Response Essays

Class Conflict in Composition and Rhetoric: Theory-Bytes in Response to Marc Bousquet and His Critics

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Intelligent idealism is closer to intelligent materialism, than is unintelligent materialism.

—Lenin

Reality is slyer than any theory.

—Lenin

Imagination is more important than knowledge.

—Albert Einstein

I am delighted to have the opportunity of responding to Marc Bousquet’s “Composition as a Management Science: Toward a University without a WPA.” I am gratified that there have been so many responses to Bousquet’s work and am happy to add mine. Given the constraints of this response—and the constraints of the everyday life we now live—this meditation will, of necessity, have to be far too undeveloped and limited, more a down payment on the larger project of theorizing social class in composition and rhetoric than an adequate, let alone comprehensive, examination of the issues at stake here and the complex argument constructed by Bousquet. In a post-Fordist world of sound bytes and factoids, this little article is inevitably a set of theory bytes, a ragtag collection of fragments on their way to a more sustained statement.

Let me begin by saying that I am mostly in agreement with Bousquet and appreciate both his courage and the courage of the editor of this journal, Lynn Worsham, for going public with what have been prohibited
or excluded rumblings and mumblings in the discipline. I certainly agree that there has been a rise of the Writing Program Administration (WPA) discourse and its associated subjectivities that at times I, too, have found disturbing (see Dana Harrington and Heather Shearer for further confirmation of this). Bousquet again is correct in noting that this rhetoric of "pleasing the prince" has been premised on the notion that "there is no alternative." This seeming willed failure of social imagination to see beyond the existing social arrangements is not, as Bousquet well shows, specific to composition and rhetoric, but is part of the discursive environment of post-Fordism. The argument topos that "there is no alternative" is not unlike the topos of exigency—that circumstances force us to attend to an issue, that we have no choice; both are strong lines of argument that carry great potential of getting one's attention in a time of distraction by the multitude of forces at work and in everyday life. They, however, both bring with them great risks of subsequently alienating the very folk they are meant to interest. I do applaud Bousquet's resistance to this so-called "pragmatist" thinking, though I do have some reservations about Bousquet's own enactment of this rhetoric.

But what I most appreciate in Bousquet's argument is his underscoring of the social class issues at stake here. For over two decades, there has been an appreciation in composition and rhetoric of the central importance of social class to this discipline, to language use, and to the study and teaching of writing. At least since Richard Ohmann's English in America was published in 1976, there has been a wide ranging consensus that we as scholars and professionals ought to be doing more to bring forward class matters, to examine what seems so critical to our work and work identities. Yet, as Lynn Bloom suggests in "Freshman Composition as a Middle-Class Enterprise," there has been little explicit work on social class in the discipline. Since Bloom's essay, that has mostly continued to be the case. The disciplinary apparatus—the official and unofficial journals that shape our professional work—has been quiet in regard to social class. With the exception of one article in College Composition and Communication, Julie Lindquist's "Class Ethos and the Politics of Inquiry," one article in College English, John Alberti's "Returning to Class: Creating Opportunities for Multicultural Reform at Majority Second Tier Schools," and one article in JAC, William DeGenaro's "Class Consciousness and the Junior College Movement," there has been little extended and sustained attention placed on social class in our most recent scholarship. This is not to say that people do not invoke social class. And it is not to say that scholars like Ira Shor in their own published
work haven’t pursued social class and power relations in composition. It is to assert that the disciplinary apparatus, thus far, has been reticent to get into social class matters, and this, of course, has had a chilling effect on new scholars coming out of PhD programs and occupying entry-level positions who must publish or perish. That this state of affairs has lasted so long I attribute in part to the existing discourse of social class in the U.S. and within the profession, which prohibits and excludes far more than it opens up. Bousquet not only violates that prohibition in his article, but he takes up one of the most sensitive threads of the discourse of social class, the matter that the very discipline of composition and rhetoric has a class structure that rivals—and actually is part of—that in American society. Composition and rhetoric is a social formation that is classed, that is marked by the discourse of class. In composition and rhetoric, class conflicts are part and parcel of everyday life. We all in some sense know this, yet we rarely study it or theorize it. Bousquet begins to open up this taboo subject. This is perhaps the most important contribution to the disciplinary conversation.

