

RADICAL TEACHER

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Looking Back: Towards a Socialist America

by Mary Ann Clawson



PEACE, FREEDOM, SOLIDARITY BY JESSICA THORNTON VIA JUSTSEEDS.ORG

As its title, "A Student-Initiated Course in Socialism," proclaims, the creation of "Towards a Socialist America" (TSA) at Wesleyan University in 1976 was remarkable in two ways: 1) as a course that placed the question of socialism squarely on its agenda, and 2) as a challenge to a dominant narrative that locates agency in the actions of inspired teachers.

For TSA was not, as Arnesen, Ebbe, Rome, and Ward emphasize in their remarkable account, a faculty initiative. Nor was it based on students' request that a professor create the content of such a course. Instead, TSA was initiated by a single student, Andy Polsky, who approached English Department Professor Dick Ohmann in the fall of 1975, requesting that he sponsor a group tutorial using Polsky's own reading list, "a kind of working syllabus of sorts of things I thought we should read" (Polsky interview). Ohmann confirmed this account. "It would be very much a student run course," Ohmann recalled. "I certainly didn't run discussions or run the course. And I was in any case, as I've indicated, the learner at that point."

Following their discussions, Polsky recruited seven additional students who would comprise the "Towards a Socialist America" group tutorial, which then formed the basis for the large Fall 1976 course that followed, and that survived for many years with Ohmann's continuing and essential sponsorship.

What can be learned by looking back at this unusual case? What explains its emergence, its survival, and at least some of its influence? Here I draw on original course documents and interviews with early participants, including Ohmann himself, to further illuminate the TSA experience so well captured in Arnesen, Ebbe, Rome, and Ward's 1978 account of a seventies model for "teaching about socialism."

Origins

When asked about TSA's origin, Ohmann began by pointing to institutional factors that may have facilitated such a course. Wesleyan's "pedagogical and curricular liberalism," its "openness to new ways of learning" and faculty receptiveness to student demand, had led, in the late 60s and early 70s, to student-faculty apprenticeship programs and group tutorials reflecting student interests. It was Wesleyan's emergence as "a place where students were invited to be sources of educational change and innovation" that gave students, in Ohmann's view, a framework and a vocabulary for course creation.

Moreover, Wesleyan had developed a very vigorous political culture by about 1966 or 67. Indeed, Ohmann remarked, "if anybody was thinking about in 1967 . . . what would be the best college in the country to institute a course called 'Towards a Socialist America,' somebody might have said Wesleyan. Now that's not how it happened, of course. But it may have something to do with why it took roots and lasted so long and went through so many changes." Why then '76 rather than '67, widely seen as a peak year of New Left activism?

Galvanizing role of anti-war protest

The Vietnam War stretched into the seventies, and both Ohmann and student respondents allude to a long experience with anti-war protest and the larger questioning of the system that increasingly accompanied it. Ohmann thus describes years of on-the-ground protest, "going around and participating in demonstrations at draft boards helping support students who were declining to be drafted. And sometimes going to support faculty or student uprisings at other universities." By the seventies, his activism had led to a questioning of his teaching and scholarship, and ultimately to an engagement with Marxism.

"I began thinking of ways that I might narrow the divide between my politics and the teaching that I was doing, moving to an emphasis on literature as a form of rebellion or protest And meanwhile, in my spare time, I was trying to catch up learning something about . . . the Marxism that had taken root in England, the UK, and the United States" among "a younger generation of political activists And I was . . . learning what I could take from and put to use from those traditions – cultural Marxism and also the kind of Marxist developments that were being proposed in the Union of Radical Political Economics." "So I was belatedly becoming," he concluded. "a left intellectual, as opposed to somebody who went to demonstrations and raised hell."

Perhaps more surprisingly, anti-war activism also figured in the politicization of students entering college in the early seventies, a time when many high schools had become sites of organized anti-war protest. While the peace treaty that ostensibly ended the war was signed in 1972, fighting continued until the fall of Saigon in 1974, so the war was a continued presence during these students' high school years, as they observed older peers facing the draft and, in a few cases, encountered efforts by Students for a Democratic Society to extend organizing to younger teens. Jay Kilbourn, a member of the founding group tutorial, describes a student strike at his suburban high school, culminating in a march to the state capital, while Polsky's intense involvement extended over many years.

