

Reflections on Work and Activism in the ‘University of Excellence.’

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The University, through its students, faculty, staff, and alumni, strives for excellence and educates students to the highest standards.

Place and Promise: The UBC Plan

Excellence has the singular advantage of being entirely meaningless.

Bill Readings, *The University in Ruin.*

Excellence is the goal contemporary society strives for: excellence in sport, in business, in art, in scholarship, and in life in general. Yet as Bill Readings so pointedly observes, contemporary society has emptied the idea of ‘excellence’ of meaning. The search for excellence structures workplace competition, student recruitment, and the evaluation of practically all aspects of the contemporary university environment. In its operational mode excellence is little more than a set of quantified indicators—dollar value of grants, number of publications, ranking of publication venue, completion rates of students, and so on. These indicators are tabulated by individual, unit, or university and then ranked accordingly. Deriving from the tautological market principle that those who win are by definition excellent, being top ranked makes one excellent. There is, however, a problem if too many people get the reward. The crux of excellence is its reliance upon failure as the foil against which it is itself determined. Excellence is no absolute; it’s a normative measure that relies on failure and the threat of failure to propel peo-

ple to engage in acts of self-exploitation simply to keep their employment or their place in the university of excellence.

It is critical to note that this is not an argument for incompetence, an excuse for inadequacy, nor a call for the mediocre. My focus is on the way that excellence as a concept (not as a quality) is tied into the ideology of neo-liberal capitalism. Capitalism in general is a system by which mechanisms of a free market are used to regulate and control human transactions and engagements. There are obviously historically contingent and regional variants of capitalism. What I ask the reader to focus on is the way in which excellence has become a core term for a series of labour management practices that have insinuated themselves into the belief system of academic labourers. The power of the neo-liberal concept of excellence is that it presents as a quality academics all aspire to while simultaneously undermining the possibility of actually obtaining it. Our work becomes measured by quantity and placement of output: “so long as one

publishes with the prestigious academic presses and journals, one's publications are 'excellent'" (Wang 2005:535). The paradox is that we become embedded within the hegemonic discourse as we attempt to labour within the context of our workplace: we are, in a manner of speaking, damned if we do, damned if we don't.

This paper is an autoethnography of the university of excellence. That is, I draw from my personal experience as a student and then professor within a series of North American universities. In this paper I reflect on three linked, but autonomous, social moments within my scholarly career: 'On Strike!' a story of student radicalism; 'In Struggle!' a story about academic labour, and; 'New Proposals (Again!),' a manifesto for action.¹ Each of these moments revolves around a particular aspect of the university of excellence, its structure and location within the wider society, and the ways in which engaged progressive political action might intersect with the realities of our everyday work and lives.

On Strike!

The social space of 'student' provides—at least in theory—the opportunity and capacity to act that one appears to lose when enmeshed within mainstream employment and respectable middle age. It is a social space that gives license to radical, anti-social, or experimental behaviours and perspectives (see, for example: Pfaff 2009). This notion is well captured in that famous old saw: "If you aren't a socialist in your youth you have no heart. But, if you're still a socialist in middle age you have no brains."

The student social space is facilitated by our society's extended notion of late childhood; that is, the social categories of teenager and youth. This makes an engagement with alternative futures possible while simultaneously diminishing their importance through a folk model in which such experiments are discounted as the 'antics' of youth. It is not, however, a space of total freedom. Possibilities are constrained by historical facts, cultural forces, and the general structures within which people finds themselves. Yet it is

this very possibility of change and innovation that gives power to student protest movements. As a faculty member within the university of excellence I see contemporary students struggle with the possibility of political activism within a context that has changed significantly since my own days as a student activist.

The memories of the earlier generation of the 1960s and 1970s student radicals overshadowed my own student radicalism in the 1980s. Their stories of struggle made it sound as though it had all been done before. Yet, as is often the case with youth, our optimism and excitement in the face of what was new to us propelled us forward. In my circle we found Rosa Luxemburg's idea of spontaneous struggle and the mass strike beguiling even as we overlooked the importance she placed on organization and the historical moment. Nonetheless, we saw this as a means to organize and advance in the face of a deepening attack against public education and an emerging agenda that later became familiar to us as neo-liberalism.

The universities of the 1980s were in the early phases of the new corporate university of excellence (Readings 1996).² They were still partly in recovery from the protests of the 1970s, but they were also striding forward with new forms of privatization and techniques of labour control. Universities followed industry with the establishment of two-tiered contracts for academic labourers: one set of rules for tenure-stream/tenured faculty; a much less rewarding set for a growing body of part-timers (Patterson 2001). At the same time tuition fees and class sizes exploded across North America. The radical call to make university scholarship meaningful was degraded into a less progressive utilitarianism linked to notions of economic efficiency and job training. This is the moment within which I entered into student politics.

I came to university having grown up in Prince Rupert, a northern British Columbia resource dependent community, where strikes and labour conflict

1 These sections were original presented as a part of a trilogy of papers at the annual meetings of the Canadian Anthropology Society (CASCA).

2 This is not to say that universities have ever been anything more than a central part of the ideological apparatus of capitalist societies. However, there have been a series of forms, the corporate university of excellence being only the most recent.

had been the normative backdrop against which one learned about the world. Born in the early 1960s, I am perched at the end of the baby boom and the beginning of what fellow BCer and author Douglas Coupland (1991) called “Generation X.” My political coming of age was formed in the shadows of *les enfants soixante-huit*.³ Though I vaguely recall the 1967 centennial ‘Canada song’⁴ from TV commercials it is the shocked tones of family conversations and the accompanying harsh black and white news reels of the declaration of martial law by Canadian Prime Minister Pierre Elliot Trudeau in October 1970⁵ and the Kent State killings⁶ that brought the wider world to my attention. And, while I do recall joining my cousins in their TV room to watch the first moon landing in 1969, it was the fall of Saigon⁷ in 1975

3 The ‘children of 1968,’ as the generation of protest came to be called in France.

4 Canada song <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IE0nhnwNcgU>

5 The 1970 October Crisis was Canada’s late 20th century experience with radical left politics and radical Québécois nationalism. Early in October 1970 James Cross, British Trade Commission in Montreal, was kidnapped by the *Front de libération du Québec* (FLQ). A few days later Quebec Labour Minister Pierre Laporte was kidnapped by the FLQ. In response the federal government invoked the War Measures Act (WMA), the first time in Canadian history during peacetime, which led to a military occupation of Montreal. The WMA suspended civil liberties and allowed for the arrest without charge of several hundred political activists in Montreal and across Canada. James Cross survived his kidnapping, but Laporte was summarily executed by strangulation.

