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Bureaucratic order and social purification in literary theory classrooms

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I'd like to begin my story with the words of a Cornell University student I'll call Tim, who smoked a cigarette as he spoke to me, on a cloudy day outside the library, about his experience in a literary theory course. I asked him what he thought of the theoretical texts he'd read, and he responded, "I thought they were just playing a game — a self-serving, self-gratifying game of wit. Derrida is not really telling you anything, he's just problematizing everything. He doesn't tell you anything, he just says all previous interpretations are wrong. They release your mind from social constructions, and leave you with nothing." Tim went on to say how the course had affected him personally. "There's an extended awareness," he said, "at the level of the signifier — of words, and images, of how language means. You're very aware of the frame." And he added, "There's a lot of despair. You start to question your own context. Your whole life may be some kind of — construct."

I believe that these remarks reveal what we could call the liminal zone of theory, the social margin of an intellectual world. My aim today is to examine the social order of this liminal zone, and its implications for our understanding of the universities we inhabit. I'll speak of theory in the singular, partly because that is how the locals often use the term, and partly because an interdisciplinary body of theory has in fact developed in the American humanities over the past forty years.¹ That is, I don't mean to speak of theory as a universal feature of human society (as in Marx's *German Ideology* [1978]), but rather as an indigenous label for a particular academic discourse. But I'll speak of theory in the singular because, in the eyes of students like Tim, theory

¹ For historical overviews, see Leitch 2003, Graff 1988.

is *not* simply one more academic discourse, but rather an unfamiliar and revolutionary semiotic world. It is the world that non-academics often call "postmodern," a world mesmerizing to some but contemptible to others, a world that appears quite differently to insiders than to outsiders. For insiders in literary studies, it is a world that has evolved since the 1960s from an avant-garde intellectual movement to an institutionalized and dominant professional discourse. Today, sociologically speaking, theory is the professional realm of professors (Williams 1994, 2000). But to understand how new members enter this realm, we must look to the introductory theory courses taught to undergraduates. Paradoxically, social reproduction of the theoretical field begins in classrooms that are quite peripheral to that field (cf. Bourdieu 1988). And we as see in Tim's case, this reproduction involves an intellectual and emotional struggle. He expressed disdain for the "game of wit" even as he felt a new "awareness at the level of the signifier"; he accepted that everything was a social construct, but he was left full of despair. Neither altogether inside nor outside the field of theoretical discourse, he was obliged to constantly renegotiate his position, in an academic game that, contrary to stereotypes of unintellectual students, assumed existential stakes. Although I should add that Tim seemed to take things more seriously than most of his classmates.

Historically, theory's institutionalization was more or less complete by the time of my ethnographic fieldwork in 2003, which took place in two Cornell undergraduate courses, one an introduction to literary theory and the other an introduction to cultural studies.² The literary theory course focused on different theoretical approaches to interpreting literary texts, ranging from historicist methods like Marxism and New Historicism to formalist methods like deconstruction, while the cultural studies course focused more on teaching "semiotic readings" of

² For other studies of theory and/or literature departments, see Boyer 2001, Chiseri-Strater 1991, Cusset 2003, Graff 2003, Williams 2002, Scholes 1985, Ohmann 1976.

culture.³ Both were taught as seminars by tenured faculty, and in the eyes of the professors, neither course went well. "It was a terrifically disappointing experience," one professor said to me poignantly. Judged by the standards of the one-way pedagogy that Paolo Freire called the "banking model of education" (1972) in which the pedagogical content is deposited in students like pennies in piggybanks, neither course was terribly successful. But as one student wisely observed to me, "you're always learning something — the question is what."

I believe that students learn to participate in two essential social processes: the reproduction of bureaucratic order, and the social reproduction of new theoretical elites. By bureaucratic order I mean the classroom spacetime, social hierarchy, and structure of tasks and evaluations that are codified in the syllabus and constantly recalibrated by the professor. This is not bureaucracy in the classic Weberian sense, but rather a small-scale classroom bureaucracy nestled within the larger structure of the university. By social reproduction, I refer to what is at heart a process of social *purification*. While a few "better" students are sanctified and inspired and become theory adepts, the majority are alienated and discouraged and reject theory: the bad students are strained out. Thus, even students who don't assimilate the assigned texts and who resist becoming proto-theorists are participating in social purification, by deselecting themselves from the theory elite. The social reproduction of theory thus depends on the unintended consequences of students' choices. I want to emphasize, as well, one implication of my analysis: the classroom's social order is only superficially autonomous. In fact, it can only be understood in relation to the theoretical field, and the institutional order of the university at large.

If social purification and bureaucratization are what happens in the classroom, the question is

³ Some representative course texts were Greenblatt 1990 and Johnson 1985 in literary theory, and Durham 2001 in cultural studies.

how. An answer has to begin with the fact that classroom social action is almost totally realized in discourse. During a classroom session, professors and students shut the door and remain seated, holding themselves still, and largely refraining from interrupting the official task, which is the collective construction of a long stream of talk. This talk comes in a number of distinctive genres, which I would label, for instance, professorial monologue, interrogation, textual quotation, group interpretation, and student presentation. Outside of class, too, the required interactions are discursive, and more specifically *textual*: students have to read texts written by others and then they have to write essays of their own, which the instructors have to read and comment upon. Social form, to repeat a classic insight from linguistic anthropology, is discursively emergent (Moermann 1988).