"I had been myself an anti-war activist beginning at the end of junior high school... We had staged, we had many events, protests, marches. We had gone to Washington for big demonstrations. We had Tom Hayden and Jane Fonda come through. We had done a rally with them in 72 . . . so I had done a lot of anti-war activism." And when the war ended, Polsky reflected, "I was basically saying, 'What do I do now?' Because I had been an anti-war activist since I had been an adolescent and I wasn't sure where to go at that point."

For both Ohmann and Polsky, a larger engagement with radical thought emerged as an answer to the "what do I do now?" question, a question being asked by activists more generally. In this context, TSA's socialist perspective, Arnesen et al. suggest, offered "an understanding of the connections among various issues . . . and a firmer base from which to become politically involved." Most participants "had been politically active but lacked a unifying theoretical

framework" as a guide to action. And the theory they embraced at that moment was Marxism.

The decade's broad-based feminist mobilizations, along with continued movements for Black and other ethno-racial empowerment, are well-known, and rightly so. But the seventies also saw the growth of redistributive projects targeting class inequality and corporate power. These included labor organizing, especially fueled by Marxist-Leninist groups; democratic socialist initiatives associated with Michael Harrington (DSOC/DSA); community organizing sparked by ACORN's 1970 founding; and the citizen action/public interest movement with Ralph Nader as its figurehead. What they shared was the conviction that organizing against class inequality could unify and mobilize people across race and gender lines. Within that context, an engagement with Marxism flourished in many circles.¹

Content and intent

The course structure thus mandated an early introduction to "the basic tools of Marxist analysis needed to deal coherently with later portions of the course" (24). Readings such as Ernest Mandel's *Introduction to Marxist Economic Theory*, Magdoff on imperialism, and the Poulantzas-Miliband debate on the nature of the capitalist state, along with Marx's own writings were assigned (TSA, Spring 1976). If some found this section "the most enlightening," others saw it as not just "challenging" but "unyielding, . . . the least satisfying part of the course" (Arnesen et al.) The continued commitment to including this demanding literature, in the face of resistance, reflects the centrality of Marxist thought to this project and the combination of scholarly rigor and political engagement that it espoused.

The Marxist and socialist commitments of the original TSA project are precisely articulated in "A Word About the Course," the statement that prefaces the group tutorial reading list of Spring 1976: "We are presuming some background in Marxist and/or other socialist thought." This meant not only background familiarity but political commitment: while "not only a course *for* socialists [italics mine], but the statement also read, "it accepts as a given an affirmative answer to the question, 'Do we need socialism in America?' and uses this as a point of departure" for a course "prepared from a democratic socialist perspective" while including "material from the whole spectrum of the Left."

Perhaps most importantly, the "Word About the Course" defined the tutorial itself as an organizing project. "I wanted and we wanted to make it about the activism, about how we get there," Polsky recalled. "This course has been prepared for those who have an interest in combining their academic life with progressive political organizing... It is our hope that the seminar will lead to some sort of socialist organizing/intellectual group at Wesleyan." This goal, to reach beyond the small group comprising the tutorial to the broader campus, led to the creation of TSA as a larger course the following year (F76), an initiative enabled by and resting on the commitment made by the tutorial group members to serve as TAs that following semester.

The Fall 76 "Word About the Course" removed the tutorial introduction's explicit affirmation of socialism, characterizing the course more ambiguously as a consideration of "radical criticisms of modern America, various strategies for change, and some visions of alternative ways of organizing our social life." Despite this "somewhat looser approach," Arnesen et. al, observe, the course has "at all times . . . taken an anti-capitalist stance" (Arnesen et. al., 22).

Process – the politics of pedagogy and the replicable model

The Fall 76 version of TSA, which opened it to the wider campus and enrolled some 70 students, introduced a second agenda of "close attention" to "the process of study." Thus, "we will encourage cooperative learning, combining academic theory and social practice, and developing democracy within the class." That is, they proposed to center a politics of pedagogy alongside the explicit critique of capitalism. The authors describe a classroom dynamic based on a "non-hierarchical structure and shared responsibilities, in which rotating facilitators took responsibility for stimulating and moderating discussion. In its challenge to hierarchy and affirmation of self-governance, the classroom becomes a political space, a pre-figurative institution of a kind."

