Employing Theory to Change Higher Education

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In my *JAC* article, "Žižek’s Rhetorical Matrix: The Symptomatic Enjoyment of Postmodern Academic Writing," I examined the relationship between critical theory and the troubling working conditions affecting many compositionists in American universities. One of my central claims was that the stress on theory and cultural criticism in graduate schools has coincided with a growing level of economic exploitation in most areas of higher education. In fact, many graduate students in English, who have specialized in high theory and cultural studies, have found that once they enter the job market, there are very few tenure-track positions for people specializing in theory and cultural studies. One reason for this problem is that the same institutions that train these graduate students only hire people in traditional historical areas (Early Modern, Romanticism, Modernism, for example). In order to gain employment, many of these "theory-based" graduates have pursued jobs in the field of composition, only to find out that these jobs rarely grant tenure or reward faculty for research. To change this situation, I argued that, "we need a national movement that would defend the particular cultural knowledge, experience, expertise, and degrees defining the professional status of compositionists" (350). My call for a national movement is based on the fact that we have a national academic labor pool that thrives on producing a surplus of qualified faculty members who are forced to take low paying
and insecure positions to stay in the academy. In order to counter this late capitalist corporatization of higher education, I posit that we need to direct our critical, theoretical, and practical energies toward improving the status of all academic workers.

I posited that many radical and critical faculty members unconsciously use theory as a way of escaping from the concrete economic realities shaping the institutions in which they work, and that this use of theory hinders the effort to fight the downsizing, privatization, deregulation, de-funding, and the casualization of higher education. In my effort to clarify how certain “universalizing” and “globalizing” tendencies in contemporary theory lend themselves to this movement away from economic and political change, I analyzed various aspects of Slavoj Žižek’s work. My aim here was to show how a leading intellectual, who is very concerned about economic, educational, and political issues, rarely deals with the material conditions shaping a large portion of his readership. In response to my criticism, Žižek points out in his *JAC* article, “Passing from ‘False’ to ‘True’ universality: A Reply to Robert Samuels,” that he is neither American nor tenured, and he argues that my analysis is thus misdirected. Žižek states that he has written extensively about the way the cultural studies’ notion of multiculturalism “obliterates” concerns for class tensions. He also posits that my own analysis fails to “articulate the link between the particular problems of today’s academia and the global capitalist system” (625). While I agree with many of Žižek’s responses, I believe his reply only strengthens my argument.

If we do indeed live in a global economic system, it is necessary for all of us (even those who live and work outside of America) to consider how late capitalism works to shape our local and international working environments. In the case of higher education, we can use many of Žižek’s own insightful readings of contemporary culture and society to lay the theoretical foundations for collective action. Žižek’s work has taught us to understand the multiple levels of mystification that block our ability to enact concrete social change. My argument with Žižek was not so much with his vast array of critical readings; rather, I was more concerned with the reception of his writings in American higher education and his own descriptions of American academics.

As I argued in my essay, we can employ Žižek’s work to understand the general structure of postmodern universities:

Debates over curriculum and culture . . . have often hidden the real source of power and conflict in our institutions of higher education: the new
administrative class. This foundational source of power and economic control functions like Žižek’s vanishing mediator: ... a traumatic social antagonism covered by imaginary fantasies and ideological constructions. ... (349)

In this passage, I pointed out that Žižek’s work helps us to pay attention to the “traumatic” core of economic and social inequalities. Furthermore, he provides a theoretical framework to understand how and why students and faculty escape from encountering this “real” of social power by seeking refuge in cultural debates and ideological fantasies. According to my “Žižekian” reading of the university,

The main way that fantasy and ideology function to hide the basic conflict between education and capitalism is by producing happy or content students who do not complain about the universalizing standardization ... of their higher education. This ideological satisfaction of the psychological subject is also evident in the academic fantasy of the pure theorist who is not involved in the concrete economic and political forces shaping higher education. (349)

My use of Žižek’s own theories here shows how my reading of his work was not an attack but rather an effort to apply his notions to particular educational dynamics.

Perhaps, as Thomas Rickert’s response to my essay argues, I did not offer enough concrete material strategies to counter many of the problems I located in higher education. To help clarify what I mean by a national or international teacher’s movement to defend the expertise, experience, and degrees of compositionists, I would like to show how theory can help to enact social and economic change in higher education. This strategic use of theory grows out of my experience being on the collective bargaining team representing over three thousand non-tenure track faculty in the University of California system. Like many other universities, the UC system has grown increasingly reliant on what they term “teaching-centered” faculty. These faculty members are often long-term and full-time Lecturers, many of whom have doctorates and important publications, but their jobs are designated as being outside of the tenure-track. In other words, the university has simply defined a whole series of positions as being temporary and insecure in order to save money and maintain “flexibility.”

