

# RADICAL TEACHER

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## Is Class an Identity?

by Richard Ohmann



ARTWORK BY AMBERHOY, "POWER AND PROFIT" VIA JUST SEEDS

In my section of Introduction to Literature, we were discussing Jane Austen's *Emma*. I knew from experience that a lot of students would have silently rejected the premise of the plot -- indeed, of almost all those 19th-century plots: that whom one marries is really important, where "whom" refers less to any unique individual (Mr. or Miss Right) than to a social status and the conduct that is supposed to enact it in public. Their expected incredulity was in fact the starting point for the unit on *Emma* that some of my Wesleyan colleagues had developed.<sup>1</sup> We would work through letters of Austen, historical documents, and historically based criticism to open a vista of marriages as hugely consequential for the two parties and their families, for the social order of the village, and, beyond that, for the very future of England, which depended in part on whether the landed gentry and the aspiring commercial class would peacefully negotiate their relations and justly rule the nation and the world.

Most students could understand the historical and symbolic seriousness of marriage within and across classes, and even see how such issues got tangled up in the emotions of individual lovers. But along with this grudging acknowledgement went an almost palpable sense of condescension, and of relief that our own civilization had left such superficialities behind, that nobody could now be stigmatized or ruled out as a marriage partner because his or her family was "in trade," that we were free of class chains and class blindness. I decided, one year, to challenge the assumption:

"Well, hypothetically if you were ever to get married" (I had to put it that way to get past their quite proper unwillingness to leave lesbian and gay people out of the conversation and their perhaps less proper revulsion against marriage as an arrangement even for straight couples) "if you were to get married, would class lines be no barrier?"

"Certainly not" -- general agreement "it's love that counts."

"You would be as free to marry a 7-11 clerk as a medical student?" "Of course we'd be less likely to meet and get to know the clerk, but it's the person, not the job or the money, that matters."

"What about differences in education or taste?" "No, the 7-11 worker could read the same books and like the same music that we do." (I hear strains of *My Fair Lady*.)

"And how would your parents react to news of your plans?" Hmmm: that turns out to be a quite different story. To translate their response into my own words: the parents didn't shell out \$25,000 a year or otherwise support and strive and sacrifice, in order to have their kids marry straight down and out of the professional-managerial class (hereafter, PMC). The parents, though maybe nice enough, are old fashioned, bound by antique social rigidities; they are something called "classist." If only we could get rid of classism, along with sexism and heterosexism and racism, people would be unhampered individuals at last, free to love where the heart sings, perhaps even to marry; and the ghost of Jane Austen could rest in her grave.

Now let me acknowledge the narrow reach of this anecdote. Wesleyan University is selective and expensive. Over half of the students have some kind of financial aid, but even many of those come from PMC families. The rest have, with help from parents, striven to join that class. Many of those are minorities. All have come to a college that, like many similar ones, advertises its diversity as an attraction. The ethos is liberal, respectful, what its enemies like to call "politically correct." Most students hate prejudice and inequality; they accept the goal of a small utopia in Middletown, Connecticut, at whose threshold you check all invidiousness, distinction, and privilege based on color or gender or sexuality or ethnicity. (I think that's one meaning of the disappearance of family names from social interaction, so that it's almost rude to ask "Jason what?" after an introduction.)

But if this analysis is right, the anecdote may after all have something to teach about class and identity. These students have entered a college world that is supposedly without hierarchy. Living for a while in such a "diverse" world is a PMC initiation ritual; living in a classless world is, paradoxically, a manifestation of class privilege. To notice or make a fuss about class would, then, spoil the illusion; it would remind all that they came to a selective college in part to preserve or upgrade their class standing. It would call into question their individuality, uniqueness, and freedom. So they enact class without allowing its reality -- at least now, at least in this society, at least for enlightened Wesleyan students.

Granted, the students are reasonably self-aware. They can mock the ideology. Gags about "diversity" abound: "Wesleyan is so diverse that you can meet people here from almost every neighborhood in Manhattan." The students make their way through the world with sensitive compasses and gyroscopes that tell them also which neighborhoods in Brooklyn are homelike to them and which parts of Boston; which places have nothing to do with their lives (e.g., Staten Island and Paterson); where are the places to go after college (New York, San Francisco, Seattle, Boston, Washington); where they might spend summers; what styles and fashions signify how to speak in what Basil Bernstein called the "elaborated code" of the middle class<sup>2</sup>; how to place those who don't; how to avoid alienated labor by deploying credentials or creativity and -- yes -- whom to marry, should it come to such a pass. Their political causes are numerous and sincere. They know there are rich and poor people. But many are reluctant to decode all of this intuitive knowledge, and much else, in terms of class.

Is class an identity? I think yes. It is a complex and powerful identity, a script you act out daily, a bundle of habits and feelings and ways of relating lodged deep in your psyche and broadcast by your talk and conduct. It is not instantly visible like race and gender. But neither is it easy to revise or conceal -- much harder than suggested by those ads for tapes you can listen to while commuting, which will soon have you speaking as well as Henry Higgins, thus shielding yourself from harsh inferences about your background.

