

# **RADICAL TEACHER**

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

## The Disciplines and the Left: The Radical Caucus Movement

by Ellen Schrecker

**RADICAL  
CAUCUS**  
OF  
THE MODERN LANGUAGE ASSOCIATION

In December 1968, when the Modern Language Association's annual business meeting chose the radical literary critic Louis Kampf as its second vice president and future president, it was breaking with the MLA's traditional elitism. But it was not an isolated incident. Kampf's election was part of a broader radical movement within the academic community that challenged the conventional knowledge, hierarchies, and pedagogy of the traditional disciplines, as well as the concept of "objective" scholarship that those disciplines clung to. Though the MLA's "Little Bourgeois Cultural Revolution," as Kampf and Paul Lauter called it, ultimately proved less earthshaking than its perpetrators had assumed at the time, the movement that produced it did have a significant impact on American higher education.

By the mid-1960s, as the civil rights movement and the intensifying Vietnam War induced more than a few American academics to shake off the political torpor of the McCarthy era, they began to organize a left-wing presence within the academic profession. One such venture was the Socialist Scholars Conference, an event that began in 1965 and grew so quickly that it attracted some 3000 academics to its 1967 conference at a New York City hotel. The New University Conference (NUC), a somewhat more activist-oriented attempt to bring academic radicals together, was founded in 1968 by graduate students, junior faculty members, and a few sympathetic elders who conceived of the organization as an adult branch of SDS that would operate "in, around, and in spite of" the university.

Most of the action, however, occurred within the individual disciplines, where younger radicals in almost every major field tried to mount some kind of insurgent movement. Although a few scientists and others had been trying for years to infuse their disciplines with critical scholarship and/or political activism, it was not until the late 1960s that a significant cohort of academic leftists actually implemented that agenda. Their efforts found a receptive audience. Within a few years, almost every learned society within the academic profession boasted its own radical caucus, usually started by graduate students and junior faculty members.

Though NUC activists often initiated these groups, their operations varied. Some were carefully structured, others more loosey goosey. In good New Left style, some organized themselves into "communes" or "collectives." A few of these bodies were rather evanescent, disappearing after they peaked in the late 1960s and early 1970s, while others are still around, usually because they had produced a successful journal. Sometimes these groups organized along regional lines. The sociologists, for example, set up both East and West Coast branches of the Union of Radical Sociologists, while the historians of the Middle Atlantic Radical History Organizations had "collectives" in New York, Boston, and Providence.

Like the members of the MLA's Radical Caucus, these left-wing activists focused their early efforts on their disciplines' annual meetings. They all submitted resolutions. While uniformly calling on their colleagues to oppose the war in Vietnam, many of the radical caucuses' proposals were also geared to their fields' specific issues. The

anthropologists, for example, sought to ban classified research. The literary scholars protested against the repression of Soviet, Latin American, and African American authors. In 1968 and 1969, a number of the radical groups succeeded in persuading the professional societies to pull future meetings out of Chicago to express their opposition to Mayor Daley's crackdown on anti-war demonstrators at the 1968 Democratic Convention. Not all of the radicals' resolutions succeeded. They usually encountered considerable opposition from the eminent professors who ran the learned societies. Along with the majority of society members, many of those established scholars did not want to take stands on such controversial issues as the war in Vietnam because it would, they claimed, "politicize" their fields.

The radical caucuses also sought to democratize their professional societies. Again, their demands varied and achieved mixed results. Among the kinds of reforms they pushed were contested elections for officers, the public posting of job openings, attention to women's issues, and the addition of radical panels at scholarly meetings. They also put up candidates for office and, as Louis Kampf's ascension to the MLA presidency revealed, sometimes won. A write-in campaign elected the venerable radical Alfred McClung Lee president of the American Sociological Association, while one of the candidates running on a radical slate for the American Political Science Association's executive committee in 1970 actually won a seat.

