New Rhetoric") to the unreconciled lucidity of Marxist analysis. This can easily be seen in *English in America, Politics of Letters, Selling Culture, and Politics of Knowledge*: the precise attention Ohmann devotes to print capitalism in a range of its linguistic forms, with the political goal of unlocking the relation between language and class formation and the contradictions that beset intellectual work in class society.

Vignette 1

> There have been awkward meetings between Home Office officials and senior executives from the security companies. "The executives go in and say 'How are you getting on with your process mapping?' and the officials just look blank. The executives tell them it's like running a credit-card business; you need relational databases to manage information about individuals, so you need organizational design and data management. The Home Office don't really know what they are talking about" (Davies 4).

This passage comes from the second part of Nick Davies' "Life Behind the Prison Looking-Glass," a special investigation that appeared in *The Guardian* (London) on June 22 and 23, 2005, on the prison system in the UK and, as pictured in the scenario above,

the current plans of New Labour (and the consulting private security companies it has contracted) to merge prisons and probation into one system in the UK.

Vignette 2

> You must visualize the Cape Town, South Africa daily newspaper *Business Report* just about two years earlier, on September 16, 2003, when, in the news section on page 2, Stellenbosch University ran a boxed ad for its master's program in "Decision Making, Knowledge Dynamics and Values"—a "thought leadership programme for organisations in a world of global complexity." It is almost too painful to list the topics students go through with the Centre for Knowledge Dynamics and Decision Making ("your thought partner in the Knowledge-based economy"): "lateral thinking," "complexity and chaos studies," "knowledge management," "scenario construction," "megatrends." As the ad says, the program resembles "in some respects" an MBA "but with a strong qualitative and notional rather than quantitative and financial approach."

What I am thinking is that the "notions" in the Stellenbosch University ad have become a transnational way of speaking (and form of cultural capital) in academic and professional settings concerned with "managing change" in the new information age and its knowledge economies. The language that the two vignettes use has enough in common to see right away that a sector of the professional-managerial class (PMC) must be in back of it all—a class fraction vying for influence in the wider commodification of knowledge in education, health care, management, consulting, public relations, human services, information design, and so on.

I present the two vignettes to acknowledge, in turn, that it is virtually impossible to think of Dick Ohmann without the PMC coming to mind. As I see it, Ohmann took a cluster of ideas and images floating around in the postwar US—popular representations of the "man in the gray flannel suit," C. Wright Mill's *White Collar*, new left debates about Barbara and John Ehrenreich's essay "The Professional-Managerial Class," the idea of mass culture—and shaped them into an ongoing investigation into the nature and ideology of professional work in class society. What must have started as a hunch on Ohmann's part has turned into a method of inquiry and means of political engagement.

Perhaps the most disarming aspect of Ohmann's work is its characteristic modesty, in the qualification of claims, in the foregrounding of Marxist concepts as "speculative instruments," and in how he describes research agendas that he has no intention of pursuing but offers congenially as generative topoi. Think, for example, of the "missing" Chapter 6 1/2 in *English in America*, with its call for "empirical research" on freshman English and the writing

careers of ruling-class leaders; or the "several hundred pages" in "Historical Reflections on Accountability" that he "cannot supply" (and hopes he will "not be the one to write") on accountability as a current containment and market strategy by the right.

The genealogy of the PMC is an interesting one. In *English in America* (1976), Ohmann says he means "to offer hypotheses about how this industrial society organizes the labor of people who work with their minds and whose work is anchored in bodies of knowledge and theory." Notice how tentative, at this stage in the late sixties and early seventies, is the class analysis: "To say that I am looking at knowledge and work under advanced capitalism would be far too grand but in the right direction" (4); and how the links that mediate class formation may be expressed, in the terms of the time, as those between professionals and the "technostructure." In the chapter "Writing, Out in the World," Ohmann analyzes three genres of professional discourse: the reports of think-tank "futurists," the deliberations in *Foreign Affairs* and conference proceedings by liberal foreign policy experts, and the memos by government and military officials that appeared in *The Pentagon Papers*. It is probably an exaggeration to say that this chapter is the decisive moment in the book, but I want to emphasize how Ohmann seems to recognize the linguistic forms of the PMC before he gives it a name and treats it unequivocally as a class formation.

This, of course, was to come in two key essays from the late 1970s and 1980s (both are in *Politics of Letters*), "The Shaping of a Canon: U.S. Fiction 1960-1975" (1978) and "Writing and Reading, Work and Leisure" (1986). These essays reveal the usefulness in literary and cultural analysis of the idea of the professional managerial class (still not an acronym, however). Both essays identify the PMC as a class "between labor and capital" that emerged and matured with monopoly capitalism and the rise of professional credentials in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—and in its self-representations continues to accent literary production and practitioners' understanding of professional work.

Selling Culture (1996) must surely stand as the demonstration of Ohmann's hunch about the professional-managerial class, the full—blown version where the idea now appears unambiguously by its brand name PMC. There is little doubt in my mind that *Selling Culture* belongs on the shelf with Raymond Williams's *The Long Revolution* and Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* as starting points to investigate the establishment of mass culture and the politics of literacy in the formation of national markets and communication systems under nineteenth-century print capitalism. The sweep of the book and its powerful explanation of magazines, markets, and class at the turn of century should not, however, cause readers to overlook the way it grew out of an earlier essay "Where Did Mass Culture Come From" (1981) or how it is linked consequentially to Ohmann's further investigations of the PMC in the essays that appear in *Politics of Knowledge* (2003). What we should say is that *Selling Culture* is the research project itself, with the full display of evidence and analysis of the PMC that the essays

keep sketching in miniature. And we should keep in mind it is just as true to say that the continuing pertinence of Ohmann's treatment of the PMC is in the most recent political engagements, in the *Politics of Knowledge* essays, with the crises and strategic shifts of monopoly capitalism since 1970 and the changing social position and class relations of professionals in an era of flexible accumulation, global markets, and the restructuring of work.

If you look at what it was like "Working in English in America, ca. 1965" (the departure point of *English in America*), the politics of language in US college English were still very much in the thrall of Orwell and the Committee on Doublespeak, with general semantics and the communication movement in the near background. The idea was to protect English from the propaganda, manipulation, and neologisms of the technocrats and to keep it the lingo of democratic, straight-talking, freedom-loving Anglo-Americans. In the meantime, having sorted out, over the ensuing forty years, so many linguistic problems, from the use of "definite, specific, concrete" language to Basil Bernstein's "restricted" code to changes in the economics of print culture in the 1990s, Richard Ohmann has established a distinct Marxist vantage point, far from the Cold War limits and misplaced certainties of English in 1965. This is a perspective that both requires and enables knowledge of the relation of language to class formation in the US—to understand the predicaments of the PMC and the terms of our work and our present troubles.

Works Cited

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Part II:

Richard Ohmann's Influence