But most people don't so readily identify themselves by class as by gender or race, and perhaps don't even feel being

working class or PMC the way they feel being white or male or straight or, especially, being Latino or black or female or gay -- except of course when they are way out of their usual class habitat: a mechanic plunked down in the Century Club, say, or an English Professor at the Elks. And even such misadventures are not likely to endanger the displaced person, the way women and African Americans and gay men and others risk insult or violence in many venues. Class is not so insistent, not so turbulent an identity as these others. Famously, a large majority of our fellow citizens place themselves in the vague and commodious middle class -- just as our rulers would have them do, in order to preserve this supposedly classless and harmonious society. In writing courses I sometimes would ask students how they characterized their class membership. A typical set of uncomfortable replies: 18 middle or upper middle class, and two not. One of the two said she was "lower class"; the other said his family was "rich." Bold and disconcerting replies, I might add.

I have much less experience of other class locations in U.S. education, but I wonder if these generalizations mightn't apply, at least partially, in settings very different from Wesleyan. The students I taught a couple of times at our local community college knew where they came from and where they were, and they knew it wasn't Harvard. But except for a couple of trade unionists, they were reluctant to think of the difference in terms of class. First generation college students, they had a big stake in believing anyone could make it in this country. Class seemed an artificial barrier and a rebuke to their hopes of rising. They needed to see class as epiphenomenal.

Now, of course the ideology we take in with every breath has a lot to do with the many ways in which students at Wesleyan and at Middlesex Community College overlook or evade the hard reality of class. The U.S. is a country where every immigrant's destiny is to make good, or at least enable his and her kids to make good. A country with no hereditary ranks, where everyone is as good as everyone else. A country where all who work for a corporation are part of a big "family." A country with equal opportunity, where you end up with what you earned through talent and hard work.

So for any teacher of composition or literature who wants to nourish critical thinking and writing, this is rich soil. The potential for demystification, for thinking through the myths we have lived, is large. In addition, class so subtly mixes the external (hood or burb, Brooklyn Tech or Exeter) and the interior (including language and love) that the possibilities for discovery through writing are exciting and endless. I used to adapt Ira Shor's classroom investigation of best and worst jobs to get students started on what they expected out of life and how they imagined the mass of people who had the worst jobs.<sup>3</sup> (The best imagined jobs were all professional or creative -- we're a PMC institution.) Students did collaborative projects on work, taking off from Studs Terkel and interviewing people at the college and elsewhere about their jobs. A couple of times, students set off to interview others they knew to be rich or poor, discovering among many things how differently the two classes

imagined social space. The kids without money talked about college as an escape hatch, a way to "get out of" rural Maine or their Korean neighborhood in Queens. The rich students had the whole world in their sights, a sense of choice as their birthright, but also, often, an ethos of obligation or even guilt, derived from their good fortune. I have written about group projects on dress and fashion that discovered class in every morning's choice of garments. Interviews were one of my favorite media for the writing class, for various reasons.<sup>4</sup> But my point here is not to recommend that pedagogy, just to urge a focus on class.

Those my age remember that for the more privileged college students, race, gender, and sexuality were also in hiding through the 1940s and 50s. It took Betty Friedan and James Baldwin and Paul Goodman and the movements of the sixties to make them real, put them on the educational agenda. If they sometimes reside there as frozen identities surrounded by halos of correctness, we can try to complicate that rigidity in our teaching and political work, partly by considering how these identities interact with each other and with class. In teaching about class, I think we start at a more basic level. Yet students and teachers do have deep reserves of tacit, textured knowledge about class. We can draw out and structure that knowledge, adding what social scientists know; understanding why class won't go away if people just stop being snobs; theorizing; *writing* class in the writing class.

It's a good time to be doing that. After long absence, class has once again become visible in the public arena, if crudely, as the "widening gap between rich and poor." Everywhere, global capitalism is degrading and casualizing the labor of the old, industrial working class -- but also of the PMC itself. Look at what's happening to our own profession, including to most of the people who teach first-year writing courses. Students seeking class advancement face that same barrier. There's room for solidarity between students and instructors, perhaps in ways that have not been possible for a while -- perhaps even in a way comparable to the solidarity that sometimes pervades and enlivens black and women's and queer studies classrooms.

## Notes

1. This essay is based on a talk I gave at the 2001 convention of the College Conference on Composition and Communication. I have written about this course in "Teaching Historically," an essay included in my *Politics of Knowledge: The Commercialization of the University, the Professions, and Print Culture* (Middletown CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2003).
2. Basil Bernstein, *Class, Codes and Control*, 3 vols. (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973).
3. Ira Shor, *Critical Teaching and Everyday Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).
4. See "Writing and Empowerment," in my *Politics of Letters* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1987).



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