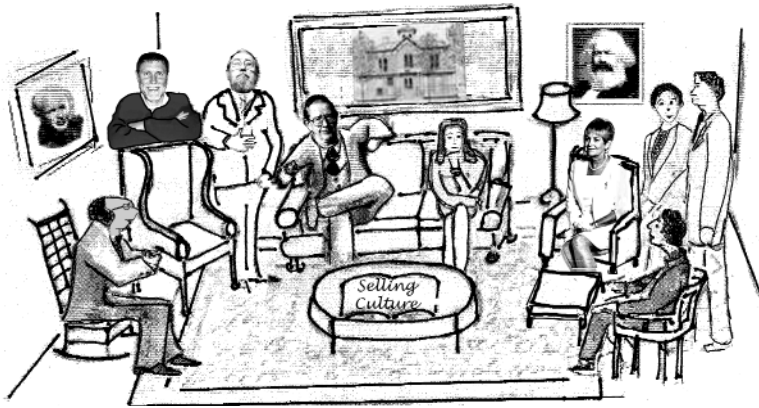


A Conversation with Richard Ohmann

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The Works and Days Burkean Parlor

Center picture on back wall is of Hull House, Jane Addams's residence, where Dick was presented with a copy of this issue at a reception in his honor.

[This conversation took place a few days after President Bush gave an address to the nation on the Katrina disaster on September 15, 2005.]

SOSNOSKI: It's just about impossible to start a conversation about politics without mentioning hurricane Katrina and the devastation it has wrought on New Orleans and other sites along the Gulf Coast. I'm curious to know what you thought of Bush's speech?

OHMANN: I avoid listening to Bush if I can, and was successful in avoiding all his pronouncements on Katrina except for a few sound

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bites. One of those said it all, for me: “we’re not finger-pointers, we’re problem solvers.” Yes, the refugees (my stepson and companion are among them) need help, and our masters need to get better at planning for nasty events. But Katrina is a call to revolution, not problem-solving.

Was there ever such a primal capitalist event? Three or four generations of the Bush family’s oil buddies preferred climate change to declining profits, and cranked the political system to get what they wanted—thus guaranteeing that the Gulf waters would be hot enough to cook up monstrous storms, and that there would be enough extra energy in the atmosphere to make for a record hurricane season and ever more bizarre weather, year by year. Capitalist industry did in the protective wetlands of the Delta. Real estate interests chased profits by turning lower and lower sections of New Orleans into building lots. The Army Corps of Engineers did the bidding of all these interests, modifying nature to the tune of “Accumulate, Accumulate.” Then the neocons took away funding for stronger levees, as part of their general shredding of government for the people. Disaster relief lost out to the chiefly ideological war on terrorism and the Bush people’s plan to make a new world order beginning with Iraq and Afghanistan.

So it irks me a bit to hear the man offer problem-solving as the remedy for Katrina, when it was his kind of capitalist problem-solving that prepared this path of desolation in the first place. [That’s why I’m splitting and stacking all that wood.]



Dick’s woodpile

DOWNING: As usual when Dick offers an interpretation of political realities, I agree completely with his sketch of the Bush administration’s evasion of any responsibility for the accelerating ecolog-

ical degradation leading to Katrina, Rita, and many more hurricanes to come.

OHMANN: Did you see a photo that circulated on the net called "Bush vacation," of grinning father and son holding up a big trophy fish caught in the waters of New Orleans, with waist-deep fugitives in the background? Maybe that would be the right one to go with my rant.



Bush vacation

HARKIN: I agree with Dick that the "We're problem-solvers" sound bite was appallingly telling. And it seems to be the talking point of the moment. Problem-solving, especially solving the problems you create, is a very corporate thing to do. I wonder if somewhere, at least, the Bush people might believe that capitalism (business, science, industry) might someday solve the problems that it creates. So global warming is just a problem waiting to be solved (by good ol' American ingenuity, unfettered by taxes and pesky regulations) rather than the beginning of the end of life as we know it.

In any case, W certainly presents himself as a problem-solver: the whole speech in New Orleans was designed rhetorically and visually to do that. He wore a business suit with a blue shirt, sleeves rolled up, tieless: the very image of a CEO getting down to some serious problem-solving. (I watch it so you don't have to, Dick). When Jeb Bush fights hurricanes, by contrast, he usually appears in a Polo shirt, and when Jimmy Carter used to talk about environmental problems as the moral equivalent of war, he brought out the sweater.

Unlike every other speech in both presidencies and the campaigns, this one was delivered without a backdrop of carefully chosen smiley-faces. The cathedral itself was the background, its spire

pointing to the Great Problem Solver Upstairs. It's noteworthy that, like the Republicans, the GPS Upstairs first makes problems (floods come to mind) and then He solves them. So, the President really seems to be telling us to have faith and there will be no more hurricanes.

But where's the meat? Well, the speech solved lots of problems for his base. But for the poor people who are now homeless—not so much problem-solving. There will be tax incentives to rebuild, and the folks from the culture of poverty will receive free grants of federally owned land IF they promise to get a mortgage (!) or have help from Habitat for Humanity. New Orleans will be rebuilt in a “sensible, well-planned” way, he says planning, of course, being another code word for the base.

OHMANN: I associate problem-solving with the liberal tendency in capitalist history: with welfare state projects and, in this country, the New Deal. But as flexible accumulation has taken root and the political pendulum has swung toward the neocon end of the arc, the market comes forward as sole and adequate response to any doubts. Now of course, in the market, each of us buys and sells alone, works alone, bowls alone. That caricature (c.f. the 100,000-plus in D.C. last weekend) would mean the end of politics, and an entropic condition of helplessness.



Dick in his 1949 International Harvester pickup truck

HARKIN: And if the folks from the culture of poverty should happen to default on their mortgages (perhaps because the rebuilding

effort was unfettered by the necessity of paying minimum wage to the laboring rebuilders), well, the new bankruptcy laws will soon return them to their culture of poverty.

And then there are the Worker Recovery Accounts, the \$5000 to go to school to “train” to get a “good job.” What kind of tuition does \$5000 pay? My hunch is that it will send you to a “for-profit institution.”