Yet, despite my appreciation of the work that Bousquet has done for the discipline and profession in opening up a space to begin a more in-depth dialogue about—and study of—social class, I have some serious reservations about his approach. As part of a public disclosure of potential conflicts of interest that I believe all composition professionals ought to confront, I need to acknowledge before I even begin my presentation of my objections the fact that I know and count as professional colleagues and friends some of the most important of Bousquet’s adversaries mentioned in his article. I have known and supported the scholarship of Joseph Harris, Michael Murphy, and Richard Miller, for instance, for decades. Let me add that this is precisely my point—that the work of Bousquet’s opponents (at least these particular scholars) share some premises with Bousquet, and that these assumptions are problematic to further discussion of these issues. By looking closely at Bousquet’s article and at those junctures where he shares strange ground with those whom he sees as advocates of what might be termed WPA discourse, I hope to move the conversation around some theoretical pitfalls that have been the end of attempts to study social class in the past.

My claim is that Bousquet’s argument and the work of Harris, Murphy, and Miller to which Bousquet refers in this article, show traces of the discourse of positivism. Now, let me be clear: I am not charging anyone with presenting a positivist argument, let alone being a positivist. That would be absurd. Bousquet is a critical theorist; Harris is, among
many roles, a historian who draws on postmodern and modernist theory (Barthes, Bartholomae, Britton); Murphy draws in his early work on Baudrillard, Adorno, Horkheimer, and Benjamin; and Miller, well acquainted with Foucault and the postmoderns, often enacts a rhetoric that is very close to creative writing. So the work of these folks is not—let me emphasize that, not—positivist. That is precisely my point. What is interesting is that even the work of such good (nonpositivist) scholars is pressured by the wider discourse of our culture to unknowingly appropriate positivist concepts, categories, modes of knowing. It is a testament to the power of positivism that it is so resilient—many of us believed the beast was slain back in the late 1970s and early 1980s when the emerging discipline seemed to turn away from cognitivist scholarship to academic discourse theory—or, to wildly oversimplify, from Flower and Hayes to Bizzell and Bartholomae. We were wrong.

Positivism lives. It is the ruling discourse of the U.S. public or civil culture and has been for some time. It is a discourse within which “sure,” if not “certain,” knowledge in a posited “material” reality is privileged. Knowledge is reduced to knowledge that is external, observable, evident, operationalized, and formalized. The world and its phenomena are divided into pieces or components or fragments. Social life in the discourse of positivism is approached with methods, regardless of their current sophistication, long ago associated with the hard sciences, particularly quantitative methods. In the discourse of positivism, to know means to measure. It is a discourse that views alternative ways of knowing with at least suspicion. In fact, there is a tendency in the discourse of positivism to render less “pragmatic” discourses and their accompanying ways of knowing as metaphysics, nonsense, or beyond language and rationality. Most importantly perhaps, “Positivism, generally speaking, implies an acceptance of the scientists’ or observers’ categories as valid; as a consequence, this has often meant an imposition of meaning by the (so-called neutral, value-free) scientist—a form of cognitive domination by the ‘expert’ of the actor” (Sarup 22; emphasis added). The subject of knowing in the discourse of positivism is situated in such a way that the world is evident; it is a fact or at least a chain of facts or soon to be “discovered” facts. We can see the effects of positivistic discourse in the perennial question we composition teachers get early in the term from our undergraduates—“Do you want the facts or our opinion in this paper?” Positivism reigns in the classic rejoinder of Joe Friday in Dragnet, “Just the facts, ma’am.” It is a “just the facts” sort of discourse.
So what are the traces of the discourse of positivism that lace their way through the language/power of Bousquet and his critics, and what is to be done about them?

