

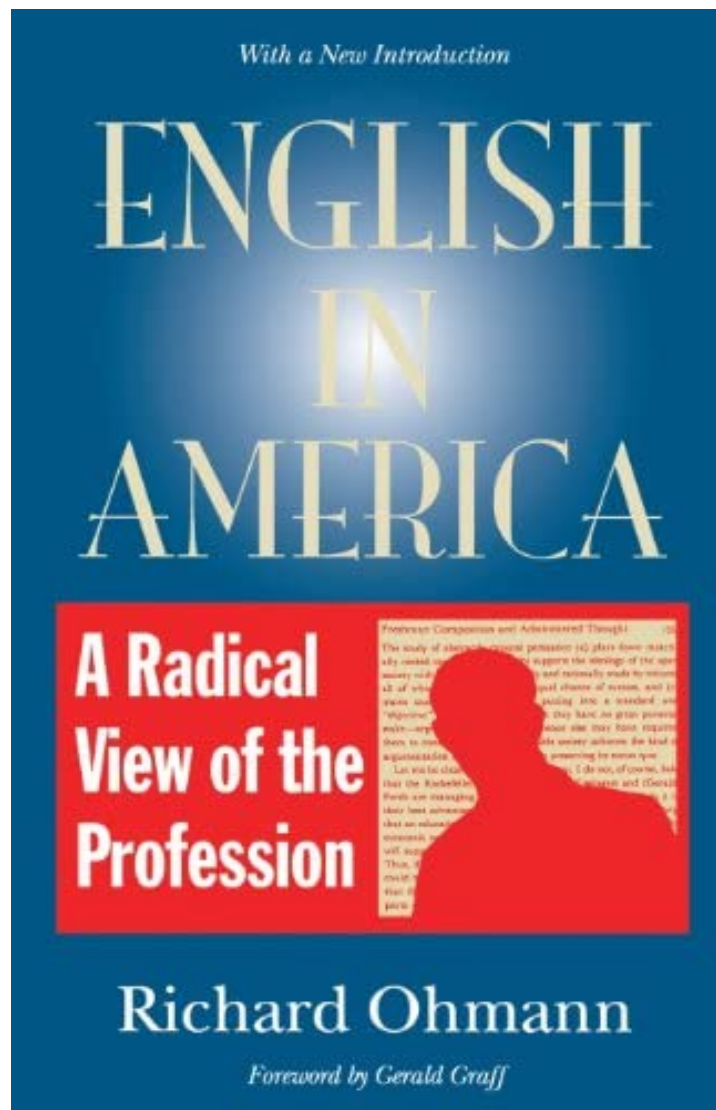
RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

FROM *RADICAL TEACHER* #3 (1976)

Letter to Richard Ohmann & His Reply

by Richard Ohmann, Louise Yelin, Susan O'Malley, Sharon Leder,
Reamy Jansen



RICHARD OHMANN. ENGLISH IN AMERICA: A RADICAL VIEW OF THE PROFESSION. WESLEYAN UNIVERSITY PRESS, 1996

Dear Dick,

We feel that *English in America* loses some of its life and forcefulness in what appears to us to be an attempt to reach a larger audience of left/liberal academics, who at this stage in their careers are more likely to become cynical about their work, rather than become radical activists. Your book is part of an effort to shift their direction. But the other part of your audience, and we have little sense of the size or proportion of either, are those who are already with you: teachers involved in radical classroom practice; emerging graduate students; unemployed faculty. We suspect a split, perhaps it is only in attention, between the potential audience and the radical one, the latter becoming impatient with the book, and the others tending to feel defensive and under attack, if one can judge from the existing reviews and our general intuition. Did you have these questions of audience in mind when you were writing?

This split, then, has the potential for extending into the realm of practice. For example, if the book's polemics move the left/liberal reader to engage in the struggle for socialism, *English in America* implies that little at the university level can be done right now, and that any real change of substance will come only on the way toward socialism or after it has been achieved. Won't this once more lead back to cynicism about politics on the college level? We feel that while you effectively explain the causes of alienation in the class room, and the department, and tie them to the world of the university and the society at large, you open the door to having this alienation about the work life replaced by another form of alienation, which finds little hope in the possibilities for social action and change. We feel that the book should place more stress on such possibilities. In other words, now that we have an analysis, what do we do?

Sincerely,

Louise Yelin
Susan O'Malley
Sharon Leder
Reamy Jansen

Dear Louise, Susan, Sharon, and Reamy:

I appreciate your questions, and the criticism they carry. It must be rare for someone who writes a political book to have a chance to discuss its argument and reception with those who share its aims, and whose criticism comes out of comradeship and struggle rather than the wish to score debating points or advance a career or defend a position. I'll try to reply in the same spirit.

First, about my intended audience. You are exactly right about my trying to reach liberal teachers, and "shift their direction." I believe that since liberal values, including those associated with humanistic education, cannot be realized within liberal capitalist society (or call it the welfare state, or monopoly capitalism), it is possible to move such an audience toward socialism by showing how capitalist institutions defeat our humane intentions, even when those institutions are the professional ones we have in part created. This belief is not a point of abstract theory. I have come to it, most obviously, through my own experience of the last ten years. But of course that experience took place in the Radical Caucus, in NUC, in RESIST, in the classroom, etc., far more than in my private study. The process I went through was one that hundreds or maybe thousands of other students and teachers were going through at the same time. The evolution of liberal academic ideals into socialist practice is a recent historical fact, not a hypothesis.

