

# RADICAL TEACHER

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

## Historical Reflections on Accountability

by Richard Ohmann



Imagine that almost all academics think of ourselves as *responsible* to others, and, if pressed, might allow substitution of "accountable." Responsibility to our employers is contractual, and the professional ethos urges responsibility to students (our clients), to colleagues, and to vague but strong principles of intellectual conduct that obtain in our disciplines. The professional idea calls for responsibility to society as well: we earn our privileges not just by guarding and augmenting our special bodies of knowledge, but by undertaking to put those knowledges to work for the good of all.

"For the good of all" opens up a vast ideological space for disputes that are familiar enough, and a space for the anti-professional cynicism that, as Stanley Fish has argued, festers endemically within professional groups, not just among the envious laity. Still, even cynics tend to think *they* serve the needs of important others; and except in times of deep conflict (such as the years around 1970), professionals with different allegiances live more or less comfortably together, under the capacious roof of that "all."

To speak of professors: most believe that open inquiry and free debate do in fact advance the interests of a democratic society. For liberals, that may be enough. Conservatives tend to identify the good of all with the good of the sovereign individual. People of the left inflect it toward the good of those lacking wealth and power. At this level of abstraction, accountability is not especially controversial, nor exacting. Certainly it was not so for this person of the left. Accountability to my students: plan the course, show up in class, keep it moving, comment thoughtfully on papers, mentor when asked, submit grades, write recommendations – the usual packet of services. To my departmental colleagues: take on my share of core courses and administrative duties. To the administration and trustees: just don't make scenes, I guess; the thought rarely crossed my mind. To society as a whole: I cheerfully held myself account able to the wretched of the earth, the workers, the women, the racially cheated and despised, the queers, the reds, all the disempowered. And aside from the enmity of a very few colleagues and students, this noble commitment was virtually risk-free at Wesleyan University, as were the commitments of faculty conservatives and liberals. I know that accountability imposes itself more obstinately in the working lives of teachers at less privileged institutions, and teachers without tenure at all institutions. Still, when faculty members have been able to define our own obligations to society, we have charted a high road – the good of all – that practitioners can travel easily together in spite of different values and allegiances, and without much fuss about ways in which our specific work meets those obligations, or doesn't.

This mild regime of self-policing has been under pressure for some time. It articulated well enough with such concepts as responsibility and obligation. But accountability, the more salient concept in recent decades, is different, and in major ways. First, as its root suggests, accountability means keeping score. Not sufficient, in the new regime, to invoke free inquiry, critical thinking,

socially beneficial knowledge, and other such ideals, however wide their appeal to the public. Accountability entails being able to show that the efforts of an instructor or department or institution actually did move toward the desired end. That in turn requires framing the goal precisely enough to permit agreement on the state of affairs that would constitute its fulfillment, and on the amount of progress made in its direction at any point. Measurement, in short. And while the measure of success may be crude (e.g., Wesleyan set its sights for a while on reaching at least a certain spot in the *U. S. News and World Report* rankings), it must be quantifiable. Academic resistance to accountability owes in part just to that fact: how can the complex things we most highly value be reduced to numbers?, we ask.

### ***Accountability is not to the disempowered but to the powerful.***

Quantification of aims and accomplishments may seem less rebarbative to scientists than to humanists. All in the arts and sciences, however, are likely to be put off by the ideas and language of business that have trailed along with accountability in its migration into the university. A 1994 book on *Measuring Institutional Performance in Higher Education* (edited by Joel W. Meyerson and William F. Massy; Peterson's: Princeton, NJ,) works in a semantic medium of "client feedback," "stake holders," "make or buy options," "output" (of departments), "use synergy," and the like, and carefully recommends to educators common business practices such as TQM (total quality management), BPR (business practice reengineering,) and benchmarking (comparing your performance by quantifiable measures to "best practices" at other institutions). A brochure for administrators from Johnson Controls offers "open system architecture," "system integration," "cost control," "project management," and "performance guarantees." Speakers at an October, 1999 conference on "Market-Driven Higher Education" sponsored by *University Business*<sup>1</sup> used a lexicon of "markets" (e.g., students), "product," "brand" (your university's name and aura), "value added" (including, I guess, to students as labor power), "marginal cost," "deals," and "resource base" (the faculty, chiefly). They taught why to want and how to get "customization," "knowledge management," "just-in-time learning," "strategic partners," "faculty management," good "assessment models" (though some said no good ones exist), "policy convergence" (I took this to mean something like consistency, and the left hand's awareness of what the right hand is doing), and – my favorite – the "Hollywood model" (i.e., the sort of contract put together by agents, actors, producers, and so on, in contrast to the antiquated and feckless arrangements we now have in higher education for owning and selling knowledge).

