

Noreen O'Connor and Rich Hancuff

Theory into Practice: An Interview with Barbara Foley

Noreen O'Connor & Rich Hancuff: It appears that many people in the academy are committed to teaching and scholarship on theories of race, multiculturalism, feminism, Marxism, and postcolonialism. But as Cynthia Young points out in her *minnesota review* essay, "On Strike at Yale," scholars are often reluctant to investigate the praxis of these ideas. For example, while feminist theory courses and women's studies programs proliferate on many campuses, the status of the largely female faculty who instruct introductory undergraduate courses grows steadily more exploitative. How do we understand the schism between academic thinking and the reality of academic institutions?

Barbara Foley: Yes, I remember it well: Sara Suleri and other presumably radical Yale faculty playing such a reprehensible role during the Yale strike. How do we understand this? On the one hand, it is important to bear in mind the incredibly elitist set-up of academic departments. Graduate students and adjuncts—leaving aside the gender question for the moment—are invisible to full-time faculty (adjuncts especially so: at institutions with graduate programs, faculty at least get to know some grad students in their classes). I meet the adjuncts in my department only at the copy machine. I get to know them only if I introduce myself or they introduce themselves. They are never invited to department meetings. They don't even get their own keys to the john. So no matter what the content of what one teaches, the institutional arrangements in the capitalist university militate mightily against the kind of collegiality needed to form the sort of united movement of teaching staff that is needed in turn to confront the currently disastrous state of affairs facing all but tenured faculty. (And who knows how long their/our exemption will last?)

On the other hand, if we think carefully about what it is that most academics on the "cutting edge" of current literary and cultural study are actually up to, the disjunction between "academic thinking" and "the reality of academic institutions" should not be all that surprising. For, if I may be blunt about it, much of the most progressive-sounding (and presumably paradigm-shattering) current theory lacks the anti-capitalist framework that is necessary for understanding—and addressing—that reality. For instance, in order to grapple with the predominance of women among the most exploited sectors of the academic proletariat, we need to understand the material basis for the universal

devaluation of labor coded as primarily female. This material basis rests firmly in the need of capital to exploit—hence the unpaid labor performed mainly by women in the home, central to the daily and generational reproduction of labor power; the huge amount of work undertaken by women in the informal economy, which permits capitalists to pay proletarians, male and female, sub-subsistence wages; and the dramatic sexist differentials in pay between male and female proletarians. I don't mean to preach here to the choir. But I don't think that such issues take center stage nearly often enough in feminist theory and women's studies courses. And the lack of such a class approach to sexism has far-reaching effects—including, in the issue before us here, the relative ease with which feminist professors can work cheek by jowl, as it were, with female adjuncts whose conditions of labor remain invisible and uncontested.

I won't make the arguments here, but a similar critique can be made of much that passes for progressive in postcolonial studies, critical race theory, queer theory, and cultural studies.

NO & RH: In *Radical Representations*, you see cultural recovery of neglected leftist writers as an important component in analyzing contemporary cultural problems. Yet you have also argued that teaching radical writers doesn't really accomplish revolutionary goals, because the university institution is malleable enough to co-opt that teaching as part of its "multiculturalism" or "diversity," essentially minimizing the threat such teaching might have to the institution. How does the teacher push a revolutionary activist pedagogy within the confines of the institution?

BF: I can argue this one out of both sides of my mouth! It is absolutely necessary that left faculty teach left books. Proletarian literature, at its best, not only sets forth a class analysis of racism, sexism, alienation, etc., but also puts the question of working-class revolution on the agenda. Myra Page's *Moscow Yankee*—which describes an unemployed Detroit auto worker's embrace of Soviet socialism during the First Five-Year Plan and has been recently reissued by the University of Illinois Press—has an incredible impact upon US students, particularly those from working-class backgrounds. William Attaway's *Blood On The Forge* and Richard Wright's *Uncle Tom's Children* provide valuable, if wrenching, opportunities for talking about the economics of lynching, the use of racism to break the back of the labor movement, and the politics of gendered race and raced gender under Jim Crow. John Dos Passos's *U.S.A.* trilogy gives students a radical take on modernity and a grasp of early twentieth-century US history that they will get in few other places. I could go on and on. Those of us who consider ourselves leftist

pedagogues have a responsibility to teach books like these, for the greatly enlarge students' sense of the range of human potentiality.