On the talk shows recently, people have been saying that the media (especially the mainstream press) was no longer being deferential to the administration. Peggy Noonan had a negative column in the *Wall Street Journal*; David Brooks was unhappy in the *New York Times*. Moreover, the willingness of Anderson Cooper to shed tears on camera and “lay into” Senator Landrieu, of Brian Williams and Ted Koppel to challenge Brownie, herald a new era, “they say.” (Just to remind you, Anderson Cooper of CNN is the son of Gloria Vanderbilt.) Could it have had any effect on viewers? I ask because in December, Dick, you said at the MLA that only a rather large popular uprising could possibly affect the Bush admin. I agree. Any chance that this could be the beginning of one?

DOWNING: I agree with Patty. Can the left and liberal elements in America begin to intervene in any material way in this program?

Bush presents himself as the hero/savior leading the patriotic rebuilding of New Orleans. All I can say is that like many, I have watched too many hours of the continuous coverage of the hurricanes, without once encountering any investigative reporting, no investigations of FEMA and Bush’s recent defunding of this organization, no exposure of the link between this defunding and the increased war effort in Iraq. Where’s the National Guard and the helicopters needed for local emergencies? Not hard to answer that one. It’s as if fear of the hurricane were on the same order as fear of terrorism, so any questions about the causes of the problems that point to social and political sources is seen as grossly insensitive to suffering, almost as if it were anti-patriotic to be discussing these issues when people are dying. Regardless of the fact that the historical reasons for those deaths has a great deal to do with social policies regarding race and class differences, as well as the distortion, if not destruction, of scientific evidence. An uninformed public is the most susceptible to fear, of course, and, so far as I can see, that’s exactly the Bush plan. Do I too sound irked, to put it mildly?

SOSNOSKI: The public is certainly kept uninformed but the contradictions are in plain view, at least some of them. For example, the unsuccessful search for “weapons of mass destruction.”

HARKIN: I was struck by the fact that he called Katrina a “cruel and wasteful storm.” WASTEFUL is a word for the era of flexible accumulation. The whole notion of having just-in-time just-about-everything is to avoid WASTE—but of capital and things! This storm wasted people! His writers usually don’t have such tin ears.

OHMANN: And as even the President was forced to note, though he did not put it in the words of that old song about the Titanic, “the rich refused to associate with the poor”—so that the disaster when it came was one of class and race. There can be no more “natural disasters,” such as the event in the Yucatan that did in the dinosaurs, only social ones.



Dick's farm

DOWNING: I think an important twist to all these events is the issue of free speech. I share Salman Rushdie's sense (which he expressed quite eloquently at a recent talk at SUNY-Buffalo) that his greatest fear in the United States in these times is triggered by the orchestrated threats to freedom of speech that have been mounted by many sources, but spearheaded by the Bush administration itself. In plain (if not entirely free) speech, it is difficult to even learn what's going on or who is doing what. Centralized administrative power funds only knowledge useful for its own agenda and suppresses divergent views in ways that should be appalling to most Americans. Yet we hardly hear about these things.

The list of examples seems endless here, so I'll just list a few that come to mind:

The House passed a bill this past July that funds federal surveillance of (I would call it intimidation of) many academic area studies such as Middle Eastern and Asian studies programs; Patriot Act 215 allows government agencies the surveillance of bookstore and library acquisition, selling, and lending practices; many right wing think tanks have been deeply funded to provide unscientific evidence to drum up scurrilous “reports” that global warming is not

caused by human acts; as Dick mentions, the Army Corps of Engineers takes more interest in profits than levees; the administration has deliberately ordered the altering of or direct suppression of what they believe are “unacceptable” EPA reports: what the administration doesn’t like, does not get disseminated, and the mainstream media hardly ever investigate these actions. (See Chris Mooney’s new book, *The Republican War on Science*, New York: Basic Books, 2005). Bushian bureaucrats have retooled the knowledge the government authorizes so that it better fits with the interests of big oil.

SOSNOSKI: It’s not all that surprising that Republicans would attack scientific findings, especially when they might diminish profits. The role conservative religious groups play in their election strategies mandates it.

DOWNING: Exactly. More than 40 of those right-wing think tanks, media outlets, consumer, and religious groups are funded by ExxonMobil, the world’s largest oil company, which also recently sent the Bush administration a list of federal scientists it wanted removed because their views jeopardized big oil interests. These are direct threats to free speech, but, again, many people never hear of them because the media chooses not to report them.

When Bush’s friend, Senator James Inhofe (R-Okla.), the chair of the Environment and Public Works Committee, calls global warming “a hoax,” he is just registering the views of many deeply funded anti-regulatory think tanks that work to undermine scientific findings on global warming, even though there are virtually no respected scientists who doubt its reality. For Inhofe and his ilk, all of those established scientists are just “hysterical people, they love hysteria,” he said when, this past February (2005), he rose on the Senate floor to defend the US decision not to join the other 140 nations that celebrated the ratification of the Kyoto Protocol.

The question then, is what can we do in these times?

OHMANN: I’m a gloomy guy these days, but that’s no excuse for



Dick’s Buddhist persona

not thinking about what next, unless one is at the stage of tuning out and accepting the universe—which I also do, some days, in my Buddhist breathing efforts.

DOWNING: I would like to think the abuses are now so great that larger segments of the population might begin to catch wind of these disturbing events so that some forms of grassroots organization can link with more mainstream

political action groups that have a better respect for truth than deception. But I'm not always optimistic.

SOSNOSKI: I'm not either. It seems to me that a classic political strategy is employed here. Do not worry about consistency, no one will notice your illogic. Advocate whatever is in your best interests and contradict yourself as often as you like. Memories are short.

HARKIN: I agree. I think it's noteworthy that there's at least one area where science is not attacked: the issue of reading. The No Child Left Behind Act prefers/mandates "scientifically proven" methods of teaching reading to such an extent that it's difficult for primary schools to get funded UNLESS they use phonics. Phonics, of course, only teaches children to recognize words, not to infer meaning from context. This notion leads me to think about meaning as the product of reading.

