

RADICAL TEACHER

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Losing While Winning

by Richard Ohmann



PROTESTS IN PARIS DURING MAY '68.

In 1968 I was angry: about the Vietnam war and racial oppression, about the complicity of universities, about the rigidity of their curricula, the conservativeness of literary studies, and—in some vague relationship to this web of outrages—the stodginess of the Modern Language Association. So ends the part of this talk given to personal reflection.

I recall those feelings to suggest how far short they fell of systemic critique and proportionate strategy. Some of my fellow rebels at the 1968 convention had clearer minds. But we had no common plan for reinventing the study of language and literature.

Paul Lauter mentioned some progressive changes we nonetheless helped achieve—our unexpected successes. I will comment on two non-successes, starting with some numbers.

The first: MLA veterans from back then remember how the thriving job market of the 50s and 60s abruptly wilted at the 1969 convention, where a job seekers' caucus sprang up, decrying its vistas of underemployment while we decried, among other things, the privileged professoriate.

What in 1969 seemed a job market crisis (and is still often so called) soon began to look more like a permanent collapse. No one in this room needs reminding that tenure track jobs became especially scarce, while adjunct positions proliferated. One illustrative number: last year, MLA listed 320 tenure-track assistant professorships in English. I conjecture that there were about four times as many new Ph.D.s in the field as there were tenure track jobs. Presumably most of the new crop had hoped for old fashioned, starter jobs in lit or comp. Way over half will settle for precarity, a change of field, or unemployment.

The number of tenure track jobs currently listed is down by more than 60% from just before the Great Recession. Some expected our job market to recover as the whole economy recovered. That didn't happen. There was an upward tick for a couple of years, then a further decline in tenure-track jobs—to the lowest figure since the 1960s. That's a trend, not a forecast, but who can find cause for optimism in it?

My second snapshot of MLA post-1968 begins with numbers that have received much less comment. In 1970, MLA membership was just over 31,000. The number peaked, oscillated, and fell. In 2016, it was slightly over 24,000. A drop of 23% may seem insignificant, but not if mapped onto the dimensions of American higher education as a whole. Over the same period of time, undergraduate enrollment grew by 150%. Proportionately, then, MLA membership had fallen by more than two-thirds. Does that factoid warrant the inference that people in the MLA fields now perform only one-third the share of all university teaching that they did 50 years ago? Yes, as a base for speculative thought, including this one: the content of college education has dramatically changed, and not in ways that portend a strong market for literary studies, the other humanities, or indeed, the whole arts and sciences curriculum.

I use the word "market" purposefully. Both the dwindling of MLA and the swelling of the contingent workforce, look to me like two waves of the same, marketizing tsunami that has surged through higher education. The surge has reinterpreted tenure track jobs as a wasteful affront to free market principles, given legislatures an ideological reason to cut funding for public universities, and pressured deans and provosts to devise cheaper, more insecure work arrangements. That degradation of the labor process went hand in hand with a shift in university labor's product, now understood as for students an investment in future earnings, and for society an investment in the growth of GDP. It is marketed as a commodity, with that use value.

On those terms, literary criticism, art history, anthropology, and so on cannot compete well with business, engineering, and information technology. As the curriculum has become more vocational, employees in MLA fields have become a smaller and smaller fraction of the university workforce.

Needless to say, the restructuring instanced by the expansion of contingent labor and the migration of students toward majors with high market payoffs amounts to one big non-success, the weakening of our profession. A strong profession controls the requirements for employment in its domain, and keeps the number of qualified practitioners roughly in synch with the number of such jobs.

Take a step back from this snapshot of our profession, and note that other professions—including robust ones like law and medicine—are passing through similar processes of etiolation. (See *Radical Teacher* # 99, "The Decline of the Professions," edited by Ellen Schrecker and me.)

Take another step back, bring the whole of global employment into the picture, and be reminded that the degradation of labor and the decline of worker self-organization have been deep trends in capitalism for almost fifty years—that is, for most of the time since World War II. Was our profession the laboratory for neoliberalism's war on labor? No, but academe is surely one of its battlefields.

That epochal shift from Fordism to neoliberalism did not happen by chance. It had protagonists: rich ones such as Joseph Coors, the Koch Brothers, and the Walton family, who began reshaping U. S. conservatism in the wake of Goldwater's challenge, through foundations and think tanks (Heritage, American Enterprise, Cato . . .), activist philanthropy, the southern strategy, Reagan's war on unions, the rise of the Tea Party—until a Republican Party that such old timers as David Rockefeller would barely recognize was on the verge of a unified regime. The election of 2016 may turn its history in surprising directions. But meanwhile it has claimed most of the social surplus for a tiny class of oligarchs, and set out to privatize just about everything.

This is a social order with little space in it for projects of racial and gender inclusion, economic equality, disinterested learning, ecological planning, public support of art, and so on—projects that won beachheads in MLA, the liberal arts, and university education in 1968 and after.

I offer one final simplification of this already gnostic talk: the incursion of 1968 was remarkably successful—not just in “stirring things up,” but in catalyzing a serious reorganization of literary and cultural studies, and helping change the content and the politics of higher education. That led conservatives of the Reagan era to target universities, especially the humanities and new disciplines such as black studies, gender studies, and queer studies. Remember the culture wars of William Bennett and Lynne

Cheney? By that time the conservative restoration was aligning its culture warriors with the neoliberal revolutionaries, the free market purists, the evangelicals, the Tea Party, the new populists, and more.

We won; their victory eclipsed ours. Big history swallowed up small history.

To challenge and alter its catastrophic course, we’ll need to look squarely at how we lost while winning, since 1968.



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