Administrators are becoming fluent in this language. It feels alien to many faculty members, and not centrally because of academic distaste for business. Some are hostile to business, some not; but I think all can see that the discourse of books on accountability and of the *University Business* conference is one for managers, not

the managed. And while it is no secret that universities have ever expanding administrations, many faculty members cherish the hope that their administrators are managing on behalf of us and the students, taking care of the business side so we can teach and students can learn. But accountability for administrators means managing us and our work, not just physical plant and endowment. The literature on the subject may urge them to enlist faculty members in the setting of goals and devising of measurements, but we are not within earshot of these prescriptions, not part of the intended audience. In short, when politicians or business men or trustees or university presidents call for accountability in higher education, they are asking administrators to plan, oversee, and assess our labor.

Well, isn't that what managers do? Exactly so, and the accountability movement would be of little interest except that it brings managerial logic into the area of self-management to which all professions aspire, and which the stronger ones were able to stake out in an uneven and conflicted historical process beginning more than a hundred years ago. Accountability, when achieved, turns back that process. Its advocates stigmatize the foot-dragging of professors as whiny and selfish (which it may sometimes be), but more pertinently as retrograde. And that it always is – in just the way that Luddite resistance was retrograde in its time and the resistance of doctors is retrograde now. These were and are defenses against new relations of production, imposed from without, to reduce or eliminate the control that groups of workers have exercised over their labor.

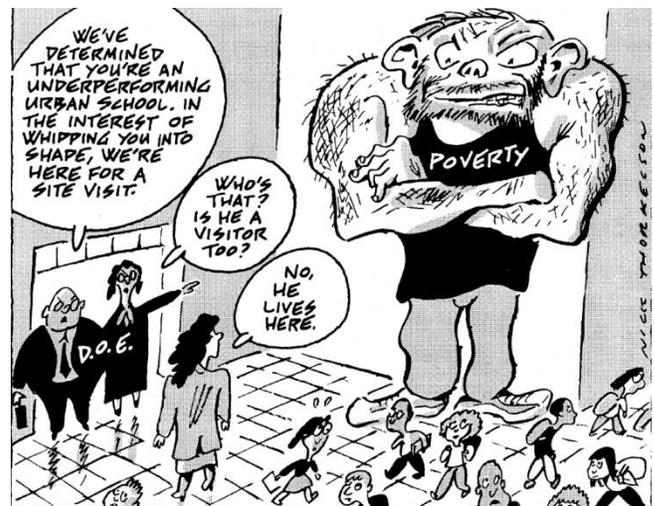
***High stakes testing schemes will make for more surgical channeling into the job market and the class system—and under the banner of accountability.***

That brings me to the last major way in which accountability differs from obligation or responsibility. In the utopian regime of my employment at Wesleyan, or at least in my fantasies about it, I could hold myself responsible to the disempowered, and identify my work with democracy and equality (just as my colleague on the right could identify his with individual freedom). After all, most people here and abroad are disempowered. When Lynne Cheney or William Bennett occasionally took hostile notice of my work, that only proved I was doing something right. I and my comrades were on the side of the general public; Cheney and Bennett spoke for an usurping coterie. We wanted to try democracy, for the first time in history; the Right wanted to maintain the rule of the few and call that democracy.

