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Interview With Paul Lauter

Leo Parascondola

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Leo: Paul, I'd like to begin by referring to "Class in the Classroom," originally a lecture you delivered in honor of Constance Coiner. It appeared in text form on the listserv of the Center for Working Class Studies (Youngstown State University) posted there by Sherry Linkon, one of its directors, in an effort to spark a discussion of the nature of the relationship between class and education. It worked very well as I remember. There was a heated exchange that lasted a while. In it, you write,

Class, I have found, remains that unaddressed member of that now-famous trio 'race, gender, class.' Over the last two decades, there has been far more widespread acknowledgment of and open discussion of race and gender in the classroom, while class has generally remained the silenced subject. In fact, in classrooms, people have seemed afraid to talk about class. They often don't know to acknowledge economic difference and economic privilege--with their entourage of conflicting social and cultural forms. Why? (unpublished text of 2nd annual Constance Coiner Lecture at SUNY-Binghamton)

Let's start with that final question: Why?

Paul: That's a good question. I guess one major part of it has to do with the centrality of the class conditioning, if you will, that is so much a part of university and college life. I'll give you a couple of instances. I started teaching as a TA at Indiana University in the mid-50s. Indiana was not at that time quite the elite institution it became later on. I taught in the English department, and we had a series of rules. There were certain things like three comma splices in one essay, and you failed the paper no matter what else you did. Occasionally, we would get students, particularly African American students from places like Gary, who had no idea that there was such a thing as the past tense. They never used "-ed" on the end of verbs; I'm sure you're familiar with things like this. And, of course, our role was basically to teach either them to speak, learn, and understand standard English...or to flunk them.

There were three two-credit English courses you had to pass at Indiana, and those were the basic "flunk-out" courses. Functionally, what that really meant was, if you projected it out on a wider scale, you either adapted yourself culturally to what the expectations of the university were about the way in which you spoke, the way in which you wrote, and the way in which you thought, or *you were out*. It was not particularly a racial or gender question as it was a class question. So, that was on the one end.

On the other end, you take somebody like me. My father was a court reporter in the New York City Courts, and I came up and started college in 1949. That was precisely the point at which government policy, carried out in a variety of ways, was to encourage social and class integration of white ethnics into the mainstream. So, we were being assimilated, and a university education was the primary way in which you were assimilated, in which you became part of that American cultural, social, and economic

mainstream. So, on the one hand, our function was to screen, and, on the other hand, learning that function and learning how to exercise it was part of our process of assimilation at the same time.

And I think that exemplifies what one of the major or primary functions of the university really is. It has to do with constructing certain class norms and maintaining those and enforcing them very intensely. At the same time, the changes that came about in the university during the 60s and 70s because of the social movements...the Civil Rights Movement, the Black Power Movement, and Feminist Movement... as reflected, for example, in the literary canon--who it was that you studied--those changes had primarily to do with race and gender and almost nothing to do with questions of class and the distinctions of class culture. Or even thinking about culture as having a class component. And although some of us read Mao Zedong's "Talks at the Yenan Forum" which were very revealing, none of that really took hold in colleges and universities. So, the changes that took place were changes that marginalized issues having to do primarily with class. Now, the source of that remark about how class disappears from the trio (race, gender, class) is something based upon experience. The fact of the matter is there's very little around in the way of textbooks, really useful writing for the classroom, that has primarily to do with focusing on class issues.

Leo: One could reasonably argue that two key moments in the expansion of access to higher education were the passage of the GI Bill of Rights after WWII and the Open Admissions and Affirmative Action struggles of the 1960s and 1970s. The student population of U.S. colleges and universities have expanded exponentially since the 50s. In the U.S. today, nearly 15 million people attend college, more than in all the countries of Western Europe combined.

Paul: Is that right? I didn't know that. That's amazing!

Leo: Yes, it certainly is. In light of what you've been saying, it seems to me that there are ideological phenomena parallel to these two events. That is, more people are aware of universities as places where a culture is transmitted and where consciousness is transformed or reconstructed. There's nothing especially revolutionary in these observations, but, undoubtedly, there's a great deal at stake in the cultural politics of higher education. I'm speaking of the notion of the university as "ideology factory," one aspect of "reproduction" theory. Such a conception is clearly related to your own ground-breaking work as a literary "canon-buster" pushing issues of class to the forefront of literary interrogation. One of the responses has been Gerald Graff's controversial *Professing Literature*, a book immersed in the culture wars of the 1980s over the transformation of the curriculum of English Studies. What's really at stake here? When we say we are (or want to be) professors of literature, what are we professing?

Paul: Initially, if you think about the period of the GI Bill, that had primarily to do with acculturating students, whatever their origins, to a certain idea of "high culture." You see that reflected in the work of people like Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren and the textbooks they produced which were enormously influential both in and of themselves and in terms of producing imitators. *Understanding Poetry*, which came out first in the late 30s, and then *Understanding Fiction* and the others (they did four or five of them) were enormously influential. The way in which they're framed, basically, if you read the "Letter to Teachers" which is the preface to *Understanding Poetry*, is that anybody can learn the aesthetic principles of poetry and can learn to appreciate and to read poetic discourse of the sort Brooks and Warren are talking about. But you see the way in which that's structured. There's a canon that they're helping to establish, although they didn't talk about it that way. It emphasizes certain forms of discourse: irony, complexity, balance...particularly, balance. You can learn to have a balanced, ironic outlook on the world which, of course, is a different outlook from those who are politically committed and who are deeply involved on the left (or on the right, for that matter).

