



Culture and Agency

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Source: *College Composition and Communication*, Vol. 48, No. 2 (May, 1997), pp. 292-296

Published by: National Council of Teachers of English

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/358676>

Accessed: 03/06/2009 09:58

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without first-hand knowledge of their classroom practices. I and other contributors to *Left Margins* are struggling, however haltingly, to find responsible ways of dealing with these daunting realities. I urge Spellmeyer and those of a like mind to present their program for dealing with them, rather than glibly denigrating ours. It is grimly ironic that those in English studies trying to express viewpoints like mine here and in my article are routinely reviled, derided, or ignored—not just by conservatives, but by those self-styled progressives in the profession who display a truly PC will to deny these realities and suppress their discussion because they might disturb such teachers' comfortably clichéd idealization of students.

Culture and Agency

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I wish that the venue of the "Interchange" section allowed me to discuss in detail the history of cultural studies, but here I have time only to insist that we consider the role played by the idea of "culture" itself in the emergence of that field. France touches briefly on this issue when he points out that Boas used the doctrine of cultural relativism to argue against the "scientific" version of racism in vogue at the start of this century. But as any reader of Matthew Arnold knows, the word "culture" has an older provenance, as does its use to normalize populations and legitimize rule by the "best and the brightest." Precisely because "culture" has meant different things at different historical moments, we need to watch the way the word gets used *strategically*, to the advantage of some and to the detriment of others. Appalled as I am by *The Bell Curve*, I still feel that little can be gained by ignoring the dangers that arise from our profession's recent seizure of "culture" in every form as our rightful, and exclusive, domain. Typically, people working in English departments think of culture as a text, and because we see ourselves as the preeminent readers of texts—of poems and plays and novels—we feel entitled to deliver masterly readings of everything from child-rearing to nuclear science. Rather than producing the tolerance, however, that so enlivened early American anthropology, the ascent of cultural studies in English has given us the warrant to indict our fellow citizens—especially the ones held captive in our classes—as incompetent readers, as victims of mystification, or as psychological casualties. And yet, who is to say that culture *can* be read in the manner we suppose? Isn't it possible that culture lacks the stability of a text, a system, or a code—amenable to "interpretation" by cognoscenti like ourselves? How do we know that the practices once applied to the monuments of *belles lettres* can

be used to explicate comic strips and commercials on tv, or to lay bare popular attitudes toward race and identity? In daily life, do we really “read” a sitcom in the same way we might read “The Wasteland”—and whose “reading” should count as definitive?

For anyone standing outside an English department, these might look like obvious questions, and quite troubling ones methodologically. For us on the inside, it has been easier to put such doubts away by rushing headlong into “politics” as disinterested champions of the oppressed. But situated as we are within a specific institution, which bears the imprint of a specific history, we are quite far from disinterested, whatever our personal commitments happen to be. When we look closely at our own institutional past, we can hardly help but notice that the university has risen along with the bureaucratic nation-state. And when we look at nation-states and universities around the world—whether the economies of these states happen to be socialist or otherwise—we find almost identical structures of top-down administration. In Beijing as in New Haven, official intellectuals shore up the system by producing a steady stream of paradigms that repeatedly place the ordinary citizen in the position of a therapeutic client. New Haven declares “the death of the subject,” while the Party’s savants in Beijing denounce the spread of “spiritual pollution.” From year to year, of course, the paradigms themselves keep changing, and the persistence of change helps to ensure that the citizen is always in the wrong and “catching up.” What we haven’t seen anywhere is the genuine democratization of control over the affairs of daily life, including the production of knowledge. Among those who “really matter,” almost no one has proposed that ordinary people have the intelligence and wisdom necessary for self-rule. Small wonder, then, that higher education operates as it does.

Those who benefit from the current division of intellectual labor can be counted on to enumerate, in their own defense, the pathologies of one group or another, and even of our whole population. On the crudest level, a teacher can always find protofascists hidden in the composition class. But more typically, when we denigrate our fellow citizens—or anyway, those citizens least like us—we do so in less grandiose terms. The problem becomes, not the wholesale pathology of our culture, but an individual’s “cultural deficit” or his inadequate “cognitive development.” And here again, the left and right are often strangely allied. In the fifties and sixties, conservative white educators built whole careers on the argument that inner-city blacks had no real language, lacked all powers of reason, and so on. Linguists like William Labov did everyone a service by dispelling that myth, but the myth keeps perversely returning, and often in the work of self-professed leftists such as Donald Lazere. Lazere has previously argued, for example, that many Americans, irrespective of race, have become

increasingly illiterate under the sway of the mass media, and he alleges that this illiteracy has produced a dramatic decline in their powers of analysis and understanding ("Literacy and the Mass Media," *NLH* 18 [1986–87], pp. 238–55). Never mind that more people go on to college now than ever before, or that the average American just before World War II had a ninth grade education—these are merely facts of history whose significance might be argued endlessly. But Lazere's entire line of reasoning, taken whole-cloth from Basil Bernstein, has been decisively overturned by Scribner and Cole's magisterial work, *The Psychology of Literacy*—a work which Lazere cites without seeming to understand how it contradicts his own position, since it rejects the very notion that literacy imparts critical consciousness, a broadened perspective, or some kind of meta-awareness that non-readers lack.