SOSNOSKI: Your point about recognizing words without understanding contexts corresponds quite well to the views of the linguists I've recently been reading. In *The Way We Think*, Fauconnier and Turner argue that words by themselves have no meaning until placed in context by readers. Of course, if the contexts within which the words can be placed are repeated continuously in the media, then readers will construe the words accordingly.

HARKIN: When the Bush administration "reads" (say) Darwin, or studies about connections between breast cancer and abortion, or reports about Weapons of Mass Destruction, or studies of global warming, they are eager to see "meaning as undecidable." The Bush readers make the meaning that is useful to them: evolution is "only a theory," the co-incidence of breast cancer and abortion is "significantly causal" and there's no "proven relation" between warm ocean waters and Force 4 hurricanes and so forth. But meaning is fixed when the Bush administration wants it to be. When a child is unable to "sound out" a word phonetically, his school system can lose big money. Bush nominates Supreme Court justices who will be faithful to the intent of the framers, rather than activists. If you go to a public school, you learn that meaning is fixed; if you're inculturated as the Bushes were, you learn that you can fix meaning. No Child Left Behind creates an underclass of readers from "under-performing schools" who ONLY know phonics, and whose teachers are actively DIScouraged from helping them to infer meaning from context.

It's fairly easy to slide down the slippery slope from mandated phonics to an uncritical electorate that has "faith" in its leaders rather than a critical reading of their discourse.

SOSNOSKI: The best defense against critical writers is a large number of uncritical readers primed to disagree.

DOWNING: That's right! The entire program of ramping up public

fear of terrorism masks critical views of just what kind of terrorism the U.S. itself is and has been funding around the world. Noam Chomsky is the best one on this score (see *Hegemony and Survival: America's Quest for Global Dominance*, New York: Henry Holt, 2003). But when all attention is turned to some of the gruesome effects of the unethical war in Iraq, we rarely see what we're doing elsewhere in the world. Again, there are so many stories, but here's one that sticks out to me: President Bush's support of the atrocious regime of Equatorial Guinea's dictator, Teodoro Obiang. The search for oil has meant that Obiang has embezzled millions of dollars and enriched his family and friends while starving the population to the extent that more than half the children are malnourished. ExxonMobil, Haliburton, and other US companies are investing more in this country than in any other African nation, yet Obiang leads one of the most brutal regimes on the continent. Bush has repeatedly lended diplomatic hands to insure more oil contracts for his buddies. Again, most Americans would be appalled if they just knew the truth, but for the mass media there seems to be no such freedom in these times to report these realities.

The mass news media are now so tied to corporate interests that they only tell what sells. Hasn't the historical ideal of the press as the fourth estate providing a kind of check on the three branches of government through accurate reporting of what is actually going on been abdicated in favor of profit and short term political interests?

OHMANN: All your comments are important and pertinent. David says concisely what we have all been learning and teaching about the media these several decades: that our leaders and their corporate masters buy and promulgate the knowledge they want the public to have. Patty wonders if they think capitalism will (through the "free" market, I suppose) solve the problems it creates. I put these two things together in a puzzle I've been wondering about with more and more befuddlement as world-transforming processes zip ahead—especially climate change, environmental impoverishment, and peak oil. Do our bosses really believe these are solvable problems within the frame of capitalist markets? Artifacts of our love of hysteria? Do they think they can keep bouncing capital around to make money from each new environmental-social disaster? Peak oil poses the question most strikingly: Why do ExxonMobil and the others keep creating bad science and public ignorance about what's ahead, in order to preserve our dependence on oil? Do they see no farther than selling the last gallon of gas for a million bucks to the last customer, having produced World War III, the collapse of empire, and domestic anarchy along the way? Do they think they can monopolize wind, sea, and cooking oil power before Rome burns, and lead us into a new regime of accumulation (Patty's question)? Never in the history of bourgeois ideology has the invisible hand been called upon for such heroism. Can you two help with this puzzle?



RDX, Dick's Fraternity at Shaker Heights High School

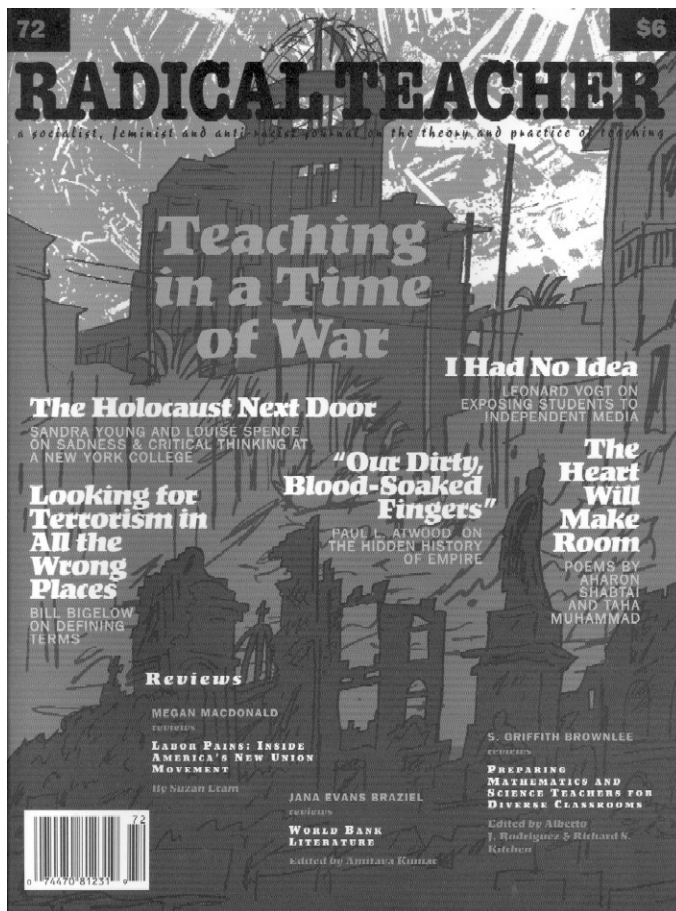
DOWNING: I like the way you cast the question: "What are they thinking?" Since I don't in my daily life too often talk with "these guys" who lead the charge of fast capital, it's pretty much a guessing game. And my guesses about the thinking process of "them" is directly related to, as you put it, how far bourgeois ideology can keep the wheel of capital rolling. That's a good way of putting it, and I see signs that it can go pretty far towards mass destruction. My guess is that there are sort of two poles of neo-con crazies. For the real loonies, the ideology is functioning fine and dandy so thought processes are ruled by complete denial and mystification: there are no real problems, just some annoying edges. For those folks, my guess is they think that if the environmental bugs would just get out of the way, the market would solve its way into and through ANWAR, global warming (the hysterical myth of the greens, as Inhofe puts it), and all the other annoying environmental hazards, all managed with an acceptable tolerance for "moderate" levels of uncontrollable world poverty and geopolitical unrest. This pole is close to sheer delusion in my mind.