The Brooks and Warren project was really continuous with the more general acculturating project of colleges and universities during that period, so *to profess literature*, it seems to me, in and around the

Second World War (particularly, the Cold War period) *was really to acculturate students to a view of the world* which emphasized these notions of "the vital center," to use Schlesinger's term, or to "the liberal imagination" (you know, someone like Trilling). That's what you were doing, it seems to me; you were acculturating students. And if it took, fine. It did not mean that everybody was going to go to graduate school, but, still, the experience of literary study was of this sort, emphasizing this outlook on the world, and selecting texts that would help to reinforce it...and separating those texts from the world of political and social struggle. That's a large part of Brooks and Warren, *the substitution, in a way, of literary imagination for politics*.

In the 60s, that persisted as the universities grew exponentially, and people who taught literature, by and large, expected--whatever they thought they were doing--to have a certain kind of life. I've always characterized it as sort of *tweedy*. It was nice work. You didn't get paid all that much, but it had its rewards. You didn't have to work all that hard...it was often in fairly nice places...the community was pleasant...and the students were receptive. Of course, what happened was that things began to change, particularly with the advent of open admissions. That's a longer process. Really, open admissions did not begin to take place in a serious way in most places until well into the 70s--even though open admissions was developed at places like where I taught at SUNY-Old Westbury. That was starting in 1970 or 1971, and CUNY was really later than that.

To have a real impact, it took a while, although there were complaints fairly early from many of the faculty that many of the students who were coming in had a different view of things. They were in a hurry. As one of my students once said to me, "I have the education. You gotta get me the degree." You know, in some ways, it was true, and in some ways, it was not true. They regarded the educational process with more skepticism, and I think in part because they were not at one with, and certainly not at home with, the notion of becoming acculturated or assimilated to what the university represented, particularly in a world, starting in '72 or so, in which the economic situation of working-class and lower-middle-class students was deteriorating. You looked forward with some doubt about whether you were going to get pleasant jobs and have that veneer of culture and those kind of opportunities. So, in those circumstances, there's now starting to develop a certain kind of division between what it was many of the faculty expected to be doing and *what students wanted* from them, which was often simply to get through hurdles, as they saw them, or get on to the more practical things.

That produced a great deal of tension. What we were doing, those of us who constituted part of the academic left, and, in particular, within the literary profession, we were trying to find ways of reconciling our socialist politics with what it was we did in the classroom. That was not so easy. There's a wonderful title that Barbara Kestle had for her article in *The Politics of Literature* that Louis Kampf and I edited...she used the title "Free, Classless, and Urbane." That was the notion...that we were training students to become "free, classless, and urbane." Of course, the students thought that was just bullshit. So, we're trying to reconcile what we're doing politically in the movements of the 60s and 70s with what we're doing in the classroom. That produced an enormous amount of tension in the literary profession. And I think that struggle over what it was that we should be doing, *what it meant to profess literature*, has continued over the years. That's part of what the "culture wars" were about, and that's part of what Gerry Graff was aiming at in arguing for "teaching the conflicts." Well, what was the conflict? I think the conflict had to do, among other things, with the notion of whether we should continue to socialize students to those forms of culture that we had had in the past. Or were we doing something else? And the something else was not always agreed on, to say the least.

Leo: Let me try to draw some threads together. I want to refer again to "Class in the Classroom." You write, "American ideology holds that education offers the primary means to get ahead in the society. And there is significant truth in that claim....At a still deeper level, the American educational system as a whole teaches all of us the fundamentally bourgeois values of individualism and competition." Now, you've just talked about the relationship between being "free, urbane, and classless" and acquiring credentials. Could

you speak about how you see the relationship between the ideologies you refer to here and the need for credentials?

Paul: Well, I suppose the credentials are the carrot, and the stick is things like grades and how it is you get grades. I'll give you a concrete instance of how this played out. I taught at the University of Maryland in Baltimore County...this must have been in 1969-70...I was there for a year or two before I got fired. Anyway, I used to teach a course there called "Revolutionary Literature." It was a fun course; I loved it. One of the main focuses had to do with individualism and collectivity. Because, after all, if you take Raymond Williams's understanding of working-class culture as having to do primarily with the development of collective culture (and I've been very much influenced by Williams), then that becomes very central.

So, I taught this course in revolutionary literature, and I gave the students the option to take a collective final exam or a separate final exam. The best students in the conventional sense, the best literature students, the ones more likely to get A or A-, opted out of the collective project because they knew it would be a lot of work, and it would not have any special virtue for them. They were interested in the A. They were interested in the credential. They were interested in the degree. They were interested in getting ahead in those terms. The others, partly out of muddlement, partly out of motivation, partly of socialist politics, and partly for other reasons...it was a very mixed group...they got together and did their collective final, and it was quite fascinating. They had all sorts of trouble. They had trouble disciplining people who didn't want to do the work. They appealed to me, and I said, "It's your problem. You've got to learn about it." They probably learned more about the question of individualism and collectivity than the individual students who did their own separate exams. *Of course, I got fired, ostensibly for giving a collective final. I think the real reason was that they never had had demonstrations at UM-BC before. Then Lauter arrived, and they had demonstrations. Forget the students, forget Cambodia, forget Kent State.* That's the mentality the administrators there had.