6 The Kent State University shootings occurred in the context of a student protest against the US invasion of Cambodia. Members of the Ohio National Guard who were policing the demonstration killed four students and wounded nine others in a 13 second barrage of bullets. Over the course of the previous three days escalating student protests had lead to the conservative university administration, acting with the State government, to call in the National Guard. However, the very fact that the students were unarmed and that several of the dead had not even been involved in the protest fueled American and world-wide opposition outrage. The Kent State shootings became a pivotal event in the anti-war movement of the 1970s.

7 Saigon was the capital of South Vietnam and the base of US military operations during the Vietnam war. In April 1975 the US were finally pushed out of Vietnam. US citizens and supporters were evacuated by heli-

that resonates most strongly in my memory.

These global events played in the background in my hometown but also set the stage for the material conditions of the everyday. We too had our own crises and conflicts. The 1970s was the turning point of the long post war economic boom. High interest rates and low rates of growth combined with a growing resistance on the part of capital to working class demands; these were the conditions out of which the neo-liberal assault began.⁸ By the 1980s the ‘new right’ was in full swing and privatization, retrenchment, and debt reduction became the language of the day.

Back in my hometown the rising cost of resource extractive industries—in terms of capital investment requirements and environmental impacts—was progressively undermining the local economy. Working class struggles were increasingly on the defensive. From a working class point of view the demands of green activists was seen as yet another form of middle class dilettantism and meddling. The strengthening movement and legal support for indigenous title and rights claims was increasingly supported by capital while simultaneously being experienced as prejudicial by the non-indigenous members of the working and petty bourgeois classes (Menzies 1994). This experience of working class and indigenous struggle provided the context for my engagement in the university as a student.

The universities I attended in the 1980s and early 1990s were in the throes of the neo-liberal transition. The idea of education as a right was being replaced by a concept of education as a commodity to purchase. Measures of economic efficiency were being applied with increasing rigour in the face of budgetary cutbacks from government funding agencies. The

copter. Striking images of people rushes the gates of the US embassy as overloaded helicopters, some with people barely able to hold on, flooded world news programs. It was a humiliating defeat for the world’s then leading super-power. But it was also a powerful and jubilant event for many who opposed the war and who saw in the US occupation of Vietnam a blatant act of imperialist aggression.

8 In Prince Rupert labour strife was a strong component of the 1970s. I have written about one aspect of this struggle within the local fishing industry (Menzies 1990, 1992, 2001b).

following two stories of student activism occurred in the context of the emergence of the university of excellence and the imposition of a neo-liberal agenda.

Solidarity Coalition

Following their election in May of 1983, Premier Bill Bennett and his Social Credit Party proclaimed a 'new reality' had arrived for British Columbia.⁹ The provincial government immediately began a radical transformation of provincial services and programs in a series of actions that was to foreshadow the next three decades of provincial politics in BC. Under the 'new reality' six thousand provincial employees were to be laid off, the labour code was to be revised in favour of business, and social service, healthcare and education programs and budgets were to be cut (Carroll and Ratner 1989; Palmer 1987; Quine 1985; Ratner 1998:110-112). Despite a growing opposition in the streets and loud opposition in the legislative assembly, the passage of an omnibus package of legislation seemed to be progressing without serious challenge. It is from this political moment that the Solidarity Coalition (a broad-based alliance of community groups and labour organizations) and Operation Solidarity (the trade union wing of the protest movement) was formed. As the summer progressed to autumn, the protest movement ramped up to a full-blown province-wide public sector strike that threatened to spread into the private sector industrial unions.

As an undergraduate student and student politician at Simon Fraser University (SFU) in the early

1980s, I was actively involved in a grassroots network of students whose political links were closely tied to extra-parliamentary leftist groups such as Socialist Challenge, International Socialists, The Revolutionary Workers League, elements of the New Democratic Party and the now defunct Workers Communist Party—an intriguing and complex alliance of divergent left groups, most of whom had their genesis in 1960s New Left politics. There were of course other elements involved and the emergence of postmodern lifestyle politics were already evident in our organizing meetings.

As student activists we saw the growing Operation Solidarity/Solidarity Coalition as an opportunity to shift the balance of power from the top-down unionism of the day to a grassroots organized mass movement that might actually topple the government. Thus we joined with the 'prepare the general strike' committee, a left faction of the trade union movement that was gaining grassroots support from wood and mill workers in the metropolitan Vancouver region and in the interior of the province. For the first time in more than a decade, the Simon Fraser Student Society called a special general meeting of the student body that achieved quorum (over 500 people). We voted to join the strike.

From our point of view as student activists we drew upon the strength and public legitimacy of the Solidarity Coalition in advocating within our classrooms prior to the walk out, and then in organizing our picket line work where we actively stopped cars, busses, and pedestrians from entering campus. We entered into the area of conflict partly out of the excitement of the moment and partly out of a belief that through this action things could be made better. Perhaps we could have made a real difference had the more conservative union movement leadership not lost their nerve. Clearly, leadership does make a difference and in the absence of a coordinated political organization outside of the social democratic power structure of the NDP and the BC Federation of Labour it was not possible to shift the narrow economism of the union establishment. From within the centre of student activism and protest we understood the possibility of progressive change even if we lacked the real political reach to make it happen. The

9 The Social Credit Party in BC had its roots in a depression era political theory. The theory behind 'social credit' was the notion that the depression was caused by a lack of disposable income. This gave rise to the famous $A + B = C$ theorem. That is, money in people's hands (A) leads them to spend (B) which combine to drive the economy (C). The practical application of this was for the government to give people money to spend. By the time Bill Bennett was elected Premier in 1983 the party was on the vanguard of the neo-liberal agenda. The party was also a dynasty that Bill Bennett inherited from his father who had formed the first Social Credit Party in BC in 1952 and, with a three year exception in the 1970s, it was the governing party of British Columbia until its scandal-ridden collapse in 1991.

university of excellence, as one of the cornerstones of the neo-liberal agenda, was triumphant. There was a general understanding of the criticalness of the political juncture but the established progressive and union leadership didn't seem to realize the long term implications of the loss.