In pursuing this goal, the creators of TSA had devised what surely must be a cardinal achievement, their eminently practical creation of a replicable model for continuing the TSA project. Key to this was the fact that its version of a student-centered course went beyond classroom dynamics to give the future TAs, in consultation with class members, the central role in planning curriculum and choosing readings for the following year's offering. Each successive iteration of the course thereby produced the next year's TAs and the next year's syllabus, a practice that ensured its continuity over many years. One cannot sufficiently emphasize the difficulty of maintaining such a project in an undergraduate environment with the constant turnover of its population. When Arnesen, Ebb, Rome, and Ward wrote in 1978, TSA had been offered as a course over six semesters, already a significant success. Yet TSA as a course conducted by students, with the support of a faculty sponsor, and especially with Ohmann's support, continued, on a yearly basis, for more than two decades. The enactment of student empowerment had led to the very practical outcome of long-term survival.

Outcomes

To reiterate, longevity was in and of itself significant. What did it mean to have a course titled "Towards a Socialist America" in the curriculum at a time when that concept had largely disappeared from popular and scholarly discourse, even though it was arguably the case that its socialist content contracted over the years, in accord with the changing spirit of the time?

Second, it arguably contributed to a major resurgence of activism on campus. Following their high school antiwar

activism, both Kilbourn and Polsky had been disappointed by the quiescence of the campus. If Polsky's initial response was to create the *Activist Call*, a simple listing of upcoming meetings, events, and initiatives, TSA, with its explicit goal of organizing, was a bolder step forward. Arnesen et.al. clearly understood that TSA would be judged by the levels and forms of activism it stimulated:

We would be presuming too much to think that the course has been solely responsible for the recent resurgence of political activism at Wesleyan. But we would certainly be justified in linking in some way the evolution of the course and the growth of the Socialist Organizing Committee, the Nuclear Resistance Group, the South Africa Action Group, the Workplace Committee. . . . We believe that the course has offered structural, analytical, and personal cohesiveness to activism here. It has given the conception and direction of activism a unity that it formerly lacked (25).

Yet it should be noted that feminist activism, such as the Women's Center and the efforts to create a Women's Studies program, are absent from this listing, as are groups like Ujamma, Wesleyan's principal Black student organization. This narrow perspective was similarly reflected in the paucity of women (one of eight total participants) in the Spring '76 tutorial, and in the content of its syllabus, which contained not a single reading on either gender or race. The fall version that followed showed only the most minimal progress, combining (or confining) assignments on race and gender to a single day. Confronted with this some forty years later, Polsky acknowledged its solipsism. It was, he quipped, "basically white male socialism. Nobody was thinking outside the socialist, the male socialist box." But "that would [have] come later," he presumed.

Consistent with Polsky's retrospective speculation, Arnesen et.al. reported that half the TAs were women by Fall 1978, in distinct contrast to the seven men/one woman composition of Fall 1976. Moreover, the "several meetings deal[ing] with personal and institutional racism and sexism, relating those forms of inequality to class and to the productive system . . . have consistently been among the most exciting of the semester." By 1983-84, the University catalog showed TSA listed in both American Studies and the nascent Women's Studies Program, another student-initiated project in which Ohmann played a significant role.