Leo: Confusing a correlation for a cause? (laughter)

Paul: There's a logical fallacy I used to teach: *Sic hoc, ergo propter hoc* or "After this, therefore because of this." That was their way of thinking. In any case, the point of it is that the giving of a collective grade and the giving of a collective final so flew in the face of the fundamentally individualistic behaviors the university encourages and demands, it may well have been the case that the Dean thought this was too far off the norm, was, in some ways, dangerous. Even as dangerous as demonstrations. They don't want students to think in ways contrary to that kind of individualistic culture that, not just the university, but all schooling encourages. I probably refer in that article to this wonderful piece by Jules Henry, his book *Culture Against Man*, which is right on the mark. He's really looking at the question of the "hidden curriculum," the noise in the classroom: What does it really teach? And that's what it teaches, above all other things.

Leo: Your reference to Henry's mention of the "hidden curriculum" reminds me immediately of Jean Anyon's piece, "Social Class and the Hidden Curriculum of Work" (*Journal of Education* 162, no. 2: 62-97). It's a study of three public elementary schools in Newark and two in adjacent suburban districts. She looks at the assumption that all the students in these five schools will receive the same quality education because they are all enrolled in the New Jersey public school system. Along with Bowles and Gintis's *Schooling in Capitalist America*, it's one of the best pieces of empirical research supporting the "reproduction" theory of education, that schooling exists to reproduce the social relations of capitalism.

You probably won't be surprised to hear that for students in the working-class school districts, work is defined as "following procedures." In the middle-class school, work is getting the right answer. As you ascend the socio-economic ladder, in the most affluent school districts, school work is variously defined as independent, creative activity or as developing one's analytical intellectual powers. Obedience, silence,

and being in your place are emphasized for children of working-class parents; independence, creativity, and being in charge of one's own cultural project are stressed for children of the executive, professional, and capitalist classes. Anyon's work, and that of many others, indicates that there are wide disparities between the promises of an ostensibly meritocratic and democratic social system and the realities of widespread inequality and injustice. Education, it seems, rather than correcting for inequality, may actually recreate it. However, there is a large body of literature which talks about the potential to transform schooling, including the university, into a liberatory social space. Can you speak about that a bit?

Paul: It's very hard, I think, to accomplish that because when students come, particularly to a residential college, it's quite traumatizing and frightening, but also opening. And so, there are possibilities that had not existed before. Nevertheless, they are not free agents. They have come through twelve years of schooling, and there is also the resident culture which is always very strong. It's very hard, therefore, to build into a college or university the opportunity for that kind of development that we would call a "free" or "safe" space. I don't think there is anything, finally, as a safe space in a college or university. A classroom is always, necessarily, a public venue. What you do there is observable by many people, not just those in the classroom, but by people outside, and the students know that very, very quickly. It's a little artificial to think about anything as a "safe space," both because of the acculturation that has taken place before, but also because of the public nature of the classroom. So, I think you have to take those things into account.

To me, the way in which you take those things into account is by *making them the subject of analysis*. It seems to me that the most useful understanding I've derived from poststructuralist thinking has to do with self-awareness of how and where one is situated. In particular, understanding the dynamics of any project you're involved with at the time when you're involved with that project. And so, what's extremely important is try to help students reflect on the dynamics of the classroom in which they are engaged and how those dynamics got set up: what the expectations are; how expectations can be in conflict; how theirs can be in conflict with yours or with others'; or how they can be in conflict internally in themselves. And also how the dynamic of the classroom has a degree, but only a degree, of safety, how it is a public space, and you've got to be aware that what you put into a public space always has the potential for being used in particular ways. Students are very much aware of that. In other words... *to become self-reflexive of the actual classroom experience*...you can't let that become the whole subject, but it seems that's what you have to do.

Leo: How do you create this public space in which everything, ideologically, is contestable? How does that fit what we talked about earlier: the implications of transforming consciousness and transmitting the culture? One way to enter this may be to talk about the enormous changes in our conception of what a literary canon is, and your own contribution to that.

Paul: In a literature classroom it's useful to introduce and get into those subjects one way or another. That is, to ask: why do we study what we're studying? why is this called "literature"? who's in charge of naming it? and how has that changed? I used to do a course at Trinity that was on, simply, canon formation...and at SUNY-Old Westbury before that which has a very different student body, much more working-class and minority. I always built that into the course because there were always students there who had the expectation that they were going to study the classics. Well, what did that mean? What were the classics? Who had decided that, on what basis, and for what goals? We always would talk about that in the introductory American Literature class I taught there. It was called "American Voices," and we used a great variety of voices.

In the survey course I teach now at Trinity, I don't talk so much explicitly about those questions. We talk about some others. For example, the course that starts out from Native American texts, and then we do some Spanish texts, and then some traditional English texts like Bradford, Morton, and Winthrop. I try to

get them to read them both ethnographically and aesthetically. I use that to get into the question of why some texts are constituted as "art," why do we call them art, what does that mean...and why others are called "ethnography" and are treated in those terms. And what's the difference? For the students I have now who are mostly upper middle class, who are not the first generation to come to college, and who are from very different class backgrounds than the students I had at SUNY-Old Westbury, that's a useful strategy to get into what we're doing in a literature classroom.

Leo: I'd like to come back to the issue of the contest over literary value, but, first, I'd like to ask you to, perhaps, mix the personal with the political. In "Class in the Classroom," you refer to yourself this way: "Here I am, a Jewish boy from the Bronx and Washington Heights, at a once-Episcopal college holding down a fancy chair named after the inventor of municipal bonds. One might say that like the lawyer in Melville's "Bartleby," I do a 'snug business among rich men's bonds and mortgages and title-deeds.'" What kind of a trip was that, personally and politically?