CUNY Strike

The City University of New York is a venerable public institution consisting of 23 separate campuses including the Graduate School and University Center, senior colleges such as City College, Hunter, Lehman, Queens, and junior colleges which—at least in principle—are designed to meet the higher educational needs of the residents of New York City. For decades CUNY has been a key focal point of assimilation and integration of aspiring entrants to the growing 20th century middle class.

Widespread community-based struggles in the 1960s and 1970s created new openings for students of working class, minority, and immigrant roots. Two key issues helped establish this entrée: an open admissions policy that undermined the restrictions created by class privilege and a tuition policy that kept the cost of access relatively low compared to other public universities and colleges (in fact tuition had been free for over 100 years). Most of these gains have now been undermined by New York State's own brand of neo-liberalism. Open admissions has effectively been removed by the cutting of all upgrading courses, persistent funding cuts, and the arrival of standards of 'excellence.' The same global issues that were instrumental in sparking the Solidarity Coalition of 1983 in BC also set the stage for the CUNY strike of 1991.

The attacks against public institutions in New York throughout the 1980s and 1990s were part of a more general attack against the public provision of social services, education, and health. University administrators were trying to meet funding shortfalls through increased tuition, restrictive admissions policies, and the undermining of educational services in general. Governments were interested in privatizing and divesting themselves of costly social services such as public education. Market mechanisms were becoming the flavour of the day.

My involvement in the CUNY Strike began

in 1990 as a new doctoral student and occurred in the context of the first Bush war against the mid-east. One of my friends recently reminded me that during that fall we ran a poster featuring pictures of Mario Cuomo, then Governor of New York, W. Ann Reynolds, Chancellor of CUNY, and the late Saddam Hussein, the former president of Iraq. Under their pictures our caption read: "Who is the real enemy?" We were facing a massive increase in tuition fees and a nearly debilitating budget cut. From this perspective, the representatives of political elites in the US seemed far more of a threat than any distant political leader.¹⁰

The CUNY strike was system wide. Spurred into action by student activists at the City College of the City University of New York (CCNY), groups of students began taking over their campuses throughout the CUNY system. By the end of the occupation more than two-thirds of CUNY was under student occupation. At the Graduate Center we organized an action in support of the CUNY colleges. Our core group of a dozen or so people was comprised primarily of anthropology students. We shared a common socialist political orientation that informed our approach to organization. Whereas the CCNY students used a cadre-type system in which only those directly involved could participate in decision-making, we opted for a participatory model of democracy. Thus, as our occupation proceeded we held a vote each day on whether to continue or end our occupation. With a process and plan in hand, we took action several days after CCNY students took over their campus with the idea of holding our campus in sup-

¹⁰ And, as history has shown us, the threat of Iraq was more myth than reality. In the first Bush war the Iraqi Army essentially dissolved under the assault of American aerial bombardment and ground assault. Many of the horror stories of Iraqi atrocities (such as the infamous baby incubator hoax) turned out to be false. The real atrocity was the thousands of ill-equipped Iraqis burned and bombed as they fled Kuwait City. The second Bush war, initiated in response to the claims that Iraq held weapons of mass destruction, has also proven to be based on a falsehood—there were no weapons of mass destruction. In the wake of a decade of warfare Iraq seems ungovernable; a country in turmoil that is now, more than ever before, likely to spawn America's much feared Islamic Terrorists.

port of the other striking CUNY students.

In the early 1990s the CUNY Graduate School and University Center occupied an 18-story office tower in mid-town Manhattan, just across the street from the research centre of the New York Public Library and Bryant Park. The ground level of the building had an open mall that connected 41st and 42nd Streets with a public walkway. Overnight a set of security gates were lowered to close off the mall, but normally these gates would have been up by the time of the planned takeover. In previous years' occupations, students had simply taken over the public mall and that had been our intention. However, when we arrived the security gates were down. Our symbolic takeover of the public mall became a real occupation of the entire building.

We had to show our student identification to enter the building past the security gates and into a lobby by the main bank of elevators. Once our first small group was in we asked the security guards standing there to leave the building. "This is a student occupation. We are in control of the building now," we told them. All but one of the guards agreed to leave. Later that morning one of the student occupiers forcefully expelled the remaining guard. Once we had the building firmly under control, we called in other students who had been waiting nearby.

Our guiding principles were those of radical participatory democracy. In practice this meant that we held a public open air meeting each day of the occupation. Anyone who wanted could vote on whether or not to continue the occupation. Inside the occupation we also had meetings to discuss how things were going, draft and approve public statements, and to consider the position to put forward in the following day's open air meeting. Our notion of radical democratic practice emerged out of our particular idea of radical socialism and our critique of anti-democratic variations of socialism and mainstream politics in which dissent and diversity are suppressed in favour of a so-called common good. We were motivated by the ideal of participatory democracy encoded in the twin concepts of trust and risk. That is, for democracy to work one must place trust in people to be fully engaged; but also, we must be willing to take the risk that things will not work out as one hopes.

We started our occupation as a consciously symbolic act. That is, we realized that simply taking over a piece of real estate had no independent value or meaning outside of the wider context of struggle. The Graduate Center occupied a position of prestige within the CUNY system, but it was not a center of power. The power of our action was as an act of solidarity with students at colleges like Bronx, CCNY, Hostos, Hunter, Lehman, or Queens where the majority of New York students attended. Yet, as the occupation progressed the perspective of the participants shifted toward what I came to call a militant liberal perspective in which the physical control of the building became the central issue. As the occupation deepened, the students who joined us came more and more to feel that controlling the graduate centre building meant that we had control of real power and lost sight of the wider context within which our actions existed.