The second, and more dangerous types, are what I would call the splitters: say this but do that. Publicly voice the rhetoric of freedom, democracy, family values, protection from terror, and the rest while behaving undemocratically, ramping up coercion, destroying human rights, and fueling terror. As long as they can keep patching together the ideological hegemony of their rhetoric so that enough people keep believing it, there seems to me little to stop them from doing what they want to do.

Now, my guess about their interiorized thought processes is, that, as Dick admits, they probably don't say to themselves or use with each other the language Dick imagined them speaking in his quotation line: that is what they do but not what they say, at least pub-

licly and that's about all we have to go on. So under the face of the obvious failures of Iraq or FEMA, they still puff up and proudly proclaim they are going to protect freedom, democracy, capital, from sub-human terrorists and natural disasters, so we're going to have to be a bit tougher than we might like: "when the going gets tough, the tough get going," as the infamous John Mitchell said during the Watergate hearings long ago. At least that's what I hear them saying publicly. Privately, my guess is that there's a lot more language, like, "screw the bastards, 'it's our due' (now Dick Cheney did say that in public), we need to give this \$15 million contract to Charlie at Haliburton, and the boys in accounting can set it up. Don't waste any time getting on it."

OHMANN: The rise in pump prices for gas nicely points up the attendant dilemmas. Some advocate suspending or reducing gasoline taxes, subsidizing the purchase of heating oil, and so on. Purists reply that such interventions just gum up the workings of the market. Leave it alone, and the price of gas will open the eyes of consumers to alternatives, before stabilizing at a new level. The immiseration of millions along the way is a sad but inevitable cost.



Many in both camps are liberals, by the way. The market purists are not exactly problem-solvers, but, as David puts it, they delegate problem-solving to the market. In the what-are-they-thinking department: do they imagine that markets were ever free? Maybe for a golden instant in mid-19th-century England? Never mind; both groups are silent about collective action as an engine of history.

DOWNING: Raymond Williams called it “Plan X” thinking, meaning short term strategic profit planning, ignoring the big picture, and bullying through the flack that flairs up, since, when you control the media, it can be smoothed over pretty quickly after the fact.

The rhetoric of terror serves this sliding scale of political dominance as a wonderful backbone for ramping up the old ideology even in the face of incontrovertible evidence that the ideology itself is the problem. Katrina, in one sense, revealed a crack in the ideology: there it was even in the mass media, the racialized poverty right on our tv screens. It should have exposed the ideology for what it has been all along, but the social problems are now being smoothed out all over. When the heroification of our leaders no longer works so well (even the Right had to admit Bush didn’t quite have it all together on this one, although they quickly found some scapegoats), the heroification descends lower, through the mass media to local heroes in the face of disaster. So we have Anderson Cooper and Paula Zahn down there in New Orleans showing how bad things are, choked with tears, but glowing with appreciation for the heroic efforts of some local citizens in the face of natural disasters. And, of course, who couldn’t deny the self-sacrifice of so many individuals confronting horrifying situations? But any social analysis of the causes of the problem (besides “nature”) has flown the coop, or been washed away with the levees.

So far I’m also still in the mode of guessing, or trying to “tell the truth and expose lies,” and I don’t think the basic virtues of Chomsky’s motto will ever go away (I hope). In the current situation, it does seem to me that anger and frustration levels are pretty high across a pretty broad spectrum of the population—there are signs of the ideological mask cracking under the strains. Given that circumstance, when I start to turn the diagnosis towards a prognosis, it seems to me that one source of potential hope is that two things would have to come together in new ways: the media and the Movement.

Let me speak first to the potential rising from the ashes of some new kind of social imaginary I will call for convenience the New Movement. That is, if as Dick has argued the PMC has lost its coherence as an agent of social change, solidarity might be built along and across different groups of workers and citizens. That academia is now the most highly unionized segment of the work force means also that the links here cut across old fault lines and class differences: the PMC itself has the flex-workers well-installed in the less than Ivory towers. So hope would have to be built on coalitions that linked academic workers with automobile workers, with fast

food workers, and so forth. Obviously, my analogy of the New Movement is to the “Old” Movement from the 1960s-70s that has been pretty thoroughly fragmented by specialized interests and identity politics which meshes well with niche marketing and flexible accumulation. That is, the old alliances would still be there—civil rights, women’s rights, environmental movement, gay/lesbian rights, peace, etc.—but the New Movement would also have to have new rhetorics, new alliances, and new forms of sophistication that make the old Movement seem naïve in retrospect.

Is anything like this possible?

OHMANN: I don’t have even 2 cents’ worth to add to David’s helpful if gloomy thoughts on academic freedom. Precisely: it’s being churned into the soon-to-be-universal market. A hopeful side-effect of this inexorable process may be the retention (not really creation) of free zones. So much critical thought and politics came into the university beginning in the 60s that such zones exist in the curriculum—women’s studies, cultural studies, and so on—and in what we (with tenure) can acceptably teach. And if there’s even a niche market for wackocommiequeer studies, the universities will let them go forward, in spite of howls of execration from the right. Those zones are places where alternative visions and projects persist, and which might reconnect to broader political movements at some time. Sound too cheerful? Well, it’s my one cent’s worth.



Dick at Society of Fellows Dinner at Harvard

SOSNOSKI: Hey, do I hear you commodifying cheer? I thought that zone was free.

HARKIN: I think I want to major in wackocommiequeer studies.

