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The NYU Strike as Case Study
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Introduction

The 2005-2006 strike at New York University elicited strong emotions. Confrontations among peers, hostilities within departments, and divisions between intellectual allies created tension, anger, and deep dismay for many graduate students, professors, undergraduates, deans and administrators. Can asking scholarly questions about last year's strike assist in reestablishing the intellectual bonds that unite the various members of academic communities? Can asking questions about the strike make future labor conflicts more transparent for parties on all sides?

In the following pages, I circumvent direct reportage and instead turn the NYU strike into a case for sociological study. Sociologists who reduce high-stakes events to mere cases of the play of social forces may seem to unduly distance themselves from their objects of study. But as a teaching assistant who withheld my labor in 2005-2006, I welcome some distance from the polemic, aggravation and fear that characterized life during the strike. This article uses the querying and pedantic tone of a research proposal to cultivate that sense of distance. Research proposals are usually backstage documents written in order to rehearse a methodology or secure funding. By going public with the artifice of the research proposal, I hope to render the difficult and well-worn events of the NYU strike in the universalizing, detached terms of academic discourse.

This proposal uses the case of a graduate assistant strike at a large research university to pose three sets of questions about power in higher education. First, what might explain faculty members' support for or opposition to a graduate assistant strike? Second, what can we learn about interestedness and consciousness by examining how faculty exercise power during graduate assistant strikes? Third, what long-term consequences might arise from graduate assistants' efforts to restructure relations of power by striking? The proposal will also consider some methodological problems associated with conducting academic research about academia. The proposal puts forth theoretical questions that could be addressed by interviewing faculty members, by conducting archival study of faculty career trajectories, and by following the future career paths of graduate students who were enrolled during a strike. Scholars of education, work, communication, and social movements may contribute to their respective fields by gathering the empirical data necessary to address these questions. Stakeholders in labor struggles at academic

institutions may wish to consider these questions in order to more effectively pursue change or resolve conflicts.

Faculty Support for and Opposition to Strikes

Do certain ideological features of American academia predispose faculty members to support striking graduate assistants in labor conflicts? Or do certain institutional features of faculty life suggest that faculty members would be unlikely to support any attempt by graduate assistants to restructure relations of power? What might account for variations in faculty support for or opposition to a graduate assistant strike? I will begin by explicating some of the ideological features of the world of American academia, before turning to some institutional features of the field in which academics operate.

Academia is one of only a few modes of employment in which political ideologies are routinely central to the products of workers' labor. In publications and in lectures, scholars routinely analyze social problems, inequalities, power, and the politics of knowledge and representation. Academic research into healthcare, education, due process, or human rights, for example, rarely celebrates the status quo. Although exceptions rule, the broader implications of academic research frequently lend support to ideologies or policies generally associated with the political left.

Intellectual curiosity may in and of itself indicate a belief that the current state of knowledge in the world requires amelioration, not to mention that the world itself could stand some improvement as well. Liberal agendas and reformist movements lie at the founding of entire disciplines, including sociology, political science, and even demographics. Marxism, feminism, queer theory, and critical race theory have clear ideological and political bases and agendas. Overall, ideological and political orientations associated with American academia might predispose faculty to support strikers in labor conflicts.

By contrast, a consideration of the institutional features of research universities might predict that faculty members would be most likely to oppose striking graduate assistants. Most faculty members must teach undergraduate classes in order to secure their institutional positions. Undergraduate teaching may impinge on the time and energy required to pursue other reputation-enhancing activities. (Some academics value excellence in undergraduate teaching, but many do not accord it the same status as publishing and other scholarly activities.) Faculty members must primarily focus their energies on research, publishing, tenure clocks, grant applications, departmental service and service to professional associations. Junior faculty feel the pressures of tenure most acutely, but tenured faculty must still concern themselves with publishing, job hunting, and other means of advancing their reputations in order to advance their careers. Faculty at universities with large undergraduate populations therefore must rely on graduate assistants to complete many tasks related to their teaching responsibilities. Departments rely on graduate assistants to teach undergraduates so that tenure-track and tenured faculty can pursue the activities that enhance the overall reputation of the department. The many institutional pressures exerted by departments and disciplines make it difficult

for faculty to pursue their intellectual agendas under the best of circumstances. The added work and complications created when graduate assistants withhold their labor as teachers, graders and research assistants may make it even harder to achieve success in an already competitive field.