The militant liberals—students who were part of the then popular post-modernist academic movement—argued that holding control over the building was in and of itself sufficient to cause the university to negotiate with us and to meet our demands for a tuition freeze. Those of us who had organized the occupation argued that our only power lay in our ability to extend our struggle beyond the building and to forge real political linkages with local trade union and community movements such as we saw represented in the college-based struggles. With the lesson of the soviet failure to build 'socialism in one country'¹¹ we rejected the idea that a group

11 Socialism in one country' refers to the Stalinist idea that it was possible to create the conditions of a classless society by turning inward and in ignoring the world around. However, this is not in fact possible and, in the Soviet case, led to horrendous atrocities and loss of life and ultimately created a state capitalist regime that shared with the west a form of corporatist control over labour through a managerial class. At the core of the socialist argument is that revolution may well start in one country but that the path toward a true communist society requires the constant expansion of the revolution outward until all vestiges of capitalism are eradicated. Stalin's approach was initially made out of necessity in the face of revolutionary defeat but it ultimately became a rationalization for the autarkic authoritarianism of Stalin's USSR.

of elite outsiders (most of us at the graduate centre were out-of-state students) could build a progressive movement in one office tower. Eventually a compromise was reached that allowed us to hand over the building to the administration while holding on to some modest political gains.

The militant liberalism that emerged in the course of the CUNY strike at the graduate center has its echo in the radical posturing of small 'l' liberal academics who publish biting critiques of the powers that be but do nothing in their own workplaces or home communities. This is a politics that denies the reality of political struggle and instead fetishizes radical text and clever theory. It is also a form of academic politics that reveals the extent to which working classes have been forced into retreat (Callinicos 1990). While the power of BC's working class in 1983 was still sufficient to mount a major defensive struggle, by the 1990s the capacity of New York's working class movement was fractured by race, ethnicity, and the debilitating effects of the American neo-liberal agenda.

In Context

The Solidarity Coalition and the CUNY student strike were both situated within particular local contexts. However, they were also local responses to wider global processes in which those in charge of the global capitalist system were attempting to shift the balance of power back toward capital. During the long post-war boom that created the conditions for the so-called affluent society (Galbraith 1998) working class people had managed—at least in the western economies—to push their standard of living to levels not previously seen. Facing the threat of workers winning more than better wages, western ruling classes entered into an historic compromise with labour (Przeworski 1985). As conditions changed over the course of the post-war decades this compromise became less tenable to the ruling classes and the compromise broke apart—hence the rise of the neo-liberal agenda.

Operation Solidarity/Solidarity Coalition was part of a broad-based social moment that linked trade unions, political parties and community groups. Other examples of the solidarity coalition

can be found in the mid 1990s struggles against the neo-liberal government of Ontario,¹² and in the weaker protests against the neo-liberal government of Gordon Campbell in BC since 2001.¹³ What sets

12 Though many commentators locate the origins of the neo-liberal agenda in Ontario with the 'common sense revolution' of Mike Harris and his conservative government (1995-2002) it was in fact under the social democratic (New Democratic Party or NDP) government of Bob Rae (1990-1995) that neo-liberalism was applied in its classic sense in Ontario. The NDP has been the traditional party of the Keynesian compromise in Canada. The party has attempted to govern, when it has been in power, through a combination of ad hoc social policy spending (i.e. housing, healthcare, education) combined with middle of the road economic policy that maintains the rule of capital. This form of happy-face capitalism seems to work in periods of economic growth. However, when capitalism is in crisis social democratic governments have lacked the stomach to take over the commanding heights of the economy and have instead retreated into fiscal policies that are indistinguishable from mainstream pro-enterprise parties. Rae retreated from his social democratic roots made in 1993 after he watched a CTV news documentary on the fiscal crisis in New Zealand (Crow 1999:184). Fearing that only a radical neo-liberal approach could 'save' Ontario from economic disaster Rae compelled his caucus colleagues to introduce a new 'social contract' that froze public sector wages, opened and rewrote collective agreements (something that would happen again in BC following the election of the Gordon Campbell BC Liberal government), and enforced mandatory days off without pay (which came to be called "Rae-Days" by disgruntled workers). Wage rollbacks were coupled by an austerity budget that slashed public sector spending. Rae's economic policy turnaround ushered in a decade of social cuts and deterioration in public services, the ramifications of which are still being felt in Ontario today.

13 Gordon Campbell's provincial BC Liberal Party was elected in May 2001. The Liberals defeated a discredited ten-year old New Democratic party government. Under the BC NDP the provincial government had tried to walk the line between fiscal restraint and targeted social project spending. Despite this, the general direction of the NDP's fiscal policy was aligned with that of Bob Rae's Ontario NDP government. The Campbell innovation was to come in hard with a massive series of fiscal cutbacks, government restructuring, privatization of core government business and services, and to legislate new collective agreements across the public sector. Where the NDP had vacillated between cozying up to business and demanding support from their traditional supporters in labour, the Liberals had no such problems and sys-

the Solidarity Coalition apart is that it marks the end of a long wave of working class resurgence in British Columbia. The Sacred attacks were part of the opening salvo of neo-liberalism in North America.

The CUNY strike of 1991 represented the end point of a similar movement or period of social advance and prefigured the political transformations of neo-liberalism within public post-secondary education in New York State. But in New York issues of race and ethnicity heavily overwrote the dynamics of the struggle. Whereas the State University of New York (SUNY) was predominantly white, the CUNY system was predominantly Latino and African-American. The roll back of state funding had a disproportionately negative effect on CUNY where funding was already only 80% on a per student basis of the SUNY system.

These local particularities shaped the possibilities and dynamics of student activism. In BC the politics were class politics. In New York class politics were mediated through the lens of race. As a student engaged in militant political struggles there was a freedom of movement that is not possible as an employee of the university of excellence. However, as the next sequence of this paper discusses, new avenues of action emerge even as others are taken away

In Struggle!