Yet we can't have illusions about the nature and extent of the radicalization of students that we'll accomplish in the classroom, no matter how good a job we do. Again, the arrangements of the capitalist university play a defining role. Students are, often without knowing it, profoundly cynical about what it takes to get by. As Jerry Graff has observed in a different context, they'll argue the unknowability of reality for one professor and the certainty of knowledge for another without batting an eye. While they may indeed be persuaded by much of what Marxist academics have to say, they also see us giving exams, assigning grades, and receiving a salary for doing so. Indeed, those who are most moved by us will often conclude that it is a virtue of the university that we do what we do: that the function of the university really is what the university says it is: to provide a "free marketplace of ideas." I feel this contradiction most sharply when I am being the most left. When I sketch out the fundamentals of the base/superstructure paradigm, for instance, and under the rubric of ideological state apparatuses discuss the role of the university, I feel pretty weird. Universities are, after all, principally ideology factories; under capitalism, they cannot simply be appropriated by would-be subversive academic radicals engaged in Gramscian wars of maneuver. If we think we are accomplishing something really "oppositional" by burrowing from within through our classroom activity, we are, I think, sadly mistaken. We take advantage of what opportunities are open to us at this moment, of course. But these opportunities come not without cost, especially, perhaps, when we feel ourselves being most effective.

At a juncture of history like the present, when the ruling class has little to gain and something to lose by being too openly repressive of leftist faculty, we operate in a highly contradictory context. At other moments (or now in other countries), such conditions have not existed and/or do not exist: witness the fate of the Herbert Apthekers and Philip Foners in the US, the more tragic stories of Marxist intellectuals in openly fascist countries right now. Our principal responsibility is to do all we can, on and off campus, to build the kind of movement that will make the ruling elite scared enough of us to fire us. That's another contradiction; but then, everything's a contradiction.

NO & RH: That brings home the problem of the multicultural "marketplace of ideas"; Marx's theories then come to occupy the same position as the latest business management techniques: content to be mastered by midterm, rather than tools to raise class-consciousness and transform the current system. It reminds us of Paulo Freire's distinction between "banking" and "problem-posing," or liberating education,

because for Freire the most radical content means nothing if it's presented within traditional education frameworks. Could you comment on the role of the revolutionary educator in challenging the ways in which students receive the course's content?

BF: That's a difficult one: I am not sure how much control any teacher has over how students "receive the course's contents," since students, particularly working-class students with jobs and families to support, come to our classrooms with so much baggage. But some pedagogical techniques work well to help students see what is at stake in both reading and interpreting literary texts. It sounds a bit hackneyed, but drawing attention to plain-old "relevance" usually gets students going, particularly if we are teaching a text with explicit radical content. I'm currently teaching *Uncle Tom's Children*; Wright's portrayal of lynch terror has an eerie applicability to the police murder of Amadou Diallo in the Bronx, and many students appreciate the opportunity to draw the connection. (Most of our colleagues don't deign to discuss mimetic referentiality in such mundane, and reflectionist, terms!) Sometimes, too, I set students up in a debate over the validity or workability of some aspect of a text. A few weeks ago my class on Minorities in American Literature debated the ending of Gold's *Jews Without Money* and got, I think, some insight into the politics embedded in what looks like a merely literary debate.