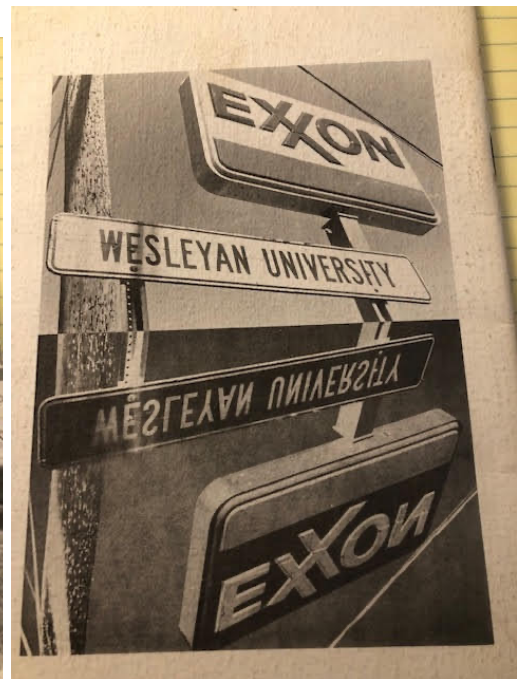
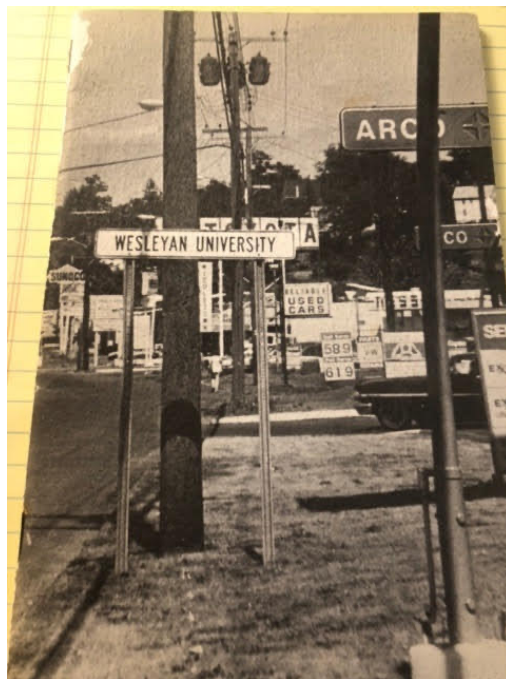
Initiated by a student, enthusiastically supported by a faculty member, TSA produced a synergistic relationship among its participants. Ohmann himself identified three outcomes as especially significant: the *Wesleyan University* booklet; "Bread and Circuses," the course he developed coming out of TSA; and the journal *Politics & Education* established by recent alums.

In addition to course reading, the original tutorial established the precedent of doing some sort of political work or project. *Wesleyan University*, a thirty-page booklet based on student research, was a product of this expectation. Building on the tutorial's Marxist analysis in locating Wesleyan within the dynamics of a capitalist system while drawing on Ohmann's insider knowledge of academic life, it characterized the university as the product of and participant in a capitalist economic and political order. Two factors emerged in this analysis: dependence on investments and class reproduction.

Stock market complicity:

The university's dependence on endowment income for a third of operating expenses formed the basis for its reliance on stock market investments, an engagement pictorially communicated by the front and back covers of the booklet.

The



WESLEYAN UNIVERSITY PAMPHLET FRONT AND BACK COVERS. 1975

front cover locates Wesleyan in a tawdry landscape of gas stations and used-car lots, suggesting an institution up for sale, and not to the highest bidder. The back cover explicitly linked Wesleyan with Exxon, conveying the University's complicity, via stock ownership, with authoritarian and racist regimes – e.g., South Africa – and with energy companies implicated in the 70s energy crisis. Today's student demands for fossil fuel divestment by their universities clearly echo divestment campaigns of the 70s and 80s.

Class reproduction

Wesleyan is located in a capitalist economy, not only through its stock market engagement but also by the way “the context of the university experience reproduces the values and relationships of American society,” for “Learning at Wesleyan is usually an individualistic and competitive endeavor” (17). Building on students’ disproportionately privileged backgrounds, the booklet argues, Wesleyan outfits them to fill positions – “doctors, lawyers, professors, business executives [that] have a considerable measure of autonomy” within a capitalist system. Yet the University’s “liberal arts rhetoric” serves to obscure such economic relationships. Challenging the view of the University as a kind of free space, the authors instead characterize it as a place where “power and economic relationships are obscured by liberal arts rhetoric” and ask students to confront the implications of their own class position. Through its emphasis on these larger engagements, the students developed a sophisticated analysis which resisted simple characterizations of heroes and villains; rather, they argue, “societal forces indirectly shape the content/values of learning more clearly than the willful acts of trustees, administrators, or professors ever could” (14).

“Bread and Circuses”

Ohmann pointed to the creation of the course he himself devised, “Bread and Circuses,” first taught in 1978-79, as the second important outcome of TSA. Keep in mind that TSA itself happened at a very particular moment. *Radical Teacher* was co-founded, in 1975, by Ohmann and his comrades in the MLA Radical Caucus, while 1976 marked the publication of *English in America: A Radical View of the Profession*, so one might say the creation of a course like Bread and Circuses was on the agenda, regardless of a TSA connection.