But of course there was an obvious problem with this comfortable position: the wretched of the earth do not organize militantly to support academic progressives, or the politics latent in much of our scholarship and pedagogy since the 1960s. Business and the right organize effectively against the academic left. Many of the general public see

the world more as Cheney and Bennett do than as we do. That's ideology. That's hegemony. Accountability, in short, is not to the disempowered but to the powerful. There would be no agonizing among professors on this subject, except that boards of regents and trustees, legislative bodies, conservative foundations and interest groups, corporations, and so on want to make teachers and knowledge workers in general more responsive to their purposes, and have power enough to advance that project.

Thirty-five or fifty or eighty years ago, they not only lacked such power, but had not even hit on the project. Why not? Why now? In answer, I will put two skeletal narratives to work. The first can be seen as more or less internal to education. In it, the years 1945-1970 brought rapid expansion of the university system. Prosperity and a growing cohort of young people were in part responsible. In addition, the U.S. economy grew fastest in industries such as communications and petrochemicals that required both highly trained knowledge workers and an enlarged research apparatus. Meanwhile, Cold War leaders mobilized the university to do combat against the Soviet Union and its allies, funding science and technology, weapons research, artificial intelligence, basic computer development, area studies, economics, and parts of other fields thought critical to the dominance of capitalism and Western democracy. These new tasks required no dramatic change in the university's procedures or its structure of relatively autonomous departments and research units, though the change in scale brought talk of, and worry about, the "megaversity." The academic professions flourished through this period, buoyed by proliferation of graduate programs, full employment for new entrants, and public demand for higher education.



CARTOON BY NICK THORKELSON

Around 1970 the party tired. Public funding became less certain. Graduate programs in many fields were turning out more Ph.D.s than there were jobs: in English and foreign languages the crisis was evident at the 1969 MLA convention, where a caucus of angry job seekers abruptly formed, to the surprise both of the leadership and of dissidents who had come to protest other things. Those other causes also disrupted the postwar complacency of the university and its constituent profession: civil rights, black power, women's liberation, and antiwar militancy came in from the streets along with open admissions and new student populations. A student power movement germinated within the now-alienating and "irrelevant" megaversity itself. This is a familiar part of the story, abbreviated here in cliché phrases to arrive at the following suggestion: that in the late sixties, dissenters within the university both put themselves in opposition to systems of domination outside it and staged a critique of its relations to those systems ("Who Rules Columbia?," etc.), The professions came under assault by many young aspirants and some established members. Secure old knowledges were challenged, new canons proposed. The curriculum, in the broadest sense, changed.

Conservatives, readying to launch their offensive against the liberal welfare state and alarmed at what seemed the rule of liberals and worse in universities, took countermeasures. Some of the new right-wing foundations zeroed in on education and intellectual life, building and circulating ideology and attacking the versions of democracy that had grown out of sixties movements. Their work on one front led in time to the culture wars of the 1990s and the attack on "political correctness" and multiculturalism. On another, it produced schemes of privatization. On a third, mainstream conservatives and neoliberals mounted a critique of U.S. education in general (including especially K-12) through commissions and reports that proclaimed our "nation at risk" because of inferior schooling, and called for "excellence." These official reports harmonized with media events like the "literacy crisis" of the mid-1970s and movements such as "back to basics" a bit later. Schooling became and remains as reliable a public concern – a media concern – as welfare or the

British Royals. Candidates run for high office on school reform platforms, and both Bush and Clinton have aspired to be "education Presidents." It was in this context



COLLAGE BY LIZ POWELL

that calls for accountability became ubiquitous. Framed by this narrative, they can be grasped as part of a complex reaction against social

movements of the sixties and seventies, and as sallies in culture wars that are often explicitly political.

The other narrative is economic, and embraces far more than the university and the educational system. It too begins with the postwar boom, seen as the cresting both of corporate, Fordist capitalism in the U.S. and of our dominance in the world economic order. Around 1970, those arrangements began to unravel. The dollar faded against stronger currencies. The U.S. balance of trade turned negative, and has remained so. Unemployment began a steady rise from its 1969 level of less than four percent, a level it never again approached until the current boom. Real wages, up substantially since 1945, stalled for a few years after 1970 and then went into a decline from which they have not recovered. The economy stagnated. Both federal and personal debt headed up sharply from the late 1970s on, with corporate debt following a few years later. The economy stagnated. Growth in productivity slowed to a trickle. The world became a far less secure place for American capital's project of development in this time of globalization.