Paul: The ironies here are enormous, and it's one of the reasons why the society is so complex. Let me draw an analogy to *The Heath Anthology*. When we started the project (called Reconstructing American Literature) that led to the development of *The Heath Anthology*, we regarded it as heavily reformist project that would try to change the nature of what people studied as the American literary canon and, therefore, more generally changed the nature of what people did when they talked about literary study. We did not see it as a commercial venture. D.C. Heath, obviously, saw it as a commercial venture. What was interesting was what they did to foster the commercial venture, like put out a newsletter, for example, and the nature of the advertising they did. This all turned out to be very helpful in terms of the political agenda that we had in transforming the canon, and so forth. And the political agenda we had, and what we did to pursue it, like organize a lot of people in the profession to get involved in this project, turned out to have a wonderful commercial payoff at the same time. You start off thinking that politics is one thing, and a commercial venture in a capitalist society is another, and the two of them are quite separate. Then, suddenly, they fuse in quite unpredictable ways.

For me, that's been the nature of my experience. I spent seventeen years at SUNY-Old Westbury working primarily with working-class students with very weak training, predominantly black and latino students, trying to create an educational experience for them that was useful and challenging, but also that built on what they did know, and what they could do, and that led somewhere. I was very active in that community. I was the faculty secretary for years. I was the union president. I was the union grievance officer and on and on like that. The Reconstructing American Literature project grew out of an effort to create a course and a textbook for these students. Well, the next thing I know, a friend of mine, Margaret Randle, who at that time was at Trinity for a year, puts my name in the hopper for this chair. People at Trinity, knowing what I've been doing at SUNY-Old Westbury, are interested in having me come there. So, suddenly there I am in this situation...and it was true, after seventeen years at Old Westbury I was about out of it, running away from it wherever possible, and it was time to move on...and this wonderful opportunity came along. But in turn, what that's done is permitted me to do a lot of things and given me a kind of platform that I would not have had at Old Westbury. So, these are very paradoxical.

And I'll tell you another aspect of the paradox. A friend of ours, Bruce Speer, who's now in Berlin, was pointing out that so much of the senior faculty who are in age somewhere between 55 and 70...and I'm toward the upper end of that...are now materially in positions where their material self-interest, deeply held without being aware of it, is necessarily in support of American capitalism today because we have--in TIAA-CREF--enormous investments in the stock market the way it is. There are many of us who are, literally, millionaires, who have a million dollars, more or less, in pension funds. There's a little poem that Cary Nelson reprints, I usually quote it some place or another, about how the "goo" works up one's overalls toward one's head. It's just another way of saying that material circumstances influence in ways we find it hard to fully understand or appreciate. Those material circumstances really do affect that way in which we think. I am a member of a marxist investment group! That is to say, all the people in the

investment group are marxists by sentiment and by practice, in so far as that's possible...we're all involved in one organization or another, often in many...but, nevertheless, it's an investment club. So, these paradoxes are really sometimes quite appalling.

I think it's very hard to maintain one's balance. I find I really try to listen to where other people are coming from because I don't always trust my own judgment about certain aspects of politics today. Certain things, I'm clear about, but other things, I really want to be clearer because, materially, I'm very differently situated and came through a very different world, a world by the way which is gone, for better or for worse. The kinds of people who are in that category--50 and over--the kinds of individual entrepreneurs of literary study and so on, that's virtually at an end. That's a good thing on the whole. What's bad is that it cheats a lot of people who had that image in their heads, and you get a lot of embittered people.

Leo: This leads precisely to the expectations of those who are now joining the professoriat, either fresh from grad school or Ph.D.s already working in part-time or non-tenured positions. They face a very different reality; as you say, the "golden" days are gone. The professoriat is becoming, or already has become, proletarianized. This is especially the case at the level of introductory courses and in writing instruction where non-tenured and part-time teachers do a disproportionate amount of the teaching; in the field of Composition, as you know, it's not uncommon to find more than 80 percent of the sections taught by low-wage part-time instructional staff. The Graduate Student Caucus of MLA has struggled, to the extent that we can compel the MLA to adopt an advocacy role for grad students and part-time adjunct labor, against the more egregious forms of that exploitation. Many of us feel that the university is dependent upon the systemic exploitation of part-time workers.

Paul: That's right. It's true.

Leo: If we can accept that premise, if we attempt to raise the consciousness of the majority of our tenured and full-time colleagues who seem to be sympathetic, what is that we can ask them to do? What's the role of tenured, full-time professors in the struggle for economic justice for adjunct and graduate instructors?

Paul: I think there are a number of things that it's possible to ask people, reasonably, to do. *One is to be supportive of organizing of part-timers, graduate students, TAs, or non-teaching staff.* To be supportive often means to take a role, both of encouragement and materially, to actually go out and help people organize. For example, at Old Westbury one of the things I found when I was the chapter president was that there were plenty of part-timers, plenty of adjunct faculty, but it was very hard to locate them. And it would be impossible for an adjunct faculty member to spend the time to locate the others. It seems to me that's one of the things that the tenured faculty could do.