I realize that reading a book is no substitute for years of political work. Why, then, write a book for liberals? Here I made in my mind a division of possible audiences somewhat different from the one you discuss in your letter. I hoped to reach younger people, mainly: graduate students and untenured faculty members who are frustrated by the way work and its institutions block their ideals, but who have not shared so directly as you and I in professional struggle and political evolution. I thought that for this group my book might be helpful as a record of recent activity, as a political autobiography, and as a socialist analysis.

Was I right in this estimate? It's impossible to know. But I don't think the reviews are decisive. Along with these public and mainly critical estimates of *English in America* by established professional men, I must give some weight to the 25 or so letters I've received from graduate students and untenured or unemployed teachers, women and men. Admitting the self-indulgence of the procedure, I'd like to quote from a few of these, representative, I think:

I just finished your book, *English in America*, and want to thank you for it. It's a book I've needed to read, and it helps me to focus the stray doubts and apprehensions that have been bothering me in the beginnings of a career in English. (First year graduate student, elite university -- subsequently a drop out.)

I have just finished reading your book, and its impact is still settling in my mind, but from this close perspective I know that you have articulated . . . many of the concerns which have been plaguing me for years. . . . My response is active as well as contemplative, and the book is now being circulated -- selectively -- around the department. (Assistant professor, major university.)

I want to thank you for writing *English in America*... You answer well two questions most teachers of English are unable to: what do we think we are doing? and what are we in fact doing? ("Underpaid, so-called part time lecturer," branch of a state university.)

What I'm supporting, especially, is your placing of our profession in an historical context, your very convincing connection of our professional values to the values that run our society. (Former assistant professor, small college.)

These 25 letters are all mainly favorable, though almost all critical as well -- more of that later. I have also had many invitations to speak to graduate students and departments and conferences since the book came out, and where I've had time to go, I've found students and teachers seriously contending with the argument of the book. Finally, for what it's worth, and to anchor these reflections in the capitalist marketplace, six weeks after publication (the only accounting I've had so far) the book had sold about 2000 copies. More than half were paperbacks, so the figures don't just reflect library purchases. Aside from healing the wounds to my ego inflicted by *TLS* and *NYR*, I mean what I'm saying here to remind me and you that we should be cautious in assuming that the left-liberal elite speaks for people on the margins of academia.

My relationship to socialist readers is another matter. I expected people like yourselves to be "impatient" with or even bored by the polemics on careerism, the MLA, New Criticism, etc. You already knew what I had to say about such things. I hoped you would find the analysis of departments, of freshman composition, and of academic history -- perhaps unsurprising ---but solid, integrative, novel in some of its detail, and useful both intellectually and practically. You can best say how reasonable that hope was.

So on balance I still think I made a correct decision about the audiences I might be speaking to. I feel much more vulnerable to the criticism in your last paragraph. Many of my correspondents sounded the same note. Perhaps the book offers readers sympathetic to it nothing but a kind of revolutionary paralysis. If socialism is the only answer, and one that seems a long way off, why do anything now? Are there no changes in our daily work or the surrounding institutions that will make a progressive difference? Surely it was wrong for me to spend so much time showing the futility of liberal reformism, and so little suggesting what it might mean to carry socialism into one's work. And it doesn't do much good right now to repeat the clichés, however true, that we must create alliances between workers and intellectuals, work toward, a mass-based socialist party, struggle against layoffs and repression in our sector, and so on.

As my essay in this issue of *Radical Teacher* shows, I think there's much to be done in and around the classroom by those of us lucky enough to have jobs. What that might

be will differ a lot from one situation to another, but I do believe it crucial to re-establish marxism and socialist teaching in the universities. The critique of capitalism should be our daily task, in however explicit or muted a form is tolerated (or unnoticed) by our bosses. Teach literature as ideology; teach how the bourgeoisie uses the "means of mental production" (*German Ideology*); teach writing as development of consciousness and as struggle; teach the literature of the oppressed. I don't have anything new to say about these strategies, but welcome the chance to endorse them.

I'm not pessimistic, most days. Our collectively taught course, "Toward a Socialist America," has 70 students. The new socialist organization at Wesleyan has 100 members. For a final project last spring, the students in a group tutorial that I worked with produced a good pamphlet (and used it for organizing) analyzing Wesleyan from a socialist perspective. Students now are working together to press the economics and government departments to hire radicals, and are trying to influence our whole curriculum.

There have been and will be fizzles and failures. Doing this kind of work heightens my frustration at my own ignorance and my deficiencies in political action. And I *am* aware both that class differences call for quite different strategies elsewhere, and that many who will read this could not possibly "get away with" what I can. Still, I think most can make at least some integration of politics and work, and I share your criticism of my book for encouraging a kind of alienation I don't myself feel. Not now, anyway -- maybe I did when I finished the book.

I want to conclude by registering three additional criticisms of *English in America*. (1) The book is not intellectually strong enough. It's eclectic, and too dependent on my own analyses -- often belated rediscoveries of the wheel. It's vaguely marxist, but not grounded in the best scholarship of the tradition, from Marx' own work to such recent, crucial studies as Braverman's *Labor and Monopoly Capital*. I just didn't know enough. (2) Some parts of the book are dated more than they need to have been, because I didn't take into account the recent depression, the main single fact of most teachers' working lives now. (3) Although I knew that the book would reflect my own privileged situation and personal history, I did not make enough effort to bring in and understand the experience of teachers, like yourselves, who work in community colleges or trade schools, or who work part-time at lousy wages, or who don't work at all.

This is not self-flagellation; I wrote the book I could write at that time. But there's lots more to be said and done about English in this republic. I'm glad you've come at it (and me) dialectically.

Yours,
Dick Ohmann



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