Given this, it’s striking that Ohmann explicitly identified it as “an idea that came from the TSA TAs. And that was . . . an exciting development for me, because Bread & Circuses had enormous appeal. . . there were 225 students” and “the TAs were all people who’d had Towards a Socialist America.” “The foundation of Bread & Circuses,” he concluded, “is something that would not have happened without TSA.” Bread & Circuses was not just an innovative contribution to the Wesleyan curriculum but an important advance in Ohmann’s engagement with the field of cultural studies, an engagement culminating in his 1996 book *Selling Culture: Magazines, Markets, and Class at the Turn of the Century*, “a study of the origins of consumer society, the culture industry that helped create it, and the making of a professional-managerial class that comprised both its creators and its clientele.

Politics & Education

Described by Ohmann as “an excellent magazine” throughout its six issues, this TSA outgrowth was the creation of a group of recent graduates who saw higher education under attack and sought to highlight it as a political issue. Thus, the first issue analyzed the Bakke case,

recounted sexual harassment at Yale, and discussed the Brazilian student movement, while the following issue looked at job concerns for the college educated, highlighted the South African divestment movement, and featured an interview with Ralph Nader on democratizing the university. But while expressing their concerns about fiscal retrenchment, threats to affirmative action, racism on campuses, and the push toward vocationalism, the editors were hopeful about what they saw as an increase in campus activism. At the same time, they observed with concern, “these efforts have been made in seeming isolation, without the knowledge of or support from others with similar goals at other institutions.” Their goal, therefore, was to establish a “common channel of communication” and to “provide concrete proposals for change.” Like its TSA forerunner, the goal of *Politics & Education’s* “was to organize.” Written for “those who want to do more than read about change,” it was “an activist periodical contributing to building a college-based progressive movement,” a larger goal which *P & E* would not be able to realize. (“About *Politics & Education*,” *Politics & Education*, Volume 1, Number One).

Politics & Education was a group project, based in Middletown; most recent Wesleyan graduates would, of course, strike out as individuals. TSA had sought to address the challenge of how graduates could live lives consistent with their “political beliefs and values” in “any job they became involved in” (Arnesen et al., 25). Community organizing, jump-started by ACORN’s 1970 founding, was reported as an option taken up by some recent TSA grads, at least for a time. Groups such as ACORN, MASS Fair Share, Carolina Action, and Citizens Action League, which actively recruited and trained recent college graduates, were a logical next step for those who abjured Marxist-Leninist sectarian groups but sought opportunities to challenge class inequality through on-the-ground organizing and collective empowerment and led in some cases to jobs with unions and non-profit organizations. Free-lance journalism and cultural work were reported as options pursued by some TSA grads, while Polsky, speaking from a much later vantage point, comments on the number who became academics.

It is, of course, impossible to learn the long-term impact of TSA involvement on the lives of the many who took the course, and especially for those most committed ones who served as TAs. What is clear is that the redistributive initiatives of the seventies, of which TSA was a part, stood at the cusp of an oncoming neoliberal regime that would dominate subsequent decades, structuring life choices, experiences, and political opportunities in ways that could not have been anticipated.

Notes

1. TSA may then be seen as concurrent with the 1975 founding of *Radical Teacher* and the 1976 publication of Ohmann’s *English in America: A Radical View of the Profession*.
2. *Radical Teacher’s* own introductory editorial exemplifies this socialist moment, as it positions *Radical Teacher* “as a means for maintaining communication among socialist

teachers." Acknowledging the importance of "third-world and feminist criticism and ethnic and minority studies, including women's studies, gay studies, black studies, and third-world studies," it arguably foregrounds class, as when it asks, "how reading and discussing a text with a particular group of people promotes or hinders the development of a working-class movement" and "can the teaching of literature be socialist organizing and consciousness raising?" *Radical Teacher*, No. 1 (December 1975) 36.

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Mary Ann Clawson taught sociology at Wesleyan University from 1980 to 2018, with courses on social movements, popular culture, and sociology of gender and family. Her longterm scholarly interest in the construction of masculinity ranged from studies of nineteenth-century fraternalism to the gender dynamics of rock bands. She's also written on the contemporary United States labor movement.



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