Radical posturing is easy to find within the pages of our academic community's journals, magazines, and

tematically removed from appointed office all those not directly supportive of their political agenda. In the university sector this can be seen in the face of government appointees to Boards of Governors. In the early years of the Campbell government the trade union movement tried to rally support. Aside from a few showcase rallies on the grounds of the provincial legislature and sporadic protests from parents, teachers, and assorted community organizations, the trade union movement seems to have restrained itself to quiet lobbying and acquiescence to the neo-liberal agenda. In the midst of the current global economic crisis, BCers seem quiet as they await the promised 2010 Winter Olympic boom that is said to be coming. With massive drop in BC's resource sector revenue (upon which the province of BC relies) combining with the opening of most public sector labour contracts in the spring of 2010 (post-Olympics) quiescence is likely to turn into protest.

newsletters. Anthropologists and their kindred colleagues seem able to muster righteous indignation over child labour in Latin America, inhumane and misogynist cultural practices in Africa, or even the barbarity of neo-colonialism practiced on indigenous peoples in 'our' backyards. But where is the everyday practice, the real social solidarity, that one might be excused for believing should accompany virtuous and radical sounding pronouncements in print?¹⁴ This section of the paper explores the ways the structure of the academic workplace shapes and constrains the possibilities for progressive action.

Social Solidarity and the Academic Workplace¹⁵

So, why does the academic workplace engender a mode of social interaction that eschews social solidarity even when many of its practitioners publicly advocate what might loosely be termed a progressive

14 I should hasten to add that not all academics engage in radical posturing—some are downright regressive in their outlook. Many academics find the competitive zero-sum game of the academic pursuit of excellence perfectly acceptable. At the very least the honesty of those who find the system palatable in its current guise is admirable, if self-serving. What does stick in the craw, so-to-speak, is the ideological bafflegab produced by some academics and academic administrators who speak of collegiality on the one hand while they are busily engaged in undermining collaboration and solidarity on the other through their active support of market mechanisms. While of a different sort, the professional book radical is equally tiresome as they pronounce on conflicts and situations in far off places, produce volumes of radical sounding prose, but do nothing to make a real difference where they work and live.

15 To my colleagues who may misread the underlying sentiment as suggesting that there is in any way a personalized sense of grievance I want to set that aside right from the start. What I am talking about in this section is the structural aspect of our workplace and the ways in which the university of excellence militates against a full-fledged form of social solidarity. This is not to say that my immediate workplace environment lacks collegiality—it is a very collegial place to work. However, the social structure of the workplaces necessitates that gains by one end up being losses by another in terms of the economic and social status rewards within the workplace. So, to my dear friends and colleagues I ask that you read on understanding that this is a structural—not personal—critique.

politics? The academic workplace can be described as one that is premised upon confrontational discourse and individual competitiveness in which career advancement is determined by individual gain in a zero sum game.

The material conditions of the academic work site do indeed have implications for how people interact with each other. My partner, who works in a public high school, often comments on the degree of collegiality and collaboration in her work place. Teaching resources are shared freely between colleagues. Ideas on how to manage classrooms and challenge students to learn are freely shared. Through these everyday communications and collaborations, a community of care and support is created. This degree of workplace solidarity extends beyond a focus on work and lies at the core of the militancy of teachers in the public schools system. Teachers in BC have a long history of job action that must in some important way draw on these everyday forms of collaboration and cooperation in their workplace.

Prior to my appointment at UBC in 1996 I worked in BC's fishing industry as a commercial fisherman. The world of fisheries is one that requires social collaboration. Even at times when one may not like one's crewmates one must find ways to work together as the very physical requirements of work necessitates collaboration and cooperation in the work process. Working in close proximity with a small group of men under conditions where what I do affects the abilities of everyone else and vice versa leads to a social solidarity the likes of which I have never seen in the university of excellence. This is not to say that the world of fishermen or the world of public school teachers is an idyllic one of solidarity and bliss. What it is to say is that the structures under which individuals work shape and constrain their capacity to effectively collaborate, and that the world of a research university faculty member is one that is specifically orientated in a manner to undermine social solidarity in the workplace even as the ideology of collegiality is proclaimed.

Academic work is, in one sense, a form of glorified piecework. That is, we are rewarded by how much we produce. This is a deliberate and provocative claim. Clearly, most tenure stream faculty receive

a base salary. University performance or merit pay systems are based on, among other things, publications. A friend recounts an anecdote in which their biology instructor explained to the class that each paper he published was valued at about \$20,000 over his lifetime. He linked each published paper's value to merit pay and advancement through professorial ranks. He also suggested that it increased his capacity to negotiate individual salary increases. Many teaching-intensive post-secondary institutions have regulated pay scales. This is not, however, the case in research-intensive universities. For those of us working in research-intensive universities in countries such as Canada and the United States salary increases over and above standard career increases or general raises are individually negotiated. It is in this sense that I provocatively refer to academic labour as glorified piecework. I would add that while the situation in a North American research-intensive university may not be the normative case, it does set the criteria against which other forms of academic labour are measured.

Back to glorified piecework: as in any other workplace governed by piecework there is no fixed limit on what is expected. Of course, we implicitly understand that this is part of the university of excellence—we drive each other forward competing for scarce rewards of merit pay and advancement through the academic ranks knowing that if we slack off someone else might work harder. Those working outside of the research-intensive university rail against the teaching load that limits their ability to meet the publication goal required to gain access to the few privileged positions in the so-called 'top-tier' universities. It's an old trick that capitalists have used to inspire productivity, but it is always intriguing (and somewhat saddening) to watch how otherwise intelligent people internalize and argue for this dehumanizing work practice under the guise of excellence in scholarship.