Graduate assistants may be most aware of the institutional interdependencies that characterize their relationships with faculty. Graduate assistants are probably only dimly aware of the institutional relationships that faculty members, department chairs, and departments must maintain with deans and administrators. Even after securing tenure, professors must seek resources from department chairs and deans, including research funds, sabbaticals, laboratory equipment, and the capability to create new classes. Department chairs rely on deans and administrators for many reasons: they may want to hire new faculty, admit more graduate students, secure tenure for favored junior faculty, or expand their departments' office or laboratory space. Given my lack of contact with this vast area of university life, I am certain this list of the resource exchanges and dependencies that structure faculty relationships with department chairs and deans could be expanded significantly. However, even this provisional list indicates that department chairs, deans and administrators exercise considerable authority over faculty careers. Deans, chairs, or administrators may make it quite clear that faculty members or entire departments endanger their institutional positions if they fail to demonstrate the proper degree of opposition to a graduate assistant strike.

Professors not only rely on graduate assistants' labor as teachers and lab assistants, but also exercise considerable authority over graduate students' progress towards their doctorates. Advisors and dissertation committee members write the letters of recommendation that strongly influence job placement. Professors may also grade coursework, oversee qualifying exams, give feedback on proposals, mentor dissertation research and in some instances run laboratories or research "shops." The extent of professors' authority over graduate students' professional advancement may make graduate assistants feel utterly at the mercy of advisors and committee members. In the case of a strike, faculty may literally have the power to fulfill the prophecy that failure to return to work would not be in a student's best interests.

How could a researcher investigate the influence of ideological orientations versus institutional dynamics? A researcher could start by considering the intellectual histories of several disciplines in order to understand their ideological underpinnings. A researcher might develop a way to gauge the ideological content of individual faculty members' publications and lectures. Archival research might reveal correlations between support for a strike and the receipt of doctorates from certain institutions, in certain disciplines or at certain times. A researcher might also wish to examine career trajectories, professional networks, years to tenure, or other measures of job security, any of which could predispose faculty sympathies towards or away from strikers, deans or department chairs. Variations in age, gender, race, sexuality or ability could also correlate with some variation in faculty support for strikes. Investigating these correlations might be useful for gaining a preliminary understanding of faculty support for and opposition to graduate assistant strikes. But because the ideological and the

institutional explanations both seem reasonably plausible, the question of how faculty express support or opposition might be more revealing of how power works in higher educational institutions.

Consciousness and Interestedness in Mechanisms for the Exercise of Power

Mechanisms for clearly demonstrating support for a strike include allowing strikers to address undergraduate classes, moving classes and events off campus, attending rallies, or interceding with administrators on behalf of threatened strikers. Mechanisms for clearly demonstrating opposition to a strike include reporting strikers to administrators, hiring scabs to cover strikers' teaching assignments, or colluding with administrators' efforts to punish strikers. However, some of the mechanisms by which faculty exercise power during a strike may be considerably more ambiguous, including disheartening messages, the communication of rumors and expressions of concern. What do these ambiguous or "soft" mechanisms indicate about consciousness and interestedness in the exercise of power? According to Latour, soft knowledge with poorly defined boundaries is easier to produce and reproduce than precise facts, and is therefore more powerful in enrolling disparate actors (Latour 1987). Do professors intentionally exercise power softly, in order to passively but effectively shape the agendas and preferences of strikers? Or does the softness of these mechanisms reside in the degree to which faculty are not even conscious that their words constitute an exercise of power?