First, there is a return to the despotism of the number. I balance my checkbook and count the prices of my groceries in my cart as well as the next person, and I certainly do not want the pilot of the jet plane I take to the CCCC convention or my general practitioner doctor to give up all knowledge based on numbers. I am not anti-number. Rather, I think we need to always question whether the number is the best alternative for knowing in a given situation. We need a rhetoric of the number, then. Even the federal government, the mother of all number crunchers, when it began to support in the 1980s qualitative research on literacy of the sort that we have in Shirley Brice Heath’s *Ways With Words*, acknowledged that there are other ways to know. In an age of the outcomes assessment movement in which outcomes (let us call it what it is—behaviors, behaviors that harken back to behaviorists like B.F. Skinner) are supposed to be “measurable,” we need to imagine other, better ways to know. We can do better. Murphy “does the numbers” on the part time labor situation, Harris congratulates Murphy on doing the numbers, and Bousquet contests the numbers (see Bousquet 505–07). And so it goes. Numbers breed numbers. They appeal to the discourse of positivism and its need for instrumental knowledge that can be easily manipulated, distributed, consumed. Yet, we must always keep in mind that numbers, when people and their everyday lives are concerned, are reductionist. Numbers can’t know people.

The English professors of the middle of the twentieth century built their raison d’être on this recognition. The New Critics, contrary to common understanding, were not arguing that literary study was the opposite of (positivist) science. To the contrary, John Crowe Ransom—in a unpublished manuscript, *The Third Moment*, as well as in his published works—argued that it is *everyday life* that is in opposition to positivistic science (Jancovich 22). Everyday life is rich with detail and textures and shifts of consciousness and senses and alternative ways of knowing, while positivism reduces this, ultimately and ideally, to numbers. Literature, in Ransom’s formulation, tried to transcend the emptiness of abstraction personified in the number—which is after all a piece of writing, no less than literature—by effecting a return to the complex experience of the everyday. Literature for Ransom and the others provided an alternative way of knowing to positivistic discourse. If everyday life in all its complexity and buzzing confusion constituted the first
moment of a spiral of knowing, positivist science with its gray abstraction and its graphic number is the second turn of the spiral, while literature both moves to another level to the third moment being writing and knowledge still, but a kind of knowledge that negates and transcends positivism and returns in a fashion to the everyday. I am not advocating a return to formalist literary study, but I am arguing that we need to be wary of the seductions of the number and reductionist knowledge. We need to imagine alternatives.

But the question of number is probably the least important of the traces of positivism. More important is the acceptance by Bousquet and his critics of several of the most venerable of the positivist categories. The great dichotomy of positivist discourse is "the individual versus the social." The critical theorist will always be alert to avoiding that and will try to imagine alternatives. Bousquet accepts that binary in its complete form and simply embraces the opposite pole from Harris, Murphy, and Miller:

Despite the evident sincerity of this line of inquiry, I'm profoundly unconvinced that a management theory of agency and what I call the rhetoric of "pleasing the prince" is particularly useful—much less necessary—to the project of transforming institutions. I prefer instead a labor theory of agency and a rhetoric of solidarity, aimed at constituting, nurturing, and empowering collective action by persons in groups. (493; emphasis added)

Harris, Murphy, and Miller argue for an individualist agency while Bousquet puts forward collective agency. Bousquet writes "But in the pragmatist-managerial version of materialism, collective human agencies are conspicuously absent"; "...empowering collective action by persons in groups"; and also "...the professional and managerial compositionist can likewise shed the desire for control and embrace the reality of collective agency" (511, 494, 518; emphasis added). Let me first say that I totally agree that university faculty, graduate students, and adjuncts need to form one big union and organize as one collective bargaining agent for better working conditions and for the good of our students. One of Bousquet's best points is precisely that, when he disputes the common sense of managerialism in terms of its effects on students. That case is presumed; it has not been made. Bousquet wisely points this out:

Despite its rhetoric of "student need" and "customer service," is the university of job-readiness really good for students? If it is really
designed to serve student needs, then why do so many students drop out in the first year and fail to graduate? If it is more efficient to reduce education to vocation, then why does it cost more and more money to go to college? . . . Exactly who receives the “economic benefits” (if any) of lowered salaries, reduced services, and lowered expectations? Why are so many young people underemployed if they are being increasingly “well trained” for corporate life? (513)

However, by accepting the individual/social binary, by seeing agency as either individual or group, Bousquet and others ignore the last thirty years of theory, which sees dangers in this simplification of agency and tries mightily to imagine the ways that agency is not simply individual or social, but something more. Michel Foucault in *The Archaeology of Discourse* begins to explore the possibility of locating agencies within and between discourses, for example. Postmodern feminist theory is extremely concerned with imagining nonpatriarchal concepts of agency that go beyond either individual acts or collective movements. At the very least, activity theory focuses on the continual shifts and transformations that individual and collective undergo through signifying functions, that is by means of historically and culturally situated language acts (see Wertsch; Vygotsky; Engeström et al.; Zebroski).