Much of the opposition these radicals encountered was due as much to their style as to the content of their demands. They were, after all, in or at least near the New Left and its confrontational mode of operations. Especially in their early days, the radical caucuses disrupted the annual meetings of their professional organizations. Their guerrilla tactics tended to antagonize their more conventional colleagues who may well have agreed with their criticisms of the war in Vietnam, but did not approve of the radicals' disrupting conference sessions and heckling speakers.

We do not have a complete accounting of all the left-wing academic organizations that were formed during the late 1960s and early 1970s. According to one scholar, there were at least eighteen such groups, but he never produced a list. Below is a preliminary and all too sketchy survey of the main ones I've encountered. It probably misses some local and regional bodies, as well as black, women's, and radical groups within the legal, medical, city planning, and other professions some of whose members had academic appointments.

- The MLA still has a Radical Caucus some of whose members were active in creating this very journal.
- The Sociology Liberation Movement (SLM) was founded at the 1968 ASA meeting in Boston. Its publication, *Insurgent Sociologist*, existed for years and is still around under the name *Critical Sociology* even though the SLM's most radical members split off to form an Eastern and a Western Union of Radical Sociologists.
- Probably the most successful of these groups, perhaps because its founders did not seek to reform

the learned society in their field, was the Union for Radical Political Economics or URPE. Formed in 1968 as an independent organization, its journal, the *Review of Radical Political Economics*, has been in continuous existence ever since.

- After an unsuccessful attempt to democratize the American Historical Association in 1969, the radical historians transformed their caucus into what became the Middle Atlantic Radical Historians Organization or MARHO in 1973. Their journal, the *Radical History Review*, is also still around.
- The Anthropologists for Radical Political Action emerged out of the Radical Caucus that had been formed mainly by graduate students within the American Anthropological Association in 1967. I am not sure how long it lasted or how active it was.
- There were two groups within the field of psychology: the Psychologists for a Democratic Society and Psychologists for Social Action. Most of their members were school psychologists in New York, not academics.
- Scientists formed a number of groups that spanned several disciplines and included non-academics as well as professors. Scientists [and later Engineers] for Social and Political Action [SESPA] grew out of a dissident group within the American Physical Society in 1969. It soon merged into a Boston-based organization called Science for the People that published an eponymous journal devoted to demystifying science in order to give ordinary people the ability to criticize its misuse.
- The Union of Concerned Scientists was a somewhat less radical group that emerged from a conference at MIT in the spring of 1969.
- The field of philosophy also had its Radical Caucus.
- The Caucus for a New Political Science was formed at the American Political Science Association's 1967 annual meeting in Chicago. It turned out to be more moderate than most of the other radical caucuses, seeking mainly to prod the discipline to focus more attention on real world social and political problems.
- Some scholars organized within their subdisciplines. So, for example, there was the Union of Radical Criminologists and its journal, *Crime and Social Justice*, began to publish in 1974.
- A similar organization, the Committee of Concerned Asian Scholars, was formed at the Association for Asian Studies meeting in Philadelphia in 1968. Its founders, who put out the *Bulletin of the Concerned Asian Scholars* for years, were upset with their field's establishment and its timidity with regard to the war in Vietnam.

The radicals who formed these caucuses were among the most politically active graduate students and faculty members at their colleges and universities as well as within their disciplines – supporting student dissidents, opposing

their institutions' collaboration with the military-industrial complex, and seeking curricular and pedagogical reforms. But they were also concerned with the intellectual content of their fields, which they saw as narrowly technical and supportive of the status quo. Each area had its own issues. Anthropologists discovered the imperialist roots of contemporary anthropology, while diplomatic historians embraced Cold War revisionism.

But, when they transcended their disciplinary concerns, these radical academics tended to share similar intellectual interests. It was not uncommon for them to take an interdisciplinary approach. Thus, for example, panels at the conferences MARHO sponsored in the late 1960s and 1970s often featured as many political scientists, anthropologists, and sociologists as they did historians. At the same time, many radicals in history and other fields shared an interest in theory and in the work of European scholars. Not surprisingly, they pushed at the boundaries of their disciplines, incorporating new approaches, new sources, and, in some cases, such as Black Studies and Women's Studies, creating whole new fields. They also discovered or re-discovered Marxism, forming study groups and founding new journals.