In the life of a department, professors have many occasions to communicate informally with graduate students – in seminars, at lectures, in hallways and in meetings. Some faculty members may exercise decorum by declining to discuss the strike with their students or with certain colleagues. In the case of the NYU strike, some professors used moments of informal contact to communicate two common "soft" refrains to strikers. The first refrain, "What do you gain by striking?" may represent an attempt to convince strikers that their demands have already been met by an administration or by departments. Attempts to convince strikers that their needs have already been met seem like cases of what Lukes calls the third dimension of power, whereby the powerful attempt to shape the preferences of the powerless (Lukes 1974). Although according to Lukes, "[t]o assume that the absence of grievance equals genuine consensus is simply to rule out the possibility of false or manipulated consensus by definitional fiat," strikers convinced that they have no grievances may voluntarily return to work (Lukes 1974, 24). The second common refrain, "I'm afraid you've already lost" may represent an attempt to exercise what Lukes calls the second dimension of power, namely the ability to shape or control an agenda (Lukes 1974). If strikers can be persuaded that their agenda is no longer viable, they may fulfill that prophecy and voluntarily return to work.

What logic of action underlies these "soft" messages, through which faculty attempt to exercise power without directly expressing support for or opposition to a strike? According to Gaventa, "the consciousness of the relatively powerless ... may be ... vulnerable to the manipulation of the power field around it" through mechanisms of power including the invocation of myths and symbols and the use of threats and rumors (Gaventa 1980, 19). Does this suggest that professors intentionally weaken a strike by delivering disheartening messages to graduate students, over whom they exert

considerable authority? Many of the faculty members who communicated disheartening messages had previously expressed support for the strike and not all of them took punitive action against strikers. According to Bourdieu, interestedness does not imply conscious reasons for action (Bourdieu 1998, see pp 75-85). Does this suggest that deans and administrators use soft messages to enroll faculty in the project of a strike's demise, and that faculty unconsciously reproduce those messages? Could interested but unconscious reproduction of soft, disheartening messages help some faculty members to resolve the cognitive dissonance between institutional pressures that militate against the strike and ideological commitments that would support it?

Methodological Concerns

Examining how faculty subtly support or oppose a strike could provide useful insights into the relationships between interestedness, consciousness and the exercise of power. In order to empirically study these relationships, a researcher would have to conduct empirical research during or soon after a graduate assistant strike. He or she would have to conduct systematic, in-depth interviews with a representative sample of faculty from several departments across the humanities, sciences, and social sciences. A researcher would have to develop a protocol for querying faculty about the meanings they ascribe to their own informal communication with graduate assistants and would have to sort out their stated opinions about the strike. He or she would have to compare the political ideologies expressed in interviewees' publications and in public communication about the strike, evaluate their positions in institutional hierarchies, and triangulate this data with the responses of other interviewees. Informal communication, rumor, gossip and casual asides would be difficult to perceive as objects of inquiry, but evidence of communication of these messages could surface in interviews with faculty or in a separate set of interviews with graduate assistants. Overall, the goal would not be to look for consistent messages from faculty, but to pay attention to contradiction, discursive tensions and subtleties.

Could any researcher – either a graduate student or a professor – expect to find enough interviewees to address these questions? Would a researcher imperil his or her institutional position by studying these questions? Even Bourdieu claimed that his study of French academia, *Homo Academicus*, did not make him especially popular among his colleagues (Bourdieu 1988). They apparently chafed at his attempt “to extend the scientific vision’s universal mode of explanation and comprehension to all forms of human behavior, including those presented or lived as disinterested, and to remove the intellectual world from the status of an exception or an extraterritoriality that intellectuals are inclined to accord themselves” (Bourdieu 1998, 75). He suggested that intellectuals’ own resistance to being sociologically analyzed might stem from an ill-placed spiritualist point of honor, a resistance to a realist representation of human action, an inadequate idea of their own dignity as subjects, or from simple narcissism. There is little to suggest that American scholars would view such research any differently than their French counterparts. However, scholars of education frequently study secondary school teachers, so perhaps their expertise could be used to develop research protocols that would not alienate university professors.

