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**REVIEW OF *CLASS POLITICS: THE MOVEMENT FOR THE STUDENTS' RIGHT TO THEIR OWN LANGUAGE***

by Stephen Parks

1. Stephen Parks's *Class Politics* is a work of academic history. In it, he recounts the history of "The Students' Right to Their Own Language" (SRTOL), a resolution approved by the Conference on College Composition and Communication in 1974. The SRTOL was a response to the changing demographics of higher education in the 1960s, especially the diversification of the student body and subsequent heterogeneity of skills that first-year students brought to composition classes. The resolution called for a greater understanding of and appreciation for students' use of non-standard Englishes, particularly Black English, in their written work. It grew out of the process movement, which "increased attention to the knowledge and language that students brought into the classroom," emphasizing experience over grammar (69).

2. However, the SRTOL also had an undeniable political resonance. Parks contends that "[t]he activism of the 1960s . . . placed the process movement's concern for protecting a student's language into the realm of militant politics" (69). Its more radical proponents assumed that college composition fostered a set of job-specific skills and was therefore a cog in the capitalist machine. Emphasizing process over product in composition classrooms would not only foster needed self-confidence for students, but also define writing as the expression of individual experience rather than a skill deployed in the corporate workplace. Others believed that recognizing the validity of different Englishes could be a form of social and cultural critique that exposed all such as culturally constructed. To highlight the political engagement of composition studies during this period, Parks situates the SRTOL in both the historical and social context of 1960s protest movements, notably Students for a Democratic Society, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, and the Black Panther Party.

3. By describing this historical and social context in meticulous detail, Parks hopes to bring to light a fact that was previously obscured: as the field of composition studies began to achieve disciplinary coherence during the 1960s and 70s, the debates that animated the field were deeply involved with progressive politics. Yet paradoxically, "as composition studies has increasingly defined itself as a discipline . . . it has done so through the exclusion of historical materials that connect its formation with progressive organizations" (4). Thus, his goal in *Class Politics* is "to articulate and document in a detailed manner the ways in which social protest movements have been an occasion for university-based academics to

organize across disciplines to restructure not only their individual working environments, but, more generally, the institutions of higher education" (2).

4. As Parks's conclusion makes clear, this historical reconstruction is meant to accomplish two goals: first, to understand the SRTOL as a struggle to forge connections between students, their communities, and their universities; and second, to apply the legacy of this struggle to today's universities. Parks argues that in order to achieve this goal, we need "courses and programs which provide students an opportunity to engage in the difficult work of recognizing the culture of power and finding the alliances, programs, and struggles that expand who has power in that culture" (247-248). In other words, a progressive agenda should drive curricular reform at colleges and universities. Parks notes the obstacles to achieving this goal: first, the goal fails to match the accepted work of faculty and graduate students in the university context; and second, first-year composition and writing across the curriculum courses are not adequate venues for accomplishing this task (the former because they are not required of all students and are restricted to one or two semesters; the latter because they focus on disciplinary conventions). Parks suggests that the first-year composition sequence and writing across the curriculum should be replaced by a new model: "a new core curriculum within the university where the language of the community, the college, and the country would be studied and analyzed through the integrated insights of a variety of disciplines and community organizations" (246).

5. One weakness of Parks's conclusion is that he does not give many details about what such a curriculum would look like, what students would study in it, or who would teach it. Another weakness is that although he does point out the difficulty of implementing his model, he seems to underestimate the likely resistance to progressive education by both state lawmakers and students. Certainly, in a time when lawmakers withhold money from institutions because they disagree with faculty members' research or statements, an explicitly progressive curriculum could produce a further erosion of public and legislative support for higher education. Parks also does not anticipate any student resistance to his plan, perhaps because his students at Temple University already "possess a critical sensibility about the 'culture of power.' They are aware through the history of their families how economics, racism, and sexism affect their future possibilities. They possess an almost innate sense of the harsh system into which they are trying to enter" (246-247). However, many students do not "possess a critical sensibility about the 'culture of power,'" and in fact, seem eager to deny the existence of injustice, class, and power relations. While their assumptions should be challenged, they may resist substantial curricular changes motivated by a progressive agenda.