DOWNING: Enough of this cheer! Jim’s comment about free zones

brings me to my second point: alternative media. That is, for anything like this to even begin to happen, there has to be a kind of new underground media (which there already is) but organized to facilitate the alliances. That is, my sense is that the mass media news networks are lost to “those guys” I talked about earlier. Not that anyone who thinks they can crack in some space for an alternative rhetoric shouldn’t try, but what I now see is a relatively chaotic but energized online network. As the ideological cracks keep getting bigger, there have mushroomed so many Bush-bashing websites, blogs, and online resource centers, they have almost been galvanized by anger at the depth of the social problems. Of course, they cut a wide political spectrum, but there’s often enough common ground if the sites could be cross-linked and networked sufficiently. I’m thinking for instance of various kinds of both public and private initiatives (some more mainstream than others; some both print and online resources) such as, to name a few, Amnesty International, the World Social Forum, MoveOn.org, the BBC website, *Mother Jones*, the League of Conservation Voters, the National Organization for Women, the Gay/Lesbian Alliance, the Sierra Club, *Workplace: A Journal of Academic Labor*, and many others. There are also many thousands of private websites and blogs such as Michael Bérubé’s which also has online links to many other related blogs. Of course, the list could go on and on. The range of angry people now spills far beyond just the radical left.

Finding and getting to these coalitions is in one sense easier through online access, but it can still be difficult to navigate around, especially for someone like myself who is not a techie. What if some good people decided to set up web sites that organized and mapped out these various online resources? There are starts in this direction. In the recent issue of *Academe*, Patrick Brantlinger described the new International Network of Scholar Activists (<http://www.inosa.org/www.inosa.org>) that works along exactly the lines I had been thinking here. Brantlinger also recounted his experience of attending the World Social Forum in Brazil this past January where more than 150,000 activists gathered. This organization, in his words, already functions as a kind of “counteruniversity.” Despite big capital’s control of the mass media, the vast online possibilities enable hope for an educated citizenry in which internet technology enables new kinds of threads, alliances, and sources of counter-information to the official stories. And the good news is that such networks are difficult to suppress through either coercion or ideology. Let me just end here by saying I am not a cyberutopian: I have seen only too well how cyberspace has been colonized by capital. But the network is rhizomatic, so always allows skirting, side-stepping, in pretty unsuppressable ways.

So is this just all wishful thinking? What do you think?

SOSNOSKI: I hate to have to disagree with David. I don’t believe that the old coalitions are still there. Take the “Women’s Liberation” movement as an example. If the movement were still there, it

would manifest itself as a movement. It may be the case that some of the original participants are still alive but that is not a sign that the movement is still alive. It seems to be that the “women’s liberation movement” has migrated into smaller splinter groups based on the interests of younger women, which are not quite the same, judging from the young women I teach. I would make the same point about the “Civil Rights Movement.” My experience with the Bronzeville group—African Americans living in a Chicago neighborhood parallel to Harlem, N. Y.—may be quite typical of what cannot be called a “New, New Negro Movement” or a “New Civil Rights Movement.” The major emphasis in the Bronzeville group is entrepreneurship. They were quite excited about Obama’s election because it gave them some leverage against white entrepreneurs who are rehabbing Bronzeville. I don’t hear or read about “women’s lib” or “civil rights” much these days. The “Gay/Lesbian Movement,” I think, has morphed into a political platform counter to Bush’s.

All of these movements, at least at my university, have been institutionalized, if only in part. Women’s Lib, Civil Rights, Gay/Lesbian Issues are in the curricula of Women’s Studies, African American Studies, and Gay/Lesbian Studies.

DOWNING: Thanks for the clarification, Jim. I call it clarification because I had thought my point was exactly that the Old Movement was not alive—that’s why I tried to draw on some notion of a New Movement. The old Movement has indeed fragmented, sold off, been institutionalized, turned to niche forms of identity politics, and the old coalitions have dissolved, etc., which is why we don’t hear about “women’s lib,” etc., and why solidarity would need a new rhetoric and new ways of forming solidarity for social change. But if there were a new movement, race, class, gender issues would have some major part in it, at least, it would be my hope still. And, from my experience, many (although, true enough, not most) of my students still seem concerned with these issues, although they don’t identify with any Movement because there isn’t one out there in the way there was, say, in the late 60s—a movement which took a lot of its animus as well from the anti-War movement and spread to the other areas. I see quite a few young people, say in their 20s, with deeply progressive social views, but my sense is that it’s true it’s hard to find any Movement or solidarity for collective action. But your caution is well-taken, since I certainly don’t mean the kinds of “New, New Movements” you characterize there—those actions seem to me just part of the cooptation into the system rather than action for general social change. Would you say, given these co-optations, that we should give up any hope for concerted social change? Or what would be a more realistic set of expectations?

OHMANN: I like David’s reasonable (if at the moment cloudy) scenario of a new movement and new media. On the latter, I am too cyber-challenged to be taken seriously, but will just say that my 35

years of teaching and writing about mass, commercial culture make me both cautious and hopeful about a new stage. Cautious because, like David, I imagine that commodification and, in particular niche-marketing, are capable of containing or abducting a lot of political anger and energy; but hopeful because the net does indeed open spaces where people can act as citizens, not consumers.

On a new movement: the old one (was it ever one except in our wishful fantasies?) is indeed fragmented, as Jim and David agree. I suppose coalition might rise out of common needs on such common ground. But the fragments are everywhere, far more numerous and contentious than 40 years ago, and sure to be maddened by the crises we've been discussing—their anger fueled by all those on-line analyses and revelations, on top of crisis after crisis. But anger without organization quickly expends itself or turns nasty, and no big, people's organization looms. My own view of the Democratic Party is, forget it. Where will a left successor come from? David's thoughts about coalition seem clarifying. In any case, we do not have to imagine the revolution all by our soggy PMC selves. We have battlegrounds enough close to home—e.g., the degradation of academic labor and the deterioration of the university system.



Harry Levin, Dick's dissertation advisor at Harvard

HARKIN: Recently I've been busy in the corporate university realizing Dick's worst fears.