The main way to challenge how students view the contents of a course, in my view, is to get to know them outside of the classroom. This can be tricky while they are still in the course; the opportunities for opportunism, either by student or by teacher, are rife. But it is very important to let students know we take them seriously by inviting them to our homes. Some might want to join a discussion group on Marxism or just have informal sessions where they examine politics and culture from a variety of perspectives. I've conducted such groups for years and years; we read everything from Engels to Ernest Mandel to the *Nation* to the *Economist*. Also, some action-oriented students like to conjoin theory with practice and join some activist campus or off-campus organization. In my case, some former students from my American literature classes have ended up working with the combating racism task force that I've mentioned. It's also fun to march on May Day with one's students!

NO & RH: You mention that the "ruling class has little to gain and something to lose by being too openly repressive of leftist faculty." The market seems to be triumphant everywhere—in television, and other media advertising, young children, truck drivers, and New Agers share in the glory of capitalism's successes, while a mild-mannered,

dapper Peter Lynch pops up to offer the "common investor" even-voiced advice so they too can join in the victory. But the persistent existence of the left seems to speak to the capitalist democracies' unanimous nature. Could you speak further on building a left movement, under these contradictory conditions, that would "make the ruling class scared enough to fire us"?

BF: On the one hand, there is no mass movement in the streets, and the lack thereof does significantly constrain what we can do. It is important that, hungering for such a movement, we do not overestimate the significance of whatever oppositional events do take place. The LA rebellion responding to the Rodney King affair, while anti-racist and possessing an inchoate class politics, was almost completely spontaneous (in the full Leninist sense). Conversely, the current manifestations of outrage over the Diallo murder are almost completely controlled by the NYC ruling class, with hack politicians like Charles Rangel getting symbolically arrested while proclaiming the integrity of "the great majority of the women and men in blue." We need to be clear-eyed in our understanding of where things are. There is a lot of passivity, of going along with the program, among the US proletariat and allied class sectors. On the other hand, it is vital that radical academics not overestimate the extent of the bourgeoisie's ideological hegemony. Many working-class people are deeply, deeply cynical about their rulers and believe virtually nothing they get through the media, or at least believe it and not believe it at the same time. There's a mass base for fascist ideas and practice in the US population, no doubt about it; but there's also a mass base for red ideas and, in the not too distant future, practice.

My view is that, sooner or later, the global crisis in overproduction is going to boomerang back upon the US, and the Wall Street bubble is going to burst. At this time, if I may pile up a few more widely mixed metaphors, lots of chickens are going to come home to roost, with massive unemployment, homelessness, and hunger. The shredding of the safety net under the Clinton regime will mean desperation for millions, and we can anticipate that the ruling class will be using many more sticks than carrots to keep things under control (their preparation for this development, by the way, is the context in which the Diallo incident should be understood). In this context, which I think we should call fascism, though I know some left academics eschew the term, lots of people, liberal to communist, will be roped in. So we might as well be part of a movement that is about the business of attacking the whole system, and proposing an alternative.

NO & RH: One of the characters in Tess Slesinger's 1934 novel *The Unpossessed* proclaims exasperatedly, after an evening of listening to a

group of academics discuss revolution, "you talk and talk but I'd like to know what any of you do." The perception of the university as the "ivory tower" divorced from the "real world" still carries great cultural weight, on both left and right. You've been an advocate for and practitioner of academics getting actively involved in issues "outside" the university, both in local grassroots campaigns and national questions. However, do you see any way in which the academic functions usefully as academic in these activist situations, or does that positioning lead to division within an activist movement?

BF: I do think it crucial that radical academics be involved in a political praxis that takes them off the campus (as well as in one that commits them to fighting around issues on campus). I can't speak generally about the issue you raise here: perhaps some academics who function "as academics" in such in-the-streets activities may encounter, or indeed create, divisiveness. But it need not happen this way. As a member of the Combating Racism Task Force of NOW-NJ for about a decade (and for several years the chair), I've certainly not hidden the fact that I earn my living as a professor. The skills I've acquired in this line of work are useful to the collective—seminar-style, as it were, we begin each meeting with as widely-ranging a discussion as possible of what is going on globally and nationally, then zero in on the implications of these insights for our particular campaigns. We get pretty left and pretty rigorous at times! And I know my pedagogical training comes in handy here.