Capital responded with strategies, familiar enough by now, that are perhaps creating a new economic order: the rapid movement of capital around the globe; a proliferation of new products and services; elaboration of financial instruments to the point that almost no one can understand the international system of money, investment, and speculation; corporate restructuring and waves of mergers; dismantling of the old core labor force with its high wages, security, and benefits; downsizing, temp labor, part time labor, outsourcing, subcontracting, and so on. This system, still in formation, has been variously named: globalization, turbo-capitalism, the "regime of flexible accumulation,"<sup>2</sup> the knowledge society. That last term predates the others, but may be critical for grasping the place of higher education in the new order. For if knowledge is now not only an accomplice in the making of other goods, but itself the most dynamic area of production, we could expect intense efforts on the part of business to guide its development, control its uses, and profit from its creation and sale. That has implications for universities and faculty members to which I will return.

First, however, I want to suggest a way of locating accountability in these two narratives. For both of them, the years right around 1970 are pivotal. And it was precisely then that accountability exploded into the language and politics of debate about education. In June, 1970, "accountability" first showed up in the *Education Index*, with reference to teaching. The Library of Congress introduced "educational accountability" as a subject heading two years later (thanks to Cynthia L. Spell of the Reference Department at the University of Massachusetts library for finding this out.). To be sure, the word was in use much earlier, and its first OED citation is from 1794. But for nearly two hundred years "accountability" carried a broad meaning: the state of being liable, responsible, held to account for one's actions; and it had no special link to education. A keyword search at the library I use (University of Massachusetts, Amherst) turned up 585 book titles, only six of them predating 1970, and none of those six about education. In 1970 appeared professor of education Leon

M. Lessinger's *Every Kid a Winner: Accountability in Education* (Palo Alto: Science Research Associates), soon to be characterized as the "bible of accountability." In the next five years, dozens of books were published with titles such as *Accountability and Reading Instruction*, *Accountability and the Community College*, *Accountability for Educational Results*, *Accountability for Teachers and School Administrators*, *Accountability in a Federal Education Program*, *Accountability in American Education*, *Accountability in Education*, *Accountability in the Elementary School Curriculum*, *Accountability, Program Budgeting*, and *the California Educational Information System*, and *Accountability: Systems Planning in Education* – to mention only those with "accountability" as the first word. Accountability had suddenly become an established idea joined at the hip to education, a recognized field of study, a movement, and a battleground.<sup>3</sup>

By no means did Lessinger's book inaugurate the movement. A 1972 anthology of articles and talks on the subject includes a number from 1969, and suggests that accountability, "one of the most rapidly growing and wide spread movements in education today," began "as a flickering spark in the twilight of the 60s. . ." (Frank J. Sciara and Richard K. Jantz, ed., *Accountability in American Education* [Boston: Allyn and Bacon], 1 and 3). Writers seeking origins tend to mention the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, later amendments that required program audits, the beginning of the National Assessment Program in 1969, a 1970 speech by President Nixon, and so on. Sciara and Jantz thought the origins of the movement hard to isolate, and I agree. The interesting thing is that abruptly in 1970 it was a movement, felt as historically momentous, powerful, and, depending on one's point of view, either tonic or dangerous.

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Beyond specific Acts, speeches, and books, or vague and timeless agents such as "the federal government," "concerned taxpayers," and "alarmed administrators," it is clear that three main forces drove the movement. One was an intense fiscal crisis of the state, brought on in part by war spending, but expressed chiefly as disillusionment with Great Society programs. In a speech of 1970, Terrel H. Bell (then a Deputy Commissioner in the Office of Education, later Reagan's Secretary of Education) noted that his department's budget had increased from \$500 million to \$4 billion a year through the sixties, and that Congress had poured "literally billions of dollars" into the schools, often into "crash programs" for which the schools were "comically unprepared." Money alone would not buy good education (does this sound familiar?). Washington now wanted "results," wanted "to be sure that every dollar

