



Foley, B. (1998). A response to the UQ Symposium. *Workplace*, 2, 62-64.

A Response to the UQ Symposium

Barbara Foley

I'd like to thank Tony O'Brien and the editors of WORKPLACE for this opportunity to contribute to the conversation begun at Queensland; I'm happy to participate in this effort to undertake "globalization from below." There's certainly enough "globalization from above" going on! I'll be speaking here as a Marxist, a faculty member at Rutgers University, Newark