But we need to recognize that the reason there's such differential access to these skills is that capitalism in fact needs and wants only a very small segment of the population equipped in this way; despite all the guff about "critical thinking," a critical and truly thinking working class is intolerable to the present order. So the left academic who functions in grass roots organizing is sharing what she/he knows, that's all. As long as we are as willing as the next person to make posters, lead chants, confront policy hacks rationalizing welfare repeal, demonstrate against racist cops, escort women past right-to-lifers at abortion clinics, and generally do whatever jobs need to be done, there need be no contradiction between being an academic and being an activist.

The greater challenge, to me, is bringing procommunist politics into struggles around reform issues. Having been involved for three decades now in taking arms against the sea of troubles caused by capitalism, I am wholly convinced that, as a system, it is unreformable. Indeed, for the masses of the world, it grows more vicious by the day. We can win specific reforms, to be sure. But, as witnessed by the recent stripping away of many of the gains won under the New Deal (themselves granted because the capitalist class feared insurrection otherwise), reforms can and will be taken away as long as the capitalists

hold state power. Given the derailing of the first wave of workers' movements for egalitarianism that has occurred in the twentieth century, revolution is hardly on the immediate horizon. So lots of people think that winning small reforms represents the outer limit of what is possible right now. But I think otherwise: the system has minimal credibility with millions of people and awaits destruction by a revived and self-critical mass movement for a classless social order. We have to talk the alternative, and make it real, even as we inhabit this seemingly unchangeable present. That's the real challenge facing all leftists nowadays, academics or otherwise.

NO & RH: In a sense, your work with the Combating Racism Task Force of NOW-NJ provides a good example of an academic functioning "as academic," that is bringing the critical thinking skills that, as you say, capitalism wants available only to a small segment of society. Do you see a relation between your experience and some implications of Lenin's concept of the vanguard party?

BF: I don't see much of a connection. Not to say I am against Leninism—far from it! But what I am describing is the kind of activity that any left-ish academic can and I think should be involved in. Whether we are pink or red or whatever, we need to contest the elitist divisions that divide us from our students on the one hand and plain old non-academic working people on the other (and of course these groups usually overlap!).

NO & RH: You speak to a problem that radical educators face when they get involved in reform struggles, namely that deep-down we feel the system is unreformable. We seem caught between a belief in ultimate unreformability and a desire to get involved in anything that will address the present oppression that people face everyday. How do you respond to the possible critique that reform struggles are necessarily complicit with the current ruling order?

BF: The dilemma you raise here is real. On the one hand, people have urgent and immediate needs; it's arrogant (and stupid) to say that these needs should not be fought for because they do not constitute a "revolutionary" demand. On the other hand, if we just call upon capitalism to reform itself, and then in some small ways it does (as is often the case, because its leaders are smart), then we are strengthening the system that gives rise to the crisis and the need in the first place. The key to fighting for reforms in a revolutionary way, to me, is to analyze what sorts of, if you will, communist ideas emerge from the struggle and the process. Take the Diallo case, for instance. If we join the fray by calling

for more black cops, or a civilian review board, or Al Sharpton for Senate, we are only aiding and abetting the loyal opposition and helping the NYC ruling class get its act together. But if we couple the call for indictment and firing of the cops in question with an analysis of the fascist function assigned to the Special Crimes Unit, and then link this analysis to a still broader analysis of the reasons why the ruling elite in NYC is tightening its hold on black, Latin, and immigrant neighborhoods, then the issue of getting rid of the whole damn capitalist system becomes part of the debate. Reds can meaningfully, and honestly, unite with non-reds around all sorts of reform demands if they keep anti-capitalist politics in the forefront and insistently link such seemingly unrelated things as the crisis in overproduction with the military maneuvers in Kosovo with police brutality with welfare repeal.