A corporation offered money to our department to create a course in technical writing. I infer that the corporation is satisfied with the curriculum in business administration and engineering but not with the communication curriculum. They exercise a little influence to get us to prepare their writers to produce the kind of writers they need (just as Dick described the process with respect to government in *English in America*) without particularly speculating about the purposes to which the writing is to be put.

This strikes me as more, not less, insidious than an upfront proposition from a pharmaceutical company: "design a test that proves this drug is safe and we'll pay you several million dollars." This corporation is asking us to create a docile worker FOR THEM (whereas they used to have to do it themselves). I think it's the more insidious because it's probably not particularly conscious on the part of the actual liaison person who is asking us to do this. This is not to say that corporate consciousness doesn't understand what's happening, but only that the corporate officer in charge of university gifts probably really thinks that she's helping the university.

The *New York Times* for Sunday, October 16th, 2005 had an article (News Section p.12) that documented the decline in state funding for state universities (and the concurrent rise in corporate donations) to the extent that state universities can now be said to be privatized rather than state supported. The University of Virginia (my graduate school), for instance, now has only 8 percent of its revenues from state taxpayers. And so UVA has asked the state legislature to extend the university's autonomy—that is to make it no longer necessary for the university to get the state assembly's permission to raise tuition. I can't help being sentimentally sad here. Thomas Jefferson's whole notion (as the founder of the University of Virginia) was that educating citizens is a responsibility APPROPRIATELY borne by the state.

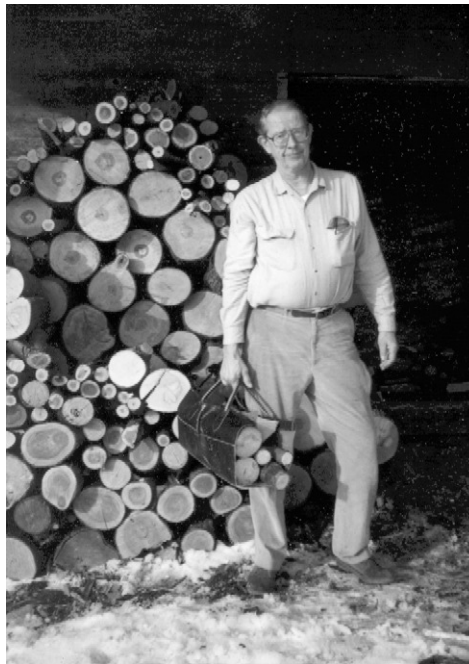
Before I drift off into complete nostalgia for the good ol' days of the ideological state apparatuses, let me ask Dick: do you think that any actual distinction can still be drawn between state and corporate agendas in post-secondary education? The *NY Times* did not discriminate between "private" universities with multi-billion dollar endowments and privatized state universities with multi-billion dollar research budgets financed by corporate interests. Should they? Is it in any way useful to make such a discrimination—for example politically?

OHMANN: That's a nice story, Patty. I remember well hustling support for Wesleyan's Center for the Humanities, when I was its director, and when funding was evaporating. My most craven exploits were consigning to Christie's, for auction, a number of the paintings and drawings on our dignified walls; and encouraging one of Wesleyan's trustees, a man in the food business with a big network, to facilitate a grant to us from the Coca-Cola Foundation. The result of that second coup was *Making and Selling Culture*, which still produces a few royalty-dollars a year to the Center's budget. All I had to do was travel to Atlanta with a sore back, and explain to Coke people what cultural studies is. I declined to cross an imaginary line, on the other side of which was explaining to them how cultural studies would help sell their product in Venezuela.

I don't know if this has any bearing on the serious question you pose, Patty, beyond offering two examples of pressure on a private institution, leading its humanities research center into entrepreneurship. Even—or especially—those private universities with multi-billion dollar endowments do lots of contract work—weren't some Harvard profs helping the tobacco companies show smoking to be a healthy activity? State universities were expected, at least from the Morrill Act on, to serve businesses alongside farmers. Jennifer Washburn's *University, Inc.* describes in rich detail how academic service to corporations has advanced in recent decades. I am less scandalized by this development than she, and less hopeful that liberal reforms can curb it, because, as you know, I see it as one small current in the great flood of change from Fordism to flexcap. For all that, and although I agree with your main point, I do think it's worth keeping state, corporate, and philanthropic

agendas separate at least for purposes of analysis, and probably for some political purposes, too. For example faculty members can sometimes rouse opposition to particular corporate raids, as violations of academic freedom and the disinterested pursuit of knowledge—an idea that still has a loyal following among us, in spite of...well, you know.

If time permitted, that thought would lead to a topic of immediate interest to me, the MLA Radical Caucus, my comrades on *Radical Teacher*, and doubtless all of you. (David has written pertinently about it in *The Knowledge Contract*.) That topic is how or even whether to reassert old professional claims against antagonistic forces as varied as corporate sponsorship of research and teaching, the casualization of academic labor, and—for short—David Horowitz. Such claims still have influence within the university, or at least its tenured ranks. But the degeneration of academic work has parallels in most other sectors that have deep historical connections; and maybe it's time for academics to be allying more with workers of all kinds, rather than distancing ourselves on the ramparts of professional privilege.



Dick allying with workers (me) important thread: the deterioration of the American university. So, let me offer the following provocation.

Some conditions that seem un-related but probably are related:

I felt bad to hear that Wayne Booth had died. He was a staunch opponent of (ahem) certain kinds of entrepreneurship in our field, and of the degeneration of the academy in general. A decent, honest person.

HARKIN: Our times with him were always very pleasant.

SOSNOSKI: He was the epitome of a gentleman.

DOWNING: *The Rhetoric of Fiction* remains a classic. And, as Dick says, "a decent, honest person."

SOSNOSKI: Before we close the conversation, I'd like to add a bit to a neglected but (at least to

1) David argues in *The Knowledge Contract* that a small cadre of “academostars” enjoys affluence, mobility, and prestige at the expense of a rapidly expanding labor force of part-timers, adjunct, and temporary instructors” (50).

2) David also argues in *The Knowledge Contract* that its latest versions reduce knowledge to data bits (59), which I’ll translate as “reduce knowledge to information.”