35. Another thing tenured faculty could do is, when conflict comes up, to place themselves in positions as "spear points" because they are, relatively speaking, pretty invulnerable. It takes heaven and earth to fire tenured faculty, and very few administrators want to take that particular task on. It's a point about which they themselves are very ambivalent because most of them hold tenured appointments, and they understand that to attack tenure in a political case can come back to haunt them. This happened at Old Westbury. I found myself as chapter grievance officer defending a guy who had been the executive vice-president who was constantly after our asses. And then, he got fired as executive vice-president. He had a one-year appointment which they didn't want to renew, and I was fighting his case for him. So, you really can be out there in the local trenches.

I also think the kind of thing Cary Nelson does is very useful, that is, to fight the ideological battles around the questions like the argument at Yale over whether the graduate students were apprentices or exploited workers. Yale, itself, has finally come around to not only acknowledging the claim that they were workers, but I'm sure there are plenty of people in the English department who still think of them as apprentices. And that was just bullshit! I remember the Yale grad students had a demonstration, I was supposed to come down to New Haven, and I was supposed to talk about that in terms of my own

experience at Yale. The problem was that *I got arrested before I got a chance to talk*. So, those are some of the roles people can play.

I've both been, since the early 60s in the Civil Rights Movement, involved with stuff having to do with African American education, primarily, and with politics, and since the late 60s, in various feminist organizations. And there have been times, you know, when a white boy in a black movement is just not particularly welcome, and guy is not welcome among women. But by and large, what I have found is that people who are engaged in struggle always are open to and receptive of groups who are willing to cast themselves into that struggle. And the same is true in this particular respect. That is, I have never found whatever it was I could bring being turned down or rejected as long as I didn't try to impose my own agenda. What people have to look for are the opportunities that emerge, particularly locally, to be part of a struggle and understand that any struggle is not somebody else's. It's always, in some sense, yours because what you're building is toward a more socially just society, and not only abstractly.

I had a big fight just last week. We were in a conference on race at Trinity, and I got into an argument with one of my colleagues. He was pointing to the way wishy-washy liberals tend to think about the ghetto or inner city and sentimentalize what they see there...you know...the kind of social irresponsibility, the drug use, the violence, and so forth. Yeah, you can talk about that, but if you're going to talk about social irresponsibility, let's talk about where that social irresponsibility really is. Who is it that created Flint? It's not the people in Flint. Who created Frog Hollow at Hartford? There's more social irresponsibility going on in the halls of Congress than in Frog Hollow. We had this back-and-forth, and he was saying that from General Motors' point of view, it makes economic sense and is very rational. But it's not rational because what you're producing, finally, is a society in which in order for these folks to exist, they've got to retreat into walled communities. That's not a society that anybody really wants including the people who are living that way, in the long run. So, I think it's not a matter of casting yourself into somebody else's struggle. I don't think it's that. It's very much a question of seeing the unity of struggles for social justice and looking for the opportunities to be useful in those struggles. That's part of the reason we're doing this book on class, culture, and literature, because it's very useful right now for people to have such a textbook. And textbooks can be important.

Leo: There's a scholar in my field of specialization, Composition and Rhetoric, by the name of James Sledd; he's now professor emeritus from the University of Texas. He made himself some enemies a while back when he wrote, very critically of his colleagues, that too many Compositionists, when they reach the apex of their careers and become fully tenured, transform themselves into what he describes as "Boss Compositionists." That is, they join the phalanxes of administrators and hiring committee members who, at best, remain silent about the disproportionate levels of poorly compensated part-time employees in the academy. The Graduate Student Caucus of MLA is very interested in building as wide an alliance as possible around changing those percentages. How do we get over the barriers between the status of full and part-time faculty as colleagues, on the one hand, and the function of full-time faculty as bosses and/or administrators, on the other? Are they *complicit* in perpetuating this exploitation of part-time labor?

Paul: I think a version of the answer is the obverse side of the question I was talking about before in relation to *The Heath Anthology* where capitalism and reform come together. When the Yeshivah decision came down that, basically, faculty in private institutions were managers, we all said that was ridiculous. Who's a manager? These administrators are the ones who make all these decisions. In retrospect, unfortunately, I think that there was more truth in that decision than we were willing to acknowledge at the time, and that most people are willing to acknowledge since.

That kind of truth is what one needs to look at; that is, one needs to understand it not so much in terms of *complicity*, which is a kind of psychological category like individual racism, but rather to look at it *in terms of the structure of the university* and the way in which it puts you into a certain position in which to discharge your duties. Within the framework of that structure, you turn into a force of oppression...or,

rather, exploitation, I should more probably say. If people can see it that way, and that's part of the role that we play, part of the role WORKPLACE plays, and part of the role the Caucus plays, one aspect of our role is to help people see the structural dimensions of the thing, rather than taking it personally, because then you only produce guilt and resistance. And then to ask the question: what are the alternatives to the structures that exist? How can create different structures? And those are not going to come into being overnight. You're not going to transform the academy overnight.

I wrote an article on the exploitation of adjuncts; I believe it was in 1974. This has been going on for 25 years, at least, and it's not going to change within the next four or five. That doesn't mean you cannot develop a four or five-year plan for change. That, actually, is what the current administrators at Trinity are trying to do, to develop a plan to replace part-timers, part-timers who are relatively less exploited...relatively! When Annie (Ann Fitzgerald, Paul's colleague and partner, currently a curator at the American Museum of Natural History in New York City) taught a course at Jersey City State College in New Jersey, she was being paid \$1,200! At Trinity, the minimum is \$4,000 per course. That's starvation wages, but as these things go, it's not bad. And the effort is right now is to create 20 new faculty lines over the course of the next five years. The trustees have agreed to that. That is seen primarily as a way of ending the exploitation of part-timers, which is not to say that there won't be any part-timers because in a city there are always people who have special knowledge...like a person at the Wadsworth Athenaeum to teach a special course in Art History or something like that. The systematic exploitation of part-timers is what we want to eliminate.