invested in an educational program will produce a payoff. . . that can be measured and that can be proved" ("The New Look of Federal Aid to Education," in Sciara and Jantz, 41-47). Nixon's man did not specify which "expensive will-o-the-wisps" Washington had now rejected, but it is evident from the early literature that accountability was in part a counterthrust against liberatory ideas and experiments in "open education": i.e., against the critique of schooling mounted by sixties visionaries and radicals. That reaction was the second force. The third – more specific to higher education – was a reaction against "turmoil and disruption on the campuses" and "political action by students and faculty members," which had produced a "mounting distrust of higher education by the public" and an "increasing demand for colleges and universities to justify what they are doing and to disclose the effectiveness and efficiency of their operations" (T. R. McConnell, "Accountability and Autonomy," in Sciara and Jantz, 200). In short, it is no coincidence (as marxists like to say) that accountability emerged and gained strength as a coherent movement exactly when the postwar U.S. economy was tearing at the seams, and when the right began to organize itself against sixties movements and build what Ira Shor has called the "conservative restoration."

Origins do not set meanings permanently in place. Accountability has been and is a contested field of meaning and a terrain of conflict. But I believe the historical conjunction that birthed it continues to inflect and propel it. To put the case (somewhat too) bluntly: accountability is most deeply about the right's project of containing sixties movements and about capital's project of recomposing itself internationally, marketizing whatever areas of life had previously eluded that process, and dominating workers of all sorts in ways more pervasive but less confrontational than those that marked Fordism. At this point, several hundred pages might ensue, arguing that the hypothesis organizes a variety of seemingly discrete events and situations into its tidy gestalt. I cannot supply those pages here (and hope I will not be the one to write them anywhere). But in shorthand, here is the sort of thing I have in mind.

1. The 30-year job "crisis" for Ph.D.s, the campaigns against tenure and for post-tenure review, the heavy reliance on part-timers and adjuncts, the outsourcing and subcontracting of many academic and support tasks – these events and practices respond of course to local pressures on administrators and trustees, and (one must admit) to self-destructive inertia among the leadership of academic disciplines. But beyond that, one can see in the casualization of academic labor the same process of dispersal and degradation that capital initiated against the core workforce in almost every industry around 1970. The regime of flexible accumulation brings accountability to us in this guise, whatever the designs or motives of its local agents.

2. These labor practices nest within a far more encompassing set of tendencies. The list could be long, but just let me mention distance learning, burgeoning adult education, the buying and selling of courseware, the intensive marketing of academic research, "partnering" between corporations and universities for that purpose, the

effort of administrations (and legislators) to assess and compare programs by bottom-line accounting, the rapid growth of for-profit universities (such as the University of Phoenix) selling job-related training and credits, the proliferation of learning companies (to the great interest of Wall Street), and the existence today of 1800 "corporate universities" (GE started the first in 1955). All of these, clearly, support the widespread observation that the university has become more and more like a business – an idea voiced not only by academic critics of the change such as Bill Readings, Lawrence Soley, Cary Nelson, and David Noble, but by advocates, including many speakers at the University Business conference and writers for *Business Week* (see for instance "The New U; A Tough Market is Reshaping Colleges," Dec. 22, 1997, 96-102). My second narrative, above, suggests a more encompassing generalization: that capitalism in its new phase extends the logic of the market to encompass areas of production not previously within its scope, and, in particular, seeks to commodify knowledge wherever possible.

3. Which brings me to a nice "clipping" in *University Business* of January/ February 1999: "In 1955, not a single health care company appeared on the list of the top 50 U.S. Corporations as measured by market capitalization. Today, seven of America's richest companies are in the health care industry. Where the health care market was 40 years ago, the education-and-training market is right now."<sup>4</sup> What I want to comment on here is how the reorganization and extension of capital's work challenges the professions. Our self-managed intellectual capital (our specific bodies of knowledge), along with our creed of public service, legitimized our partial autonomy for a hundred years. The commodification of knowledge and the marketization of professional services are in direct conflict with that autonomy. If medicine, with all its prestige and power, has given up big chunks of its domain, why expect professors to do better in the new regime? In fact, most professions (worldwide) are losing ground. (See Elliott A. Krause, *Death of the Guilds; Professions, States, and the Advance of Capitalism, 1930 to the Present*, [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996.]) Accountability, viewed on the broad canvas painted here, is not just an extra demand on professions. It erodes their historical conditions of possibility.