Academics, like other professionals, have a fair degree of freedom in setting certain aspects of their conditions of employment. However, the hierarchical nature of tenure and promotion committees is such that effective control is placed within the hands of a relatively small group of academics at each institution, many of whom have participated in the manage-

ment structure of their institutions as departmental chairs, program directors, deans, etc. While the system may vary from institution to institution the basic structure is similar. Tenure cases are reviewed first by a department (or equivalent) level committee of already tenured faculty. Their recommendation is passed up the administrative hierarchy to a Dean's (or equivalent) review committee that then sends its recommendation up to the final committee at the top administrative level of the institution. At each level in the process there is a committee of faculty and administrators of increasing seniority. The final decision normally rests with the institution's top academic administrator and approval by such board of governors or regents that may exist.

It is the peculiarity of our current workforce structure that, as jobs tightened in the 1980s and 1990s (and then again in the current period following a brief opening from the late 1990s to the 2007/8), following the 1960s/70s post-secondary expansion, hiring became more focused on actual rather than potential output. Thus, those hired during and up to the early 1980s were likely to be hired without PhD or publications. However, by the mid 1990s the going rate at UBC and similar universities of excellence was a minimum of three peer-reviewed publications at the point of hire. Since the late 1990s the focus has been on so-called 'top-tier' universities (which translates as American private or Ivy League universities) and, in the process, Canadian degrees become by definition sub-par (see, for example Silverman 1991)¹⁶.

Progressive Action in the Workplace

The paradox of the university of excellence is that, in focusing on measurable output over the content of academic production, a space for progressive action is created. However, the focus on output over content can have some rather embarrassing, and in fact, fraudulent effects. Jan Hendrik Schön, "an up-and-coming physics and nanotechnology wunderkind"

employed by Bell Laboratories managed to commit one of the largest hoaxes in recent times (Reich 2009:1). His falsified data were published in the 'top-tier' science journals *Nature* and *Science* giving him the number two ranking globally according to the ISI Web of Science ratings for 2001; a clearly 'excellent' researcher by all measures of the day. His work was totally fabricated even if it was based on an idea that was eventually found to be correct. As science writer Eugenie Reich comments, the environment of competition for employment and advancement creates a climate in which fraud becomes possible "as almost all scientists, including those at universities, are working with the next grant application or major publication in mind, and it is not unheard of for researchers working on a project that is under threat to promote preliminary data more than they otherwise might" (2009:9).

The paradox of 'excellence' as an organizing principle is that it drives output rather than content. Here we can see a critical difference between the university of excellence and what Readings calls the university of 'culture' in which culture, tied to the project of the nation state, is the animating principle of the university (1996:62-118¹⁷). Within the university of culture what an academic said or published was more important than how much they said and published. In the university of culture the question of power was "structured in terms of the inclusion or exclusions of subjects from cultural participation" (Readings 1996:117). Thus, anthropologists who dissented during the US cold war lost their jobs for supporting anti-racist positions, not necessarily nor specifically for pro-communist positions (Price 2004). Intriguingly, the primary threat to US capitalism and the cultural idea of Americanism in the 1950s and 1960s was (and, I would suggest, remains) racial equality. This likely arises from the ways in which race and class in the U.S. are intimately linked (Brodin 2000, 1998, 1989). Thus, as long as academics in the university of excellence maintain their productivity at the rate being set by their colleagues a limited social space is opened up for progressive activity.

16 The preference for hiring non-Canadian Ph.D.s can be seen in a review of faculty in the 29 Canadian anthropology departments listed in the American Anthropological Association's 2009 guide to departments where 59% of faculty in Canadian departments offering a Ph.D. programme have non-Canadian degrees.

17 See also Price 2004 for a discussion of how the university of culture disciplined dissident anthropologists.

Putting Words into Action

Since my first appointment at UBC I have been involved in a number of local solidarity actions. Some have gone unnoticed by the university's administration; others have brought some minor criticism upon me.¹⁸ I have also been involved in my community residents' association and, while my children were in school, in school-based parent advisory councils. All of these actions are fairly mainstream and 'normal' activities for many people in our society who also participate in civil society organizations. What has been different is my effort to locate my participation in efforts to democratize these various organizations and to build effective linkages between divergent groups on the basis of workplace organizations.

Early on in my employment at UBC the Asia Pacific Economic Co-operation (APEC) summit was held at UBC. The main events were housed at the university president's residence and the Museum of Anthropology—venues directly adjacent to my own office. A large community and student opposition to the event developed in the months leading up to the summit. The opposition was in part a reaction to the planned attendance of Indonesian dictator Suharto; but the more important point of opposition was the role that the APEC summit was playing in the global neo-liberal agenda. APEC was part of the international movement toward liberalized global trade and the consequent undermining of local economic security for working people.

Students and their allies ramped up their organizing and political protests as the university prepared

for the coming world leaders. The fall 1997 protests at UBC became infamous in Canada for the actions of an RCMP officer dubbed 'sergeant pepper' who sprayed protesters with pepper spray with little warning during one of several clashes between police and activists.¹⁹ For those of us who had experience with political protests in the early 1980s, in which conflict with police had been common, the carnival-like performance of the No APEC protests seemed quite different. Student activists dressed up as clowns, beat on drums, and pirouetted their way toward police fences. The police responded with pepper spray and arrests. The protesters seemed surprised with the police response but continued to advance on the police. Many of the young protesters who had experience in the environmental movement were those who 'wanted' to be arrested marched toward some predefined line and were then peacefully arrested by the waiting police. The rough and tumble of police violence was a new experience for these student protesters who complained vociferously following their arrests. Nonetheless, the protests continued under the eyes of snipers perched on nearby buildings, police in riot gear, and undercover agents embedded in student protest organizations.

As a junior faculty member I didn't seem to realize that I should remain silent and stay out of trouble.²⁰ Drawing upon my then recent experience as a student activist and my understanding of the importance of having faculty support, I attempted to have our department take a formal position of opposition to the APEC leaders summit at UBC. However, my senior colleagues politely set the issue aside citing academic freedom as one justification not to take a position. Two senior colleagues later approached me. Each in their own way implied, rather than stated, that I should keep my head down during my pre-tenure period. Neither of them brought up the issue directly, but both visits were too close to the event at

18 During the illegal 2005 public teachers strike I worked with two colleagues at UBC to organize a series of public demonstrations (one of which caused the university administration to send warning letters to faculty and support staff advising us that participation in the rally outside of lunch or coffee breaks would constitute an illegal withdrawal of labour) and a university forum (which caused a university administrator to send me series of late night emails advising me that I could not call the forum a UBC event unless my "career path" included related publications). See at: <http://blogs.ubc.ca/new-proposals/2005/11/teachers-strike-forum-videos/>). In addition, with parent activists, I co-organized strike support activities at various schools throughout Vancouver including authoring a blog in support of public education.