Once we put our oar into that water, once we accept as fact the “individual versus the social,” we find ourselves back in positivist country talking about subjective opinions and objective facts. And so in Bousquet’s article, we find that the discourse reproduces these categories at precisely one of the most important moments of his argument, when Bousquet is attempting to account for WPA subjectivity. He says,

> While promotion can be experienced subjectively as a change of class status (“the working class can kiss me arse; I’ve got the foreman’s job at last”) and is usually accompanied by material privileges, it is probably better to view the differences between lower-level management and labor as indicating a change of class loyalties, not an objective change of class status. (498)

I had three immediate reactions when I first read this: one, humor at the line of worker comment on class consciousness; second, that yes, I follow the argument and probably agree with the substance; and third, a chill going up my spine. That chill was a pre-recognition of the dangers lurking in the phrase “objective change of class status.” Crimes have been committed in the name of the “objective historical conditions,” and so we
must eschew this concept. By locating this link in his argument in the discourse of positivism, a positivistic Marxism, Bousquet opens the door to the effects of twentieth-century Marxism, which used the very concept of objective conditions or objective class position to distinguish "false consciousness" from "authentic consciousness," the "base" from the "superstructure." Yet, critical theory initiated by the Frankfurt School in 1920s Weimar Germany rejected this. And the theorists of 1968 tried to imagine the world, and agency, in a different way. Other similar references in Bousquet ("A materialist view ... would situate ... in the objective conditions of labor created by upper management ...") and the use of "material" to mean the objective facts of environmental working conditions, rather than shifts in social relations, locate important parts of the argument in the discourse of positivism that at times lurks like a reef just under the surface of article (500). I, for one, do not want to return to the old discourses of positivistic Marxism; since the Frankfurt School in the 1920s, there has been a general recognition in leftist circles in Western democracies that this is not the direction our intellectual work in critical theory should go.

The last trace of positivism in Bousquet’s article and in the arguments of his adversaries referred to in that article that I want to examine is the way the discourse constructs institutions and agency. This is a long running dispute I have had with the discipline (see Zebroski, "Symposium"). So my comments here are not directed at Bousquet alone, but also to any scholar who wants to think about "institutions" and "change," and I believe that includes Porter et al, Harris, Murphy, Miller, and many more. A discourse of positivism as an extension of the individual versus social dichotomy constitutes the nature and positions of institutions and change agents as one of universal stasis (the institutions) that is put into motion by an "external" change/agent. Even when, as Bousquet does, we posit a collective agency, the relationship remains the same. A world is at rest until "we" put it into motion. We are change agents. A passive world sits there and needs changing and takes it. It is the Cartesian cogito. I am alive and active; the world—everything else other than the I—is dead and passive, including institutions.

Yet, if agencies are somehow threaded through institutions, institutions cannot be static. They may look unchangeable, but they are changing everyday. From our first-year composition class that I meet on Monday morning to the global capitalist system in the twenty-first century, change is the starting condition. Change is the reality, not stasis. Only a discourse of positivism sees the world and institutions in the world
as (relatively) unchanging. In fact, positivism is threatened to its core by that changing world and tries to stop it—categorically, conceptually, methodologically—at the grassroots level. The discourse of positivism is the attempt to try to control the world in change, to predict it, to render it as a fact rather than as a question. Positivism tries to shut off the social imagination. But institutions are not simply “changeable”; they are dynamic and in change all the time.

Most of the calls for change agents to change the world begin with the notion that the world just sits there and is not changing. There is a social engineer sense to this concept that perhaps Ross Perot touched on in the famous claim in his 1992 presidential campaign that he was going to lift up the hood, look into the motor of the federal government, and do what had to be done to fix it. That is how I read nearly all calls for social action in composition and rhetoric of either left wing or right wing variety. Both participate in a positivist discourse of stasis. Both appropriate the discourse of social engineer.