4. Primary and secondary education are caught up in the same economic transformation. Channel One, advertising in school corridors, contracts with Coke and Nike are but symptoms: the sale of children's attention to corporations, in an effort to ameliorate the fiscal crisis of the state. Marketization works more deeply through the project of companies (like Edison) that seek profit by contracting with school districts to manage learning. Voucher systems, if they gain ground against hot opposition, will be a further step. Whether or not the charter school movement tends in the same direction remains to be seen, but in any case, it is one sign of a tectonic shift in the way public schooling sorts children out – i.e., reproduces the economic and social system, by guaranteeing that there will in the next generation be much the same distribution of wealth and power as in this,

and that inequality will be widely seen as just (i.e., based on merit), or at least inevitable.

Let me mention another sign, perhaps less noted as yet: high stakes testing. More than half the states now have or are developing standard curricula linked to tests that will decide which students can graduate. In Massachusetts (where I serve on a local school board), the first trial run of the tests, in 1998, placed 39 percent of tenth graders in the bottom category, "failing," and a total of 72 per cent in the bottom two, out of four, prompting the thought that in the Commonwealth, unlike Lake Wobegon, three-quarters of our children are below average. Predictably, students in vocational schools, special education, and inner city schools where English is for many a second language, failed in droves. The professed aim of Educational Reform in the Bay State is to guarantee all students a good education, but unless something bends, it will instead guarantee a much higher dropout rate five years from now. Why block the different paths toward a diploma that have been open to various kinds of students, and push them all along this single track? Without guessing at "real" motives, I think it clear that high stakes testing schemes will make for more surgical channeling into the job market and the class system -- and under the banner of accountability, needless to say. The official ideology of public education now is that of the market. When George Bush sent Congress his Educational Excellence Act of 1989 he cited exactly four benefits of "educational achievement": it "promotes sustained economic growth, enhances the Nation's competitive position in world markets, increases productivity, and leads to higher incomes for everyone."

5. Finally, the Culture Wars. The attack on multiculturalism and political correctness this past decade explicitly took on 1960s movements, seen as having all but won the battle for higher education. Furthermore, the germination of this strategy in centers of conservative thought and policy, from the 1970s on, is well documented. So there is no need to flog the obvious point that it carries forward the political project embedded in the accountability movement right at the outset. What I want to suggest, also, is that between the lines of their crusade for traditional values and great books and free speech, the culture warriors have provided a rationale for defunding the public university and putting it in the custody of market forces. This is a large hypothesis deserving careful analysis that I cannot offer. Let it stand as a gesture toward the unity of understanding one might achieve by historicizing accountability in the way proposed here.

To be sure, unity of understanding deriving from big historical narratives can shade into paranoia. Buyer (and

seller!) beware. On the other hand, I think that courses of action pursued without such understanding are likely to be scattered, contradictory, and at worst self-defeating. So the effort seems worth the risk, and I offer these large, pear shaped thoughts to those enmeshed in a thousand local skirmishes over accountability.

#### NOTES

- 1 A magazine from the publisher of *Lingua Franca*, sent free to 34,000 college and university administrators – itself a sign and a facilitator of marketization and accountability.
- 2 David Harvey's phrase, in *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989); his analysis has strongly influenced my own.
- 3 In 1971, for instance, the Educational Testing Service sponsored a "Conference on Educational Accountability," and Ralph Nader organized one on "Corporate Accountability." That phrase continued to sound in liberal and left circles, but the official discourse of accountability was irreversibly about schooling, not about holding the powerful to account.
- 4 The quotation is attributed to Jack Gordon, in *Training*, November, 1998. It continues: "And that market is about to explode in the same way, except that the time frame will be collapsed. What took 40 years in health care will take only 10 in education."

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