On one level, we can argue that these new positions eliminate a growing number of faculty from tenure by refusing to allow them to
participate in the research and reward system. Here, we see how theory does not really count against people; rather, the institutions deem that certain fields, like composition, should not be rewarded for their theoretical research contributions because non-tenurable faculty are mainly used to instruct undergraduates. In order to fight this system, we do need to continue our efforts to show administrators and tenured faculty members that research and theory in composition are vital and important. However, this effort to publicize our “cultural capital” will only be effective if we tie our need to be recognized as scholars to concrete social actions.

My experience has shown me that university and college administrators have become so powerful today that the only way to change these institutions is to form effective collective agencies. This means that unionization and other forms of collective organization are necessary to counter the corporatization of higher education. In fact, across the country faculty members have been engaged in collective bargaining to regulate the employment practices for faculty in non-tenurable positions. These collective agreements have helped to improve the security and compensation of many academic workers; yet, there is still much to be done.

One needed action is to connect these different collective agencies together in order to develop a national, and perhaps international, union. Through our theoretical knowledge of how global capitalism works, we can articulate the types of economic practices that need to be resisted. We can also use theories like Žižek’s notion of cynical ideology to help fight against our own resistances to changing our institutions. The sad fact of the matter is that in many institutions of higher education that do have unions, a high number of the faculty members refuse to participate in collective action. In my numerous discussions with “disengaged” faculty, I have found that these academics often resist seeing how they are part of a larger system. In many cases, faculty feel safer and more comfortable dealing with social issues on an abstract and theoretical level.

Žižek’s notion of the traumatic core of social antagonism helps us to see why these faculty members are afraid to confront the economic powers shaping their working lives. In postmodern culture, powerful authorities are often hidden and thus their power seems to be completely abstract, irrational, and arbitrary. Furthermore, non-tenured faculty are vulnerable to the arbitrary decisions of distant administrators. This is why it is often important to engage in public demonstrations that force university administrators to show their faces and become accountable for their practices. By using publicity campaigns and strikes, academics can
also help the public understand that the de-funding of higher education has resulted in a degradation of educational standards and profit-taking by management.

One of the traumatic kernels of higher education that has to be confronted in our nation's universities is the over-employment of graduate students. For example, at the University of California, sixty percent of faculty members are now graduate students. One of the results of this process is that these same students cannot get full-time jobs once they graduate: these students are thus participating in their own future unemployment. Moreover, in the case of non-research universities, part-time faculty play the "surplus labor" role of graduate students. In both of these instances, the system works to produce its own surplus labor. It is thus necessary for a national union to develop contracts restricting the number of part-time and graduate student teachers.

Some may say that the type of economic intervention I am asking for is not feasible. However, there are now over forty research universities in the country with over a billion dollar endowments, and these are the same institutions that often claim poverty and the need to hire casualized labor. In order to correct this situation, academics have to expose where the money is really going in higher education. We thus have to use our vast knowledge of late capitalism and social injustice in order to confront our own institutions.

In many ways, the field of composition has been a trend-setter in the deregulation and casualization of academic labor. Since so many of our writing courses are taught by graduate students and part-time faculty who do not have degrees and expertise in composition and rhetoric, we have helped to perpetuate the myth that anyone can teach writing. As Janet Atwill argues in her response to my essay, the field of composition has to deny the myth that composition is a universal and empty mode of instruction by tying writing to the intellectual tradition of rhetoric. However, I believe that one of the most important actions the discipline of composition can take is to institute hiring and employment practices that reward a commitment to our field. Of course, this is easier said than done; yet, we can make immediate changes by re-examining our hiring and promotion procedures.

English departments can either discourage graduate students from studying theory and cultural studies (I do not recommend this) or start hiring people on a full-time basis who have these specializations. This means that instead of continuing with the present practice of only hiring English faculty in traditional historical categories, positions in theory and
cultural studies need to be created. Furthermore, in the field of composition, we should change the practice of only hiring “administrating” compositionists in tenure-track lines by employing theorists and cultural studies specialists dedicated to the teaching of writing. For this to work, deans and chairs have to realize that composition is a serious intellectual pursuit worthy of full-time status and rewards for research. By defending the intellectual content of composition, we can work against the myth that writing courses are empty and universal. In other terms, we can fight against the abstract universal negativity that often circulates in postmodern theory and late capitalism by affirming an academic mythos (Rickert’s term) linking theory to collective social action.

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Works Cited


Conflict in Concert:
Fighting Hannah Arendt’s Good Fight

James Crosswhite

How to make a fight a good one? How to make conflict cooperative? How to struggle against each other for a common good? What better questions could confront the rhetorician? In “Fighting Without Hatred: Hannah Arendt’s Agonistic Rhetoric,” Patricia Roberts-Miller argues that “ago-