19 For a timely and thorough account see Andrew Larcombe's master's thesis "It was like the gauntlet was thrown down": the No! to APEC story (2000).

20 I am glad that I was not paralyzed by a false fear that some academics invoke by way of rationalizing their absence from political engagement. It is my sense that my life has been better for living my convictions than by trying to hide them.

hand to really be understood as anything other than advice on how to survive in the academic workplace.²¹ While I did not directly enter into the active protests I did, nonetheless, take up a role as witness to on campus protests during the summit as part of an ad hoc group of similarly minded faculty. The APEC lesson for me was that I needed to ensure that my activism was combined with academic output so that when my turn for review and promotion came up there would be enough 'output' to overshadow the 'deficiencies' of political activism.²²

Over the course of the next decade or so I had many opportunities to put this lesson into practice. From support work for students who took over the university president's office in the mid-1990s through a series of protracted and at times bitter labour conflicts between the university and its various trade unions, I had many real-time opportunities to put words into action. During this period of time I also became involved in our university faculty association and had a first-hand experience of conservative unionism at work.²³ What became apparent to me is

21 It is likely that since my two senior colleagues had come of age within the university of culture, they were very much concerned that what a person said and published could have serious implications for career progress.

22 Constraints upon publishing and the mainstreaming of peer review publications toward the lowest common denominator of academic fashion is the subject of an entirely different paper. It is important to note here that the pressures to only publish in, or to only count, so-called 'top-tier' (i.e. U.S.) journals as fitting measures of excellence is a growing problem. The net effect of these programs is a narrowing of publications in social science and humanities fields where faculty may self-censor and only publish what they think will be acceptable in the dominant U.S. journals. For colleagues who see their primary attachment as the imperial heartland this does not pose a significant problem. However, for those of us who see relevance in maintaining an autonomous Canadian tradition of scholarship this is a real problem that needs to be confronted.

23 Academic labourers, especially those of us in the university of excellence, often are quite supportive of systems of privilege and differential reward. Nonetheless, most of the people who were involved on the UBC Faculty Association during my three terms on the executive were dedicated scholars who found injustice and inequity in employment at UBC to be distasteful and

that being actively involved, even from a position of political dissent, is not in and of itself an obstacle to continued employment in Canada.

From my vantage point as a faculty member within the university of excellence, I can see the relative privilege that has been granted to us. We have a degree of freedom and flexibility that few other workers have. With this comes responsibility and obligations. If we wish to do more than simply participate in the reproduction of the dominant society and its attendant social inequities, then we have an obligation to go beyond radical words and directly involve ourselves in the democratic struggle in our work and communities. We need to be cautious to not act naively or without some form of wider support. We should, however, act. In what follows I outline some of the small ways that one can engage in progressive politics within and against the university of excellence.

New Proposals (Again!)

Kathleen Gough challenged anthropologists in 1968 to place their talents and personal political commitments behind the national liberation and anti-imperialist struggles of the day. Gough's call for new proposals are as relevant today as they were more than 40 years ago. As U.S., British, Canadian and other Western troops wage war in far-flung lands, workers in the heartland are confronting a resurgent ruling class intent on dialing back any advance or advantage that working people have gained. As anthropologists our arena of struggle straddles the sites in which we conduct research and those in which we engage in teaching and writing. This duality should give us a unique purchase from which to engage in transformative politics. It is instructive to review the key points of Gough's argument before proceeding further.

they tried to address these imbalances. Despite the rather small 'c' conservative nature of the UBC faculty association, a slate with close ties to UBC's administration took control of the executive in 2007 on a platform of, among other things, rewarding excellence. Their major grievance was that the faculty association seemed to be anti-research and far too interested in supporting mediocre faculty then in building excellence. For the new executive, awarding excellence was the order of the day.

New Proposals for Anthropologists: 1968

Anthropology is a child of Western imperialism. It has roots in the humanist visions of the Enlightenment, but as a university discipline and a modern science, it came into its own in the last decades of the 19th and the early 20th centuries. This was the period in which the Western nations were making their final push to bring practically the whole pre-industrial world under their political and economic control. [Gough 1968:403]

Gough goes on to describe how most anthropological research until World War II had been conducted in societies colonized by the West. In the years after World War II, this situation had begun to change as the majority of the colonized world achieved independence or was in the throes of anti-colonial wars. Yet, this degree of political autonomy was threatened by an attempt by the U.S. government to re-impose Western power.

Western dominance is continuing under new guises, even expanding and hardening. At the same time, revolution now begins to appear as the route by which underdeveloped societies must hope to gain freedom from Western controls. [Gough 1968:405]

The question, says Gough, is “what does an anthropologist do who is dependent on a counter revolutionary government in an increasingly revolutionary world?” (1968:405). In answer to her own question Gough suggests two answers: anthropologists either become historians of small scale society or “admit that our subject matter is increasingly the same as that of political scientists, economists, and sociologists” (1968:405).

Anthropology, according to Gough, had failed to recognize that the world was a global system defined by imperialism (cf. Wolf 1982). Anthropologists had “virtually failed to study Western imperialism as a social system, or even adequately to explore the effects of imperialism on the societies ... studied” (1968:405). While noting several important exceptions (Eric Wolf and Peter Worsley among them) Gough comments “it is remarkable how few anthropologists have studied imperialism, especially the economic system” (1968:405). Those studies that have emerged often “assumed an international capi-

talist economy [without question] in its framework” (Gough 1968:406).