The social form of the classroom is realized in two sets of social practices, which I'll term bureaucratic and didactic. While didactic practices are those that are purportedly about the course content, things like discussions of theory or interpretations of literary texts, bureaucratic practices are those that *frame* didactic practice. Bureaucratic practices are highly ritualized and efficacious, and have the effect of constructing the necessary classroom *meta-knowledge*, that is, teaching students what and how to learn. Consider the professorial practice of making apparently mundane remarks like, "Was anyone not here last time and thus did anyone not get a copy of the revised syllabus?" or, "the 14th, next Tuesday, we're gonna have a little deconstruction workshop," or, "I don't know how far we'll get today in Marxism or New Historicism," or, "Is anyone writing on Donne or Shakespeare?" Remarks like these come at the start of a class session or in between other didactic discourse genres; they refer to and organize the flow of classroom discourse and the expectations for work to be done outside of class. Though they seem banal, in reality they are the chief source of classroom cosmology. To begin with, they organize

time and space into a moral order. Time is divided up into a sequence of class sessions, texts, themes and writing assignments; temporal relations are then constructed between these units, such that, say, the calendar of readings is aligned with the sequence of class discussions.

Deviance from the calendar is met with anxiety and condemnation: students complained, one day, because a paper was due "*only one day after* the start of a new theory." Space is socially partitioned as well, such that being *in* class is morally positive while *not* being in class is morally negative; mandatory attendance constitutes a moral structure of space.

Moreover, bureaucratic practice constructs a social and epistemic hierarchy, such that the professor is symbolically identified with power and knowledge while students are symbolically equated with compliance and ignorance. It is the professor who grades and evaluates the students, not vice versa, and the professor is uniquely authorized to choose the syllabus, to organize the flow of class discussion, and to give meta-commentaries on how the class is going. This power is sometimes most visible when it meets its limits. One day, halfway through the semester, the literary theory professor declared a moment of crisis, saying "there's a kind of slowness or reluctance in discussion... sometimes it's very quiet in here... it's not, I don't think, simply a question of group dynamics—certainly not personality or ability... [but] the enterprise of theory is not particularly engaging or important to you—I feel that you feel it's not very compelling." The professor proposed changing the syllabus to do more literature and less theory. He solicited his students' feelings, but his students responded that they *were* interested in the theoretical material, even if it was hard to grasp. One of them said, "I feel like I wanna learn about these topics because they're talked about so much in other situations and I don't really know what they mean, like new historicism or deconstructivism." Eventually, the professor asked, "How many want to stick with the syllabus in full knowledge of the arbitrariness of

syllabi?" and all but a couple of students raised their hands.

This remarkable event indicates much about the constraints on agency in the classroom, about the intersection of theory and bureaucracy, and about the role of feeling and desire in the official order. We observe that the bureaucratic order dictated by the syllabus becomes somewhat *autonomous*; although the professor was its author and manager, he proved himself incapable of altering it halfway through, in the face of students' clear allegiance to the status quo. The students, for their part, demonstrated a power of their own to shape pedagogy, or more precisely, a delegated power to ratify or reject pedagogy. Yet their vote to retain the original syllabus was in no way a free choice, but rather was shaped not only by pedagogical conservatism but also by a clear *interest* in trying to learn theory, in becoming theorists. The two social processes I'm analyzing came together in this moment.

Consider the fact that the professor had prefaced his remarks by saying "I don't usually do this, but today I'm going to give you my opinion on the way things have been going in class so far..." Here we can see a rule being honored in the breach: namely, that direct expressions of feeling are *external* to classroom interaction, that desire is normally kept hidden. Yet the paradox is that, in interviews and casual conversation, students and teachers alike are alive with emotion, casting the classroom in the light of longing and fantasy. This emotional, affective dimension of the course was, it seems to me, central to classroom practice, even if normally unarticulated.

Fantasy plays a central role in the process of theory's social reproduction. It appears even in students' own motivations for taking the courses, especially in the case of the literary theory course, which was aimed at 3rd and 4th year literature majors. Students would tell me that "I'm really interested in deconstruction but I have no prior background," that "you read other criticisms and they allude to this stuff," that "they're talked about so much in other situations," or

that "I've never been exposed to this in its native context." In short, in an milieu saturated with theory like Cornell, many undergraduates acquire a curiosity or interest in the prestige associated with theoretical discourse. This interest crystallizes around alien theoretical terms like "structuralism" or "social construct" or "context" or "the frame": students often spoke as if they imagined power and prestige inhered in the words themselves, as if their inability to recognize foreign theoretical terms was an index of the terms' significance and value. Among students, also, I often observed fantasies of clarity, emphatically expressed desires to understand, and great frustration with incomprehension. I heard students say, "We really want to understand the material and don't," or "I leave this class every day hating myself," or "Whenever I walked out, I was unclear on what I was supposed to learn." Fantasy and desire coalesce around a specific institutional ideology of knowledge, an ideology of knowledge as something objectified in texts, something reified that the individual is supposed to appropriate and internalize. I should add, parenthetically, that ideologies of knowledge seem to be central to the institutional order of the university, and would be a rich field for further ethnographic study.