But looking at the first year writing course, what I see is change. The students are different every year, they are different through different parts of the course, and their subjectivities—like ours—are shifting continually every day. Students change our institutions every hour of the day “from below,” (see Thomas Miller for the history of English as a subject from below) and this does not begin to get at changes made by fiat, ex cathedra, from above. Change is what capitalism needs and creates and ultimately is threatened by. So when I go into “institutions” I do not have to carry either the individualist baggage of Porter et al (institutions R us—institutions would seem to be toys that we buy, wind up, set into motion, and play with). Nor do I carry in the baggage of Bousquet—WPA discourse is the core, stable, given, subjectivity in composition and must be removed. Nor do I see disciplinary institutions like English or composition and rhetoric as unchanging over the last hundred years (as do Harris and Miller). Rather, I see changes happening before my very eyes, changes that are constantly being erased by the powers that be. I see resistance of heroic dimensions in the everyday. I see anti-structural holes all over the Swiss cheese of institutions (see Turner, Readings). I go into the classroom and even faculty and administrator meetings about outcomes assessment with hope.

So let me end with hope. Maybe it is one of the prerogatives of age. I have never been more hopeful in my professional life, in part because I do see some shifts in the students entering college in 2003 compared to the ones I have taught in 1978, in 1988, in 1998. In every first year writing
course I teach—and three of the four courses I teach each term are first-year composition—I see a few students who are increasingly interested in social class and social justice, and who have serious doubts about the current social arrangements. Each class has two or three vocal leftists in it. To be sure, they are exceptions, but I simply do not remember even these exceptions to be so numerous in earlier years of teaching at the university. But I also see a lot of social formation going on within composition and rhetoric. Bousquet sees composition as a management science. I too see that community and strongly dissent from its views. I too am with Bousquet when he rejects the “structure of hopelessness” that underlies it (495). I also believe with Bousquet’s citation of David Harvey that our moment in history turns on our ability to open up spaces of hope in our professional and disciplinary, not to mention civic, discourses.

But I also look around and see other discourses, other communities of dissent. I think our undergraduate students and the folk finishing doctoral degrees and going into composition and rhetoric have far more power, collectively and individually—though they probably do not feel that—than the WPAs who now reign. Grassroots change is there in our everyday lives—teachers see it and live it all the time—and so-called change agents need to enter a discourse that will make these worlds visible. They need to see the constructive change already going on and imagine ways to tap it. As far as his argument goes, I support Bousquet’s claims. But I think his article probably necessarily downplays some reasons for hope. Most composition and rhetoric people who finish doctoral programs have multiple tenure track offers. Certainly, most of them are not employed as adjuncts. (Do we know what the terminal degrees are for those employed as adjuncts to teach composition? There is a “number” and a “fact” I would like to know, all the while I also am supporting better working conditions for whoever they are, in one big union.) Further, most composition and rhetoric people are not WPAs, have no desire to be WPAs. Many ignore or question the discourse and subjectivities of the WPA. There are plenty of tenure line jobs in English departments (often without WPAs) at those very colleges that Bousquet somewhat dismissively notes in passing. He points out that “historically there have been plenty of ‘teaching intensive’ assistant professorships requiring little research and plenty of teaching, as in the community colleges and most liberal arts colleges” (504). I currently work at one such college. We have no WPAs in our department of English, and we shall not have any. The faculty in my department are more vocal supporters of social justice than many of those whom I previously worked with at a
Research I institution where half the writing faculty were WPAs of one sort or another. Small universities—as well as community colleges—are the places where the action is. Bousquet implies otherwise in his throwaway comment. Whence the WPA subjectivity taking over the field? It may well be increasingly important to the top elite of the field—in the journals and in the conferences. The Thomas Watson Conference coming up in 2004 is reportedly only about WPA work this time. But the disciplinary apparatus and its apparatchiks are neither the discipline nor the profession, nor even an approximation of either. (Zebroski, “Toward”). As important as they are, it is a category mistake to view the journals, even the JAC, as the discipline or field or as reflective of the discipline or the profession.

Social imagination. That is what the profession needs to work at making visible. We need locally and globally to imagine and compose new social arrangements. We need to imagine and compose communities of dissent. We need to imagine social class in new ways, acknowledging first how social class now has changed and is changing from class formations before 1970. The discourse of positivism polices social imagination, permitting only certain possibilities and prohibiting a galaxy of others. We need to open spaces of hope in that and other discourses. As another older explorer once invited, “Come, my friends, ‘Tis not too late to see a newer world.”

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Works Cited