3) A major change in research in the second half of the 20th century was the influence of the model of information processing in cognitive psychology, artificial intelligence, and computer science where the model of the human mind was a digital computer (Michael R. W. Dawson, “The Classical View of Information Processing,” *Understanding Cognitive Science*, 13-35)

4) Since the microchip, the accumulation of information = the accumulation of wealth

5) Nowadays knowledge is often construed as a “commodity.” Patty ironically refers to students as “consumers.” Some educators un-ironically refer to students as consumers.

6) Many students at my university have abandoned the traditional profile of the docile student body. Among the many changes in their behavior I will simply list a few: MANY students (a) do not read assigned readings—cf. article on this phenomenon a year or so ago in the Chronicle, (b) do not purchase the required textbooks, (c) skip classes frequently. SOME students (a) talk on their cell phones during class, (b) leave before the class is over, (c) use pocket-sized electronic devices to cheat on exams. These behaviors occur among students at a “Research One” university. I believe they are far more wide-spread.

I would relate these six “conditions” in the following story, “University High Grammar Schools” (written in a kind of Gertrude Stein, Faulknerian style):

The micro-chip introduced the digital revolution; then, as a result, information became inordinately valuable; so that the acquisition of information became the standard of intellection, and thus dominated research fields concerned with intelligence in ways that allowed for the accumulation of the NEW wealth; so that, as a result, the traditional university (based on a different knowledge contract predominately concerned with non-digital disciplined knowledge) was no longer as useful in the goal of accumulating the NEW knowledge. BUT the youthful, white-collar, potential labor force (read “students”) who needed to remain unemployed until employees were needed were led to believe that what they first needed was the prestige of a degree before the advent of a job so that a small cadre of academic superstars were consequently needed to supply prestige and therefore a larger group of part-timers, adjunct, and temporary instructors needed to be hired as baby (read student) sitters. The moral of the story is that the aforementioned youth, being young, have been pressing the limits of discipline because—like most youths—they have doped out what is going on.

That’s the end of my parable.

OHMANN: Thanks for the parable, Jim. Those six things have certainly become intertwined in the new university. If I were refashioning the story as a Marxist one, I would change a couple of things: remove the microchip from its initiatory position, and restore the transformationally deleted subjects of those passive verbs. Predictably, I see the evolution of digital technology as guided by those with the money and power to guide technological change in ways that best serve their needs. Such people seem to me, also, to shape contexts in which institutional and ideological changes like those you describe take place and seem natural. But then, who needs a parable replete with hegemonic and counter-hegemonic processes, dialectical theses and antitheses, ruling classes propagating their ideas, and so on? Yes, many of our students have “doped out what is going on.” I wonder what miseries and calamities it will take to madden them into collective subjects of history.

I was talking with one of the poker room regulars, who asked me what my last book was about. When I got through my compact sketch of the new university, he said, “So, that’s good, isn’t it?” He liked the idea of buying the credentials and skills one needs, without buying the whole liberal arts package. Commodity living is fairly hard-wired in lots of us, I think.

DOWNING: I agree with both Jim and Dick that students have “doped out what is going on,” and Jim’s points and his parable configure pretty well how we are trying to cope with our “University High Grammar Schools.”



Dan Ellsberg, Dick’s Officemate

In a way, of course, it’s odd to speak of the university as “disintegrating” because there are still 14-15 million undergraduate students in the US—a lot of people are still being served by this disintegrating institution, and many of them love EMOs even as they hate HMOs. Most academic studies of higher education refer to the “restructuring” of the university, by which they usually mean the commodification of education and the ramping up of management control of cost-effectiveness ratios instantly calculated on digitalized spread sheets. Is dis-

integration a synonym for commodification, then? I take Jim’s framing of the question as a way of specifying exactly what it is that’s disintegrating. As you will see, in my essay for this volume, my starting point is that Dick’s *Politics of Knowledge* provides one of the most readable and articulate descriptions of this “disintegration.”

Let me here just pick up one strand of the disintegration that I find crucial. With the defunding of public education, what we now see is that, as Marc Bousquet points out, students are workers, in a very literal sense. More than 75 percent of undergraduate students now work at a non-academic job or work study for at least 20 hours a week. These statistics are borne out in my own experience at IUP: I find that in my undergraduate classes it is almost the entire class that works at least 20 hours outside their coursework, and some have full-time jobs, 40-hours a week, plus full-time student-dom. Under these circumstances, what has most clearly disintegrated is time: students have little time, thus little freedom, for speculation, non-instrumental, exploratory, experimental forms of learning.

Contrast that with my own generation going to college in the late '60s. An amazing thing happened in America in the old days of the "Movement:" the U.S. funded a great deal of time for a whole generation of baby boomers to go to school, relatively unencumbered with massive debt, and relatively free from the need to earn income while attending school. That, to me, was an unusual moment in social history. It produced a whole generation that had time to think, reflect, read Marx and Nietzsche and Beauvoir and Kristeva, in our spare time, if not in our classes, and to organize protest movements over the war or over racial and gender inequities, to volunteer for Amnesty International or women's shelters, or half-way houses. I would not underestimate the practical effects that the material production of educational time and space for a whole generation of students had on the actual course of American history during the post-World War II boom years. And this is despite the more narrow nationalist interests of the GI Bill, Sputnik, and the Cold War competition for achievement in science and military power, etc. Now, in contrast, one of the most tangible forms of disintegration, in my mind, has been the shrinking of time and freedom for students to study, learn, and explore issues under conditions relatively free from earning an income or amassing depressing amounts of debt.

When I listen to most of my students trying to balance 5 courses, work night shifts, and part-time gigs, it's hard not to sympathize. Ask many of them if they would prefer to have the time to study and learn, as well as work until they drop and play with the media culture whenever they can, and the answer is simple, at least in my experience. Which is to say that my experience of Jim's point #6 is a bit different. That is, true enough, given their difficult circumstances, some students don't (or can't find time) to do the readings, and miss more classes for various reasons. But I have had no experience of students talking on cell phones during class or cheating with electronic devices (I don't give exams). When I introduce alternative, non-official histories, ideas, and critiques, I find many students eager to hear them, learn from them, and explore the alternatives, but their eagerness is often crushed by the time constraints imposed by the university of excellence. Competition, grades, jobs—they are reading their culture correctly if they learn to meas-

ure everything by these codes; indeed, they've doped it out. And, yes, I think, following Jim's phrasing of it, digitalization converts knowledge to commodified bits of information suitable to management control in the on-time, on-demand economy.