Leo: Are these tenure-track lines?

Paul: These are 20 tenure-track lines. It made everybody very nervous. It's small college; there was a point of retrenchment about 15 or 20 years ago. With the volatility of the market and all, this could be a problem, but that's the direction in which they've gone. I think that sort of approach is what one needs to try to do...much, much harder in large university systems, particularly because there you have to persuade people politically, people in legislatures and elsewhere, that what's going on is not viable anymore. Not just that it's immoral because that doesn't sway them very much, but that it's not viable for educational reasons and, ultimately, for political reasons.

What's key is organizing. Organizations of graduate students and part-timers have to have increasing political muscle. To organize locally into what one hopes is an upsurge in the labor movement which can have an impact on the politics of a city or a state. It seems to me that in that context one can then begin to argue for a five-year (or longer) plan which says we've got to stop exploiting people and the way to do that is to create full-time, tenure-track lines. Apropos of this, tenure-track is a concept that did not exist before about 1970. There was no such thing. Every appointment was tenured. I never even heard the phrase. I think the first time I heard it was when, at SUNY-Stonybrook some time in the mid-70s, they really screwed this guy in Labor Studies. They basically said if he's coming up for tenure, if you insist that we review him for tenure, he's going to get fired because we don't have room. But if you agree to have him continue as a Lecturer, then he'll be on a non-tenure-track line. We said, "What?!"

So, nothing is separate from anything else...the local organizing, the relationship to an on-going labor movement, and the pressure that can build against the forces that have tried to transform the university in other ways. Now, it may be that we're whistling past the graveyard, and the process of transforming universities in different ways is so far along that there's not going to be any way of pushing back. But I don't think that's the case.

Leo: Yes, there's plenty of room for fighting back. The jury is still out on whether the ruling class believes it needs more or fewer skilled and credentialed workers. This is apparent from what we see around the country: the attacks (like those at CUNY, in California, in Texas) on remediation and affirmative action, the impending end of open admissions.

Paul: Let me say one thing about that. The one thing that's absolutely clear to me is that *colleges and universities are playing a much more carefully structured role in the division of the workforce*, in the ways that secondary schools used to. Much more of that is being done at colleges and universities, and you can see it on different levels. The difference between the education that Trinity students get and that which the SUNY-Old Westbury students got and still get is just so striking. That is clear.

Leo: Your observation is appropriate. At one point, this issue of *WORKPLACE* was going to be organized around the rubric of the multi-tiered university.

Paul: Well, there is no such thing. It's a very important concept. There is *no such thing* as the university system! There are really heavy divisions, and the self-interest of one part of that university is not the same as the self-interest of another. Take CUNY, for example. If they end remediation at the four-year colleges, that will cut down the number of students coming in to the senior colleges. Is that likely to increase the numbers that come into the two-year institutions? And if that is the case, if they have lots more coming into the two-year institutions, what's the impact of that? Immediately, the four and two-year institutions are to some degree being set against each other for funds, for students, and so forth. And that's true nationally. There is no single university system. One needs to understand those kinds of conflicts and contradictions, which are often the sorts of things that you can make use of.

Leo: Earlier, you spoke about the creation of 20 new tenure-track lines at Trinity College as the product of an implicit alliance of faculty members, adjuncts, people in the local community, and administrators as well. You referred to it as a dialectical process. My impression is that this alliance concluded that one result would be a better product, the ability to offer students a better education. We also spoke earlier about the double function of universities as "diploma mills" or "diploma factories" and as "ideology factories." How does that effort for reform at Trinity, and the implications nationally both inside and outside the MLA, jibe with our descriptions of the ideological functions of the university?

Paul: You have to understand the context. Trinity is an elite institution. Nevertheless, in this last round of *U.S. News and World Report* rankings, it was 23rd. Trinity would like to be higher. One of the things that stands in the way is the relatively lower proportion of full-time faculty. They have a higher teacher-to-student ratio than the colleges, as they say, "with whom we would like to compare ourselves." Now, that has to do with their ability to survive in a marketplace economy. Colleges are always afraid that they are going to run out of students. It's unlikely at a place like Trinity, but that's a worry. And also, they want to increase the quality of the student. They want to have a better student that satisfies their aspirations and the aspirations of the faculty. So, if you can change the balance of full and part-time faculty, the teacher-to-student ratio, you can move up the ranking, you can insure your viability, you can bring in a better prepared student, students who are more committed, who are intellectually more interested. You can see it's a very complicated, not very straightforward thing into which the question of part-time and full-time positions fits.

Now, I think that different situations will be quite different. That is, you're not going to have that same combination of factors that you had at Trinity, but you can find whatever the local situation is. Now, as to the fundamentally ideological functions of colleges and universities, I don't know that the changing of the balance of full and part-time faculty and the production of a more just environment is going to have an enormous impact on that, unless that becomes part of the conversation that goes on in the classroom and in the world of the college and university. And I think that's part of the function of organizations, including the organizations of graduate students, of part-time faculty...to raise those kinds of issues and the contradictions between what a university aspires to and what the reality is.