Gough concludes her essay with a short list of new research questions that would bring anthropology forward to face the realities of the world system and save the discipline from retreating from meaningful research. Each of her questions challenged anthropologists to put their skills to work to honestly evaluate the implications of imperialism for the world’s majority populations.

We should do these studies in *our* way, as we would study a cargo cult or Kula ring, without the built-in biases of tainted financing, without the assumption that counter-revolution, and not revolution, is the best answer, and with the ultimate economic and spiritual welfare of our informants and of the international community, rather than the short run military or industrial profits of the Western nations, before us. [1968:407]

Gough’s call for a more relevant and engaged anthropology in 1968 was part of a movement in anthropology that was beginning to respond to the changing realities of fieldwork in former colonies. What have become commonplace concerns in today’s anthropology were novel and even threatening to the discipline in 1968. Most anthropologists today highlight doing research that has meaning and value for the people being studied; most anthropologists try to be in some way collaborative and engage communities as partners in research; most anthropologists see themselves as in some way progressive, if only in a small ‘I’ liberal sort of way. Yet, when Gough called on the discipline to literally get their hands dirty working to make the world a better place, anthropology instead made a turn to literature and textual representations. Gough’s concern with understanding and then transforming economic and political coercion in the then newly post-colonial transnational workplaces was set-aside in the competition for academic output in the university of excellence.

New Proposals for Anthropologists: 2010

Our workplace, the contemporary university of excellence, is at the forefront of neo-liberal experiments and campaigns to target the most vulnerable and disadvantaged of the working classes. The university of

excellence is governed by principles of accountability (emphasis on count) to the detriment of content, quality, or social equity. For example, class size limits are more likely to be set by national magazine report cards and related measures of excellence than by recourse to effective pedagogy.²⁴ This is the context within which we produce papers, books, and conduct our research. It is also the terrain within which today's struggles for dignity and wellbeing is occurring. Our academic world is no longer (if it ever was) an isolated ivory tower. Our universities of excellence are at the core of the new world order. Our responsibilities and obligations thus call upon us to directly confront these forces in our workplace and through our actions.

First the practical concern: is there time to do all the things one needs to do to keep one's job (or to get one!) AND be actively engaged in progressive politics. As a parent of two who entered kindergarten in the same year I started working at UBC I say "yes there is time in the day!" However, the arena of struggle may shift.

For much of the last decade I was involved in my children's schools on parent advisory councils. Perhaps this is not so exciting as organizing demonstrations against dictators (as per the No APEC organizers) but, I would argue it is crucially important work just the same. One of the critical lessons taught by the old-line communist party union organizers in BC is that respect is built through everyday action. Networks developed through the everyday create the relationships that one is able to build from. These networks create the organizational base from which one can organize. These are the moments that have potential to make real change. As a parent I entered the world of my children's school and engaged in a politics aimed at democratizing and improving all children's learning experience. This involved activities from advocacy on behalf of other parents through to

direct action in support of striking teachers. These are small 'r' reforms, but from these can come the capital 'R' revolutions in behaviours and society that will indeed usher in a better world for all.

As academics in the university of excellence, we are expected to win grants and publish papers. In this we have a lot of autonomy. I often say to my students: "Yes we must publish, but we get to choose what we publish."

For me this has led to a series of articles and films on research methods (2005, 2004, 2003, 2001a) in place of what I may have originally wished to publish. This shift reflects my concern for conducting ethical research and to resist the undue influence of the competitive drive to publish as much as one can. To me, a respectful research engagement means that one takes the time to consult and to work with the people about whom we write. Some researchers, lost in the competitive rush to publish, prioritize their own advancement and desires over the people about whom they write. They do so without regard for consequence, seeking only the recognition that might come to them for rushing toward publication. It is possible to do honest, accurate, good work that is considerate of the people about whom we write; work that can contribute to making our world a better place. To do so should be an ethical and moral value to which we subscribe.

In our teaching we have an obligation and a responsibility to engage our students, to challenge them to examine and interrogate their values and their misconceptions of the world. This is not simply an activist pedagogy, it is a pedagogy based upon the principles of social justice and equality. It seems to me that learning in a context of social inequality, without understanding it or trying to do something about it, is an immoral act. Part of learning should mean learning about one's place in the world and the implications of privilege and disadvantage on our collective capacity to become fully human. Especially as anthropologists who actively engage people through our research and in our teaching, we have both a responsibility and an opportunity to put our words into actions that will create a better world for all.

Anthropology embodies a real possibility of transformative learning; but we need to take Gough's

²⁴ I was the chair of my department's undergraduate studies committee during a period when the Dean, having read a national news magazine report card on UBC class sizes, sent a directive to readjust course enrolment limits so that they meshed with the magazine's reporting structure. This allowed us to 'game the system' supposedly to boost our score on the national report card.

criticisms and proposals seriously in order to make good on the promise. What are the effects of global capitalism on people's health and wellbeing? How can we make democratic practice real and what does our knowledge of small-scale societies tell us about the possibility of true participatory democracy? Rather than studying those without power, can we renew the call to study up and focus on the ways in which local/trans-national elites have gained control over public institutions such as the university of excellence? Wasting anthropological insight on interesting, but ultimately naïve and irrelevant topics, contributes to maintaining the status quo and thus is akin to complicity in the injustices of the global capitalist system.

From Action to Words to Action

I have spent three decades now involved in post secondary education: about half as a student and a bit more as a faculty member. Throughout this time I have had the occasion to observe first-hand the possibilities of progressive political engagement. Over this same period of time the nature of the global capitalist system has transformed, matured into a condition in which it is now clearly a global system that has subordinated the central components of all economies to the logic of capitalist accumulation. An anthropology that tries to cling to the partial study of small places or through the use of multiple local spaces while insisting upon the idea of the confluence of community and culture will indeed be relegated to the dustbins of history. Now, more than ever, our anthropological work—our social science work—AND our political work needs to be located fully “within a framework of understanding of what is happening to the larger system” (Gough 1968:405). Anthropology, as a politically engaged practice, has the capacity to turn ideas into actions that can create a better world for all of us.

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