Of course, not all students are alike. I found, in fact, that students' and professors' views of understanding and incomprehension varied according to their position in the theoretical field. Even idioms used to describe incomprehension varied. One beginning student said, "they [that is, the texts] weren't making sense," while a more advanced student remarked that "It becomes a battle between you and the readings." The professor, by contrast, would say something like "they didn't get it." In other words, students were quicker to see incomprehensibility as an intrinsic problem of the *texts*, while professors were more apt to view incomprehension as a failure of the *reader*. And in interviews, I discovered a distribution of *blame*. Beginning students blamed the professor or the texts for being hard, or even impossible, to understand. More advanced students,

on the other hand, condemned their struggling classmates as "not willing," or said that they "haven't done the work" or "are stupid or didn't read carefully." It seems to me that these moralistic statements derive from the precarious position of semi-initiated theory students. Not yet in a position to take their theoretical competence for granted, they try to distinguish themselves morally from other undergraduates. One more advanced student answered, when I asked why she was a better student than her peers, "because I'm suited for the analytical study of literature and have a wider base of knowledge than others." For her, theoretical competence and belonging derived from *inherent attributes of the person*.

Professors, too, actively participated in making their students into theorists. The cultural studies professor at one point proclaimed to her class, "You've lost your communicative innocence — *you're semiotic readers now*." This was, I would observe, a baptismal, performative moment. When a professor dubs her students "semiotic readers," being a semiotic reader is cast not just as possessing certain skills, but rather as embodying a certain type of personhood. For his part, the literary theory professor ended his course by asking, "How have your ideas about critical theory changed? *How would you tentatively define yourselves critically at this moment?*" Being a critical theorist thus appeared almost as a Romantic project of self-formation and personal reinvention.⁴

This has to be understood within broader folk categories of personhood within the university: among the faculty we find "theorists," "researchers," "critics," "18th century British literature specialists," and so on; among the students, there are "athletes," "engineers," "activists," "frat boys," "gay pierced pot-smoking hippie poets" and many others. Insofar as a central social function of the American university is the production of persons (Culler 1988), the

⁴ This Romantic intellectual project was formulated, for example, in one of Wilhelm von Humboldt's comments on intellectual institutions: "their essence, manifested in the individual, consists of the combination of objective scientific and scholarly knowledge with the development of the person" (1970[1810]:243). See also Lüth 1998.

production of theorists needs, ultimately, to be understood as part of a much broader institutional process. And an intriguing feature of this phenomenon is that "becoming a theorist" has surprisingly little to do with the traditional sense of "classroom learning." Professors routinely produced a rhetoric of progress and a rhetoric of theoretical personhood *without knowing what, exactly, their students had learned*. Indeed, I believe that individual learning has only a rather oblique relation to the classroom social order or to the social processes that (I claim) occur there. Becoming a theorist, it seems to me, is less directly about mastering a specific, well-defined set of "knowledge" and more directly about enactment of a set of longings and belongings. Classroom bureaucracy is as much about reproducing a naturalized social order as it is about orchestrating the discussion of pedagogical content. And these processes are realized, on the one hand, through an intricate system of discursive interaction, but on the other hand, through the imaginative and emotional lives of their participants.

I don't have time here to provide all the ethnographic detail necessary to support my analysis. Let me, instead, draw out a few of its implications. To begin with, ethnography of universities stands to benefit greatly from its ability to connect micro-social interaction with larger institutional and historical structures. This avoids the pitfalls of research on universities that all too often is too specific (e.g. Strodt-Lopez 1991) or too general (e.g. Slaughter and Leslie 1997) to account for lived experience. But perhaps more importantly, I would point out the disturbing ethical implications of my analysis of bureaucracy and social reproduction. Post-structuralist and post-modernist theory often seems to pride itself on its political and conceptual sophistication, but, to judge by the classes I studied, this theoretical community exists only by way of excluding and alienating many students on the margins of its activities. Post-structuralist literary theory is

famously reflexive, sometimes obsessively reflexive (e.g. Johnson 1977), but its reflexivity seems to stop short of examining its own means of social reproduction. I would argue that a reflexive anthropology, too, would need to consider not just what anthropologists do or don't do, but also how people become, or are kept from becoming, anthropologists in the first place.

And this suggests a broader ethnographic and practical question. Much research in universities has been focused on stratification and exclusion according to race, class, religion, gender, and other such predictable sociological variables. However, exclusion from the theoretical field I studied did not correlate directly to any of these traditional dimensions of social identity. We need to investigate, therefore, the specifically intellectual and professional forms of exclusion that directly constitute our own expert communities. "Academic knowledge is not for everyone," an anthropologist once told me. I think we need to examine the social processes that make that statement true.

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