It seems to me that was one of the things that was going on at Yale. Many of the graduate students in the GSO there were raising the question about what Yale theoretically stands for and what was the reality.

The reality is a very exploitative, large corporate entity which is taking advantage of people at many different levels. Well, for some of the students, that was perfect training. That's what they're going to do all their lives; they're going to go into jobs where they're going to be exploiting. For others, because students are young people, and their minds are open, that raises questions for them.

Leo: Yes, it's kind of a contest. For me, this raises the problem of to what extent, and whether or not, we need to problematize our students' desire for social mobility. I don't think we can mount a moral high horse or that anybody wants to piss on students' aspirations. It's not about that. However, the ethic of social mobility implies an ethic of exploitation or, at least, of hyper-individualism, the fight to climb over the backs of others. How should that be reflected in our pedagogy?

Paul: There a lot of people, students...but not just students, who are concerned about the excesses of individualism as the central driving force in the United States (and in American ideology as it's deployed around the world) and about the lack of any kind of any meaningful community, the lack of any sense of collective responsibility...for anything. That comes up in a whole variety of ways, including the desire that students have to find some sort of group in which they can be comfortable, you know, not just drink themselves into oblivion. It's one way of understanding the way in which students separate themselves racially or by gender or in other ways. It seems to me that's one of the things that one has to raise--how in a particular class, but not just in one classroom (you can't build socialism in one classroom!), how do we understand this problem? In one classroom, in a particular institution, in a whole society? That's one of the things that's on the agenda.

One part of our function, at least one part of my function as I like to think about it, is to figure out how we raise that sort of issue. And how do we raise it, not in the abstract, but in the context of the particular experience that students have over three or four years, however long they spend in a campus. Graduate students can be much longer than that, in fact. Part of the importance of organizations like the Graduate Student Caucus and local organizations has to do with the experience of solidarity, not as an abstraction, but as something really concrete that has meaning, that bonds people, that enables them to work together over a long period of time to develop a level of trust that can be quite remarkable.

Think about *Radical Teacher*, for example. It's a group of people who came out of the experience of the kind of organizing we did in the MLA in the late 60s and in 1970, and there are still a few of us who were involved in that, and then a second generation that came into it in the 70s, and now a third generation coming into an on-going enterprise. The bonding among us that grew out of the experiences of organizing and struggle is terribly important. Without that, it seems to me, people don't have a concrete alternative to the pursuit of individual goals, that alternative remains an abstraction, something you read about in books, that somebody once did during the Spanish Civil War or further in the past than that. So, while I may disagree from time to time with tactics or whatever is going on, what's most important, again, like the noise of the school, is the *noise of the organization*. It's what you learn while building an organization, keeping it together, and accomplishing goals that you set out to accomplish. That helps to build a *culture of solidarity*.

Leo: Paul, I think it's fair to say that in the opinion of many, certainly those of us at WORKPLACE, you have been at the forefront of some of the most significant changes in the way we understand English Studies and American Literature. What do you perceive as the most significant changes in your career? Part two of that question is: how has your work helped you to re-imagine higher education?

Paul: Well, that's really two very different question. The most powerful influence on me was the Civil Rights Movement, particularly the Southern movement. I took movies around to various Freedom Schools and then also taught at a Freedom School in Jackson. One of the things I did there was teach Richard Wright's *Native Son*. Both the reaction of the students to that book there in that Freedom School in Jackson and the reaction of the students to the movies were compelling in a way very different from what

I had ever experienced as a teacher. It taught me two things. One was the limitations of my own education in the fact that while I had gone to excellent schools, and by conventional standards had quite an excellent education, nevertheless, my reading was very, very limited. I understood very little about African American history, literature, and culture, and I was being asked to teach that. I really began to understand how narrow my own education had been.

That was one thing. The other thing was how intense and exciting those classes were that were invested with the spirit and practice of the movement...because the kids were going out and doing things like canvassing for people to go register to vote in the afternoons. So, there was a character to the school which was in many ways connected to what they were doing...which was to dangerous and really significant work. That experience really forced me to constantly think about the ways in which it was possible to shape what I did when I came North and began to teach at Smith and then elsewhere in order to make the classrooms have something of the dynamism of those classrooms in Mississippi, and also to offer students a more systematically expanded education than I had had, an education that did not exclude as much. That's the sort of thing I've been involved in doing; it's really part of an educational movement.

A project like what ended up as *The Heath Anthology* came out of that, and I always saw my role as an organizer's role in getting people together who wanted to be part of this process of opening things up and transforming the nature of the educational enterprise. Because I was fortunate enough to have these organizing experiences, I could function as an organizer in the context of the profession that I was part of. It's hard to identify one kind of thing as peculiarly mine. I really mean this. I think that the most useful kinds of work that I've been able to do has been of the character of organizing, not to say that I haven't written my own articles or this, that, and the other. That's just part of the process as you try to formulate what you're trying to do. But again and again, the real effort has been to organize people and to, as we used to say, "get people in motion."

This really has to do with an ideal in education. We used to think about it as providing opportunities for self-actualization...that used to be the phrase. But there's a problem with that, finally. It's important not to totally marginalize the notion of individual development, and that certainly seems to have been one of the significant problems with existing socialism in eastern Europe, the way in which individual development seemed to be often sacrificed. Certainly, that's the way it was perceived by people there. But it seems to me that the ideal of an educational experience also has to do with how it is that people can work in some harmony to accomplish collective goals and the idea of collectivity, things you cannot achieve just by individual advancement, but only in the process in the development of the group, of people working together. It's the sort of thing that I struggle to find ways of accomplishing. Some of them sometimes work, and others, you know, end in failure.