But resistance has not completely disappeared. The new technology also creates new spaces of resistance. Take a look at my colleague, Joel Kuszai's "Factory School" web site (www.factoryschool.org/langdev/index.php/Main_Page). These online, alternative learning sites and community action groups have become more accessible than any such work could be before online access made it possible for many more users than in the old print environment.

But the question remains: how bad can it get? How far can disintegration go towards destruction, misery, and calamity? Are there grounds to hope for any alternatives?

I hope so, but I also think the mood of disintegration fits the times. I think these are dark times for the liberal and left in America, because it has been difficult to discern any political agenda, any solidarity, that might effectively combat the dominance of the right wing marshalling of fear and intimidation to do what they want in the "war on terror." Like Dick, I too "wonder what miseries and calamities it will take to madden them into collective subjects of history." And last night, as I was wondering, I also happened to be listening to Jimmy Carter on Larry King Live, and here's a liberal Christian pointing out how far the current administration has gone to deteriorate human rights, destroy the environment, collapse the separation of church and state, operate in secrecy, deception, and arrogance. Digitalization had nothing (directly) to do with his argument, but as Carter pointed out, Bush seems willing to justify one of the lowest minimum wages in the entire world while giving tax breaks to the most wealthy segments of the population; to conceal and deny the clear evidence we now have that many in the administration had drawn up the plans to invade Iraq long before 9/11; to unilaterally orchestrate the unjust rationales for aggressive "pre-emptive" warfare that go hand in hand with Dick Cheney's recent justification for the active use of torture, so long as we don't kill the prisoner/victims!

And these ideas about misery and calamity were not coming from a political radical but from a former President. If more students had more time to consider these facts of recent history, there would probably be a greater chance of a new movement, but when everyone's time is squeezed to the limits of day-to-day pressures to survive these times, it's no wonder we don't have more protestors in the streets. Carter's liberalism, at least, allows him to optimistically believe that these practices just can't go on because they are contrary to 200 years of US public policy. From this perspective, he has hope that broader public support will shift away from the current regime in next year's election, and then again in 2008 when Bush will be deposed by law, if not by populist objection. Now, I don't quite share that optimism because my sense is that US foreign policy has far too often clandestinely conducted itself in appalling

ways during those 200 years, whether in Latin America or other parts of the world, as Chomsky explains. But what is new is that the Bush administration has been arrogantly willing to combine their false rhetorics of freedom with public justifications for abusive uses of power, aggression, and detainment. Will an American public, at least those beside a fundamentalist rightwing, really buy into this very public presentation of the abatement of human rights? If so, then disintegration will surely continue on its merry way of making profit for the few and misery for the many.

Of course, there are still the fragmented pockets of resistance, and if they were to collapse, then education would disintegrate beyond even the bad behavior of some students and faculty. In one perverse sense, Roger Kimball had it right when he wrote his complaint about *Tenured Radicals*, because it's true a few of us still enjoy the privileges of tenure and the autonomy to teach and write in relative freedom from direct control by Bush and his cohorts, even if we aren't academostars. Kimball, Bush, and company would like to eliminate tenure, ramp up the standardization movement, and convert academic freedom into the more manageable freedom to market symbolic capital. I guess its signs of the times that Dick's poker friends think those are good things. Successful operation of this agenda would effectively eliminate cranks like us who may still enjoy those vestiges of educational autonomy left over from the great post-World War II expansion of the university system: it's clear enough they want to wipe out those pockets and make us more accountable to the accountants.

If it's true that commodification cannot go all the way down without killing genuine learning, we're going to have to find new ways to contract for some spaces of autonomy, no? We have to work with the terms of our own commodification, even as we define, defend, and wrest from the business of education the alternative time and space for some kind of relative autonomy. Such zones of autonomy are not disinterested, but interested, partisan, in favor of telling the truth as best we can. The old professional rationales for control of the criteria and resources for the production of knowledge will have to be rewritten in the new economy because the traditional humanist arguments for the liberal arts will certainly seem lame, irrelevant, and ineffective. And the colonization of cyberspace for surveillance and social control will continue to gain new powers even as the same technology opens socially uncontrollable spaces for alternatives and sites of resistance.

So for me the disintegration question always leads back to the future question: What can university workers do to sustain viable education practices in these times? Is it still possible, rather than naively idealistic, to even think about resisting the pressures of commodification? Will times get better for workers in and out of the university? These are obviously basic labor questions about working conditions for both students and faculty, and I only wish I had really good answers to those questions. From a personal perspective, I suppose the best answer I have is a Zen-like willingness to practice living compassionately with an awareness of our inter-

dependence and thus the collective need for social justice in all corners of this planet even when we can't individually control the economic conditions that determine the material basis for that living. But, of course, that's easy to say for anyone like myself with tenure and job security; its remarkable when I see political exiles from North Korea or refugees from Somalia daily risking their lives for the same commitments.

OHMANN: Thanks, David, for the sad, honest, yet faintly optimistic comment. This speaks for me; maybe it could be the last word.

I got a warm letter last week from a student and T.A. of mine, class of '80, whose small flame of optimism is like yours: "In spite of the many reasons not to be, I remain optimistic because as long as there is human spirit and community, there is hope and love." People like him make me glad I did this troubling work for 40 years. "We need to serve as mentors for the generations after ours and teach them, as you taught us, to be leaders and activists and, most importantly, to follow a belief system based on conscience and the lessons of history." Thanks, Dan; carry on.

HARKIN: I'm really glad that you mentioned your student. It's so easy to lose sight of the persons who do believe in the "human spirit and community" and are a part of our community. In a recent issue of *Radical Teacher*, "On Working in the Corporate University," you comment in your "Introductory Note" that the issue "came together without our having a plan for it." You then recount several meetings where other persons, who are just as concerned as we about these issues, spoke out. We cannot lose sight of this coalition, one that is represented in this very issue.



Radical Teacher Collective at Dick's Farm