Suppose a team of graduate students, faculty and administrators collaborated on this research? Suppose that team not only represented a range of viewpoints on the strike itself, but also included experts in social psychology, communication, education, social movements and work? If such a research project were proposed in the United States, an apoplectic human subjects committee would at the very least insist on elaborate guarantees of mutual confidentiality between both researchers and subjects, as both parties would face professional risks. But suppose the research team sidestepped confidentiality entirely by using focus groups in which subjects could openly discuss and argue about a past or ongoing strike? The use of focus group to study sensitive topics may seem counterintuitive, but how different would it be from the long digressions about the strike that surely occurred during faculty meetings and other gatherings? Academics regularly argue intellectual points in seminars and retire for friendly drinks afterwards, so perhaps a focus group could draw on that spirit of collegial sparring. Could a series of structured group discussions intended for research have any role in alleviating interpersonal tension in universities affected by strikes? And could evidence from those conversations help to prepare stakeholders at universities not yet affected by strikes?

Long-term Implications of the Exercise of Power

Studying whether and how faculty express support for or opposition to a strike would certainly be challenging, but I maintain that it would be feasible if the burden of research were shared among a group of investigators with diverse institutional positions and areas of expertise. However, I also would like to suggest a relatively straightforward research question that could be undertaken several years after a strike and that would pose little risk to subjects or researchers. Lukes argues that the exercise of power includes more than just the ability to prevail in a conflict but also the ability to shape agendas and preferences (Lukes 1974). Does Lukes' argument suggest, by extension, that conflicts have outcomes besides who does or does not prevail? And could this mean that although a party may not *prime facie* prevail, it may nonetheless impact agendas, preferences, and even identities?

Follow-up interviews with graduate assistants several years after they complete their doctorates could contribute to understanding the broader implications of efforts to restructure relations of power. Will former strikers choose different types of jobs than their formerly non-striking peers? Will former strikers pursue different research topics and different types of academic appointments than their formerly non-striking peers? Will former strikers conduct their relationships with teaching assistants, adjuncts or other employees differently when they become faculty? What kind of labor practices will they design and implement as professors, department chairs, deans or laboratory directors? Will graduate assistants who cooperated on union activities with peers in other departments be more likely to pursue interdisciplinary collaborations with scholars in other fields later in their careers?

The 2005-2006 graduate assistant strike at NYU involved a great deal of discourse about identity – graduate assistants maintained that they were workers, and that they deserved the right to organize on that basis. According to Bousquet, “the fundamental unit of third-wave or graduate employee consciousness regarding the structure of academic labor

can be contained in two words: we work” (Bousquet 2002, 94). By contrast, in public forums and in written communication, NYU administrators were at pains to portray graduate assistants as apprentices, students or mentees. What implications might that identity discourse have for those whose identities were contested? I contend that academics strongly identify themselves with the products of their labor, which may be due to the relatively porous boundaries between our selves and our work. Unlike people who go to work in the morning and leave in the evening five days of every week, academics generally need not keep a regular daily schedule, our schedule changes each semester, we often work at home, we often carry our work around with us in our heads, we often work alone, and we may be called upon to relocate ourselves and our families in search of jobs. In addition, academics regularly use people’s names – Foucault, Marx or Bourdieu – to refer to the written work those individuals produced. Does “academic” constitute a master identity, such that any attempt to define scholarly activities as work destabilizes the identities of committed scholars and threatens the exceptionalism and inviolability of the academy? Do non-strikers and non-supportive faculty resist the attempt to define their teaching as work because it threatens their identities as scholars? And will former strikers find themselves in different relationships to their scholarly work and to their careers in the academy because they held fast to the idea of their teaching activities as labor?

Conclusion

I admit to having introduced three wide-ranging sets of questions and to having only roughly sketched some strategies for answering them. I will leave it to the researchers who take up these questions to make them more precise and more readily operationalized. Nonetheless, my goal was to show the extent to which a strike among graduate assistants can provide an opportunity to study the roles of ideology and institutions in the exercise of power; interestedness and consciousness in action; and the potentially wide-ranging outcomes of efforts to restructure relations of power. I hope that this proposal prompts stakeholders to articulate and investigate their own questions about labor conflicts in university settings, and that this research will serve as a means to develop novel approaches to conflict resolution.

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