In *What Is To Be Done?* Lenin wrote of the need for revolutionaries to bring the knowledge of totality to the working class. What he said at the beginning of the century is equally true at its end.

NO & RH: At the Delegate Assembly of the MLA this year, and in Radical Caucus and Graduate Student Caucus protests held at the MLA, you were a vocal and visible supporter of change within that institution. Talk about your activist role in these organizations and in others like them.

BF: As a member of the Radical Caucus, I think there needs to be a persistent, multi-year struggle to transform the MLA from a "professional" to an advocacy organization. After all, that's what academic workers increasingly need. To those who say that this is a waste of time, I'd cite the effect of the Radical Caucus's most recent (if modest) victory: the passage through the Delegate Assembly (DA) of a strong resolution condemning the CUNY administration for its elimination of remedial education at the four-year colleges. While this resolution has yet to be approved by ballot vote of the MLA membership, it received about a two to one margin of support at the December 1998 Delegate Assembly meeting, even though the Executive Council solicited highly derogatory commentaries on the resolution from the CUNY administration, and the CUNY Vice Chancellor appeared at the open hearing on resolutions and tried to torpedo it. In the hearings and demonstrations in early 1999 in New York City, this MLA move was repeatedly cited by the partisans of affirmative action and open admissions. So it gave crucial support at a crucial time. I think it will also make a difference that the MLA has now, through approval of a series of motions put forth by the Graduate Student Caucus, committed itself to setting standards for the employment of part-time and adjunct labor and for imposing sanctions on campuses that violate these standards.

Above all, we need to reverse the changes in the MLA Constitution made about a decade ago so that we can once again pass resolutions on issues beyond the immediate purview of the academy. Every implication of recent trends in literary scholarship suggests the permeability of the membrane between literature and politics, rhetoric and praxis. Yet we have shot ourselves in the foot by simultaneously changing the rules and muzzling ourselves. (Sorry for the mixed metaphors—but they convey my agitation!) The absurdity of all this came out at the December 1998 Convention when some of us presented a resolution condemning the language used to rationalize the bombing of Iraq. (You know, "collateral damage," "Weapon of Mass Destruction," "degradation," etc.) Although the resolution passed the DA by a two to one margin (it needed three to one to get to the membership, since it was an emergency resolution), a number of its supporters noted that they'd much prefer to be condemning the bombing itself. I couldn't agree more.

NO & RH: This year the Graduate Student Caucus managed to bring the job crisis to the forefront of the MLA's agenda, with employment standards in the works. What power does the MLA have to impose sanctions on offending institutions, and do you believe these punishments will achieve results?

BF: I think the MLA has considerable power to impose sanctions, if only it will do so. It would be a major slap in the face, at least as things are now, for institutions in violation of employment standards to be prohibited from advertising, whether tenure-track jobs or even the "new wave" of untenured temporary heavy course-loaded lectureships, in the *MLA Job List*.

But in order for the MLA to have the nerve to undertake such a course, it will have to reconceive itself as an *advocacy* rather than a "professional" organization. And at this point it's a far cry from doing so. So that's one of the tasks confronting the Radical Caucus. Even as we strive for this admittedly "trade unionist" goal, though, I think that those of us who consider ourselves Marxists should see this also as an opportunity to politicize our co-workers about the causal capitalist context for the employment crisis facing those of us who teach humanities in higher ed. In opposition to those who might think that raising this context will prohibit our colleagues from getting on board, I say that it is precisely this analysis that will give our movement staying power. So let's get busy.

[This interview began at the MLA Radical Caucus cash bar in December 1998 in San Francisco, CA, and was continued by email during the spring of 1999.]

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