That Lazere should cling so tenaciously to an ideology which makes idiots of almost everyone tells us something that we still need to hear about our own "political unconscious." We like to remember Bernstein, and we like to forget about Scribner and Cole, because we have so deep a need to see ourselves as cultural leaders at a time when our actual authority has declined conspicuously. Even if it is true, as I suspect, that lay citizens have seldom paid much attention to English professors, the importance of "the canon" has clearly waned with the proliferation of alternative media—hence the rise of cultural studies itself, with its shift from *Paradise Lost* to *Terminator II*. But the explosion of alternative media turns out to be just one part of a much larger change, the emergence of a "knowledge society," in which communication plays a greatly expanded role: we may no longer read the classics, but we are buried beneath an avalanche of prose, coming from many different places and headed for many different readerships. And it is this unprecedented change which has made it impossible for any single institution to pontificate about language, representation, or meaning—not the academy, not the newspapers, not the television, not the net. Hence the futility of cultural studies, its current exhaustion, and its all-too-foreseeable death.

In my view, the history of English as a discipline has prepared us quite poorly for these changes, but I'm not referring simply to our institutional history of privilege and contempt. Rather, I have in mind our own formation, our personal formation, as academic intellectuals: what kinds of violence to ourselves has that formation entailed? There are, of course, different sorts of intellectuals: "organic intellectuals" like Antonio Gramsci, with close ties to the working-class community in Turin; and globetrotting public intellectuals like Paulo Freire, who moved outside the political establishment in Brazil, helping to teach basic literacy to villagers who

couldn't vote if they couldn't read. But today we are not intellectuals like Gramsci or Freire, and there's no sense pretending we are. As intellectuals within the academy, we have had to make certain kinds of compromises, and we have had to live with certain kinds of contradictions, which none of us have altogether confronted or overcome. We would not be here, for one thing, if we had not competed quite relentlessly against others, just as we will continue to do throughout the balance of our lives. And we all trade in ideas just as car dealers trade in cars. But there are other compromises that may also get repressed. We were taught, for example, to remake ourselves: early on, we learned to imitate the most powerful person in the classroom, and we have paid an enormous price, in isolation and self-denial, to become that person.

But what would happen if those of us who work in composition, always grateful for the leavings at the table of our betters, suddenly began to explore the uses of knowledge—the human costs of knowledge—and to do so on our own? I don't mean that we should explore these uses and costs *by ourselves*, however, without reading sociology, anthropology, political science, linguistics, and communication. Instead, I mean that we might do a much better job of promoting the public good if we were less concerned about the high rollers in English, and more willing to pursue answers elsewhere, especially in the worlds of people like our students. Part of the reason, perhaps, that in *Left Margins* Zavarzadeh, Katz, and Lazere show such profound loathing for ordinary people may be that they themselves are afraid to admit how unprepared the whole professoriate is to make sense of the events, great and small, overtaking us everyday. And yet, as soon as we retreat from this predicament to the shelter of our "authority," we reaffirm a social order that has proven profoundly disabling for almost everyone. If we are really worried about Nazis and skinheads, then perhaps we should try to understand the social conditions that have produced them—and to blame the usual suspect, corporate capitalism, is to choose the safety of complete irrelevance. For the most part, neo-Nazis *do not* come from affluent California suburbs: the famous Freeman, for example, so much in the news at the time of this writing, draw their numbers from the swelling ranks of small farmers who feel betrayed, and *were* betrayed, by the banks and the federal government's Farm Home Administration. Their paranoid fantasies about "international Jewry" are truly terrifying and odious, but no attempt to change such people will succeed if it reinstates their experiences of radical powerlessness. To say that they are not ready to think for themselves—not mature enough, not learned enough—is in my view to choose the wrong side in an ongoing historical conflict. The only way that they can become worthy of freedom is to exercise real freedom. It is the ab-

sence of this freedom which has created the problem of the Freeman—as their very name suggests. And the solution must begin with restoring, somewhere and somehow, a measure of the freedom they have lost, if only the freedom in a composition course to think and write about their lives without coercion and disparagement.

It is my view that no one ever learns anything when he becomes the object of “critique.” Clearly, France and Lazere don’t like to find themselves in that position. But they have yet to grasp the pedagogical point: when the force of “oppositional thinking” crashes down upon *their* heads, all they can do is retreat into complaints about my lack of professional courtesy—instead of recognizing, in their aggrievement, that such a courtesy *has* to reach beyond the boundaries of our profession. At the risk of adopting the essentialist tone that France finds so off-putting in my review, let me end by affirming my belief that people change—that people learn—only when they have the chance to feel more fully at home in the world. Unless we can respond to their basic human needs—the need for hope, for self-respect, and for agency—all our efforts will end only by worsening the present climate of cynicism and violence.