I've been using on-line discussion groups, for example, in this large introductory literature course I do for Trinity. Sometimes those groups are really quite wonderful, and sometimes they're really absolutely deadly. When students individually begin to invest in them, then other students begin to invest in them also. In the process, everybody learns a lot more, and they do get a sense of the group functioning, like any small group functions together. That's very useful, I think; it's useful as an experience quite independent of the material that they're learning. Whether that has any long range payoff in changing the culture, I don't know. It's possible, but hard given the overwhelming and constant reinforcement of the message of individual advancement.

For me, the ideal educational enterprise is somehow related to what I've experienced in the Freedom Schools in Mississippi which very directly related what went on in the classroom to what went on in the politics of transforming that world. There are many other examples of that; for example, in the thirties there were many classrooms that were not necessarily in colleges, although some of them were affiliated, like the Bryn Mawr School where people learned not just to do mechanical tasks, but learned how to work in relationship to one another as part of a larger movement. But, obviously, that's not the way CUNY is

ever going to be.

Leo: I like that example of the Mississippi Freedom Schools. In his book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paulo Freire talks about the problems of describing consciousness, as bourgeois scholars have done, as something reified, as a thing and not a process. He describes consciousness as consciousness continually coming into being. So that a truly liberatory or, if you will, a revolutionary consciousness is one that continually seeks to transform the practical, the mundane, everyday life.

Paul: Yeah, I know that from my own experience. There's so much in the nature of the institutions in which we work, and also in terms of our own self-interest, that pulls you back into traditional ways of doing things. You know, there's limits to your time, your energy, your commitment, and all the rest of those things. So, consciousness evaporates. I mean it's not something that you achieve, and then you've got it, and you're looking at the world through these class-crafted glasses, and you see everything correctly. No, it's a constant struggle.

Leo: Final question, two parts. As you reflect back over your own career, in terms of the nature of the changes that you've witnessed and, perhaps, helped bring into being in the university, do you have any regrets? And what caveats would you offer current and upcoming generations of graduate students?

Paul: The thing that has always stuck with me is that there have been times when I have been pretty sectarian. When this real difference of view emerged inside the MLA between the Radical Caucus, on the one hand, and the Marxist Literary Group, on the other, I did not really play a very good role in that, I have to say. I was very unsympathetic to the kind of intellectual goals of the MLG, and I still have my problems with what went on. But it's one of those situations that Mao talks about, contradictions among the people. If you take it from a negative standpoint, you reinforce contradiction and conflict, and I see something in me that has done that occasionally, and not just in that situation. I do think it's very important for people to have a certain modesty about the beliefs and outlooks that they hold, often very intensely, because it's very easy to become self-righteous. I think that part of the criticism of political correctness that has a certain truth to it has had to do with the fact that all of us, at one time or another, can become self-righteous about our own views. This is not to say that you want to preach all unity and no struggle. But we've got to be very aware of the tendency that we have to insist upon the justice and the accuracy of our own views to the exclusion of other things.

Intellectually, it's useful to have that kind of perspective. I've have this piece on *Jurassic Park* that I do as a lecture; it's a fun piece. I was making some assumptions about how audiences would react to *Jurassic Park*. I make an argument about the use of technology and the ambivalence that an audience might feel toward the deployment and use of technology, particularly in the post-Gulf War period, and I think that's probably right. One of my friends raised a question about *which* audience. You know, who's the "we" here? And he was right in raising that question. What empirical evidence did I have to support that view? Well, not that much. That wasn't my strategy, to accumulate empirical evidence. So, I found it more useful to state my argument a little more modestly, with a little more modulation, raising it, without the empirical evidence, as something much more speculative and to frame it in those terms.

I do think that, without giving up the sense of where we are and what our beliefs are, it's important to keep oneself constantly open to contradiction and to question. The healthy part of working over many years, for example, at a predominantly black and latino institution was when I was sailing off in one direction, one of my colleagues would say, "Well, let's think about it from this perspective." And I realized that I'm coming at it as a white, relatively privileged individual. It may not look quite the same from the point of view of a black student who may be just struggling through. That experience, repeated again and again, has been really important. So, if there's a sort of moral to be drawn, it really has to do with that more than anything else. Raymond Williams has a phrase that goes to the way in which we write, about the problem of "dominative discourse," to write things in such a way so that you're building up your walls, rather than

making your walls permeable. It's an occupational disease.

One additional regret. I would have liked...and I did actually make some gestures in that direction a few years ago...I think I would have liked to have been able to work in a graduate institution for a while, with people like yourself, but that just didn't come about. There are upsides and downsides to it. As you know, I taught at undergraduate institutions all my life, and that has meant that I could never *really* tightly specialize. I do American literature; I do *all* of it. And other things. I'm teaching a course this spring, a junior seminar in American Studies, which is a course on immigration, ethnicity, citizenship. My training is like...whew!...somewhere else. So, there's a downside to it. The upside, however, is that it has allowed me to do an enormous variety of things, and it's been fun. And I don't get pegged. But it would have been nice.

Leo: Thank you very much, Paul. It's been a pleasure.

Paul: Thank you. It's been fun.