One theme that emerged within these radical groups was the demand that their disciplines engage with moral and ethical issues. Especially within the social sciences, these activists criticized their fields' increasing reliance on quantification, which they saw as a way to avoid dealing with real social problems. For the radicals, the traditional assertion of their fields' leaders that scholarship also had to be politically neutral smacked of hypocrisy or worse. They did not believe that such neutrality existed. As these activists put it, so-called "objective" scholarship was nothing other than a defense of the status quo.

Finally, because they were often closer than other academics to their students, the radical ones in particular, they paid considerable attention to pedagogy. They tended to question traditional classroom practices, while experimenting with new, more egalitarian, ways of teaching. Feminists were especially prominent in such academic reforms.

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One issue that particularly challenged the radical academics of the New Left was that of how to combine their activism with their scholarship. Were they to emphasize "Red or Expert," as the then-current slogan put it? That dichotomy proved troubling for many of the most committed activists, especially when the most radical among them were urging their comrades to leave their campuses and become full-time revolutionaries.

Each activist had to deal with the issue for him- or herself. For many it was a source of tension that was never

completely resolved. As far as I can tell, only a few individuals -- Paul Lauter may be one of the best examples -- were able to make their scholarship their activism. This was also the case for the early second-wave feminists who developed the field of Women's Studies and the African-American and other scholars who did the same with Black Studies. So, for example, Robin Dizard used her academic position as a composition teacher at Merritt Junior College in Oakland, California, to teach rhetoric to the founders and early members of the Black Panther Party.

But not all the leftist academics were able to -- or wanted to -- infuse their scholarship and teaching with their politics. Noam Chomsky may be the most eminent example here. He kept his academic career separate from his political activities; he even took money from the Air Force to support his work in linguistics. Other radicals solved the conflict by dropping out of academe altogether -- often to work full-time within the Movement. Some changed careers. Several of the key founders of the Committee of Concerned Asian Scholars (CCAS), for example, went into publishing. Others, particularly those imbued with a romantic view of the revolutionary potential of the industrial working class, went to work in factories and other blue-collar workplaces. After a few years, many of these people drifted back to the academy, where they continued to bring a radical perspective to their teaching and research.

By the mid-1970s, much of the energy that had driven the radical academic movement had dissipated. The Vietnam War ended and an unanticipated economic contraction plunged the previously expanding academic profession into a job crisis that, as we now know, has lasted for nearly fifty years. The radicals were particularly afflicted, many diverted

from their efforts to transform the university to attempts simply to remain within it. Still, many retained their critical perspective even as they made accommodations with the academic mainstream. Cooptation came in different forms -- and operated in both directions as the rest of the academic community absorbed some of these leftists' initially radical projects. Mainstream economists could no longer ignore inequality even if they did not, as their radical colleagues did, commit themselves to ending it. Nor could historians overlook the past struggles of previously marginalized populations. As a result, it became possible to pursue a completely conventional career as a professional academic even while doing work in such formerly controversial fields as Women's Studies.

Today the academic profession inhabits a very different set of institutions. No longer the expanding and self-confidently liberal university that welcomed -- and sought to tame -- a whole new cohort of critical scholars, American higher education has become corporatized. Dominated by the entrepreneurial values of the neoliberal business community, it subordinates its educational mission to a cost-benefit analysis that gives scant attention to the creation of a democratic citizenry. As a result, the nation's faculties are straining to survive within institutions that have devalued almost everything they do -- except bring in outside money. Still, as radicals, we cannot give up the struggle. We must make common cause with our students and with the current progressive movements to increase access and infuse our institutions with the same critical spirit and democratic values that the radicals of the 1960s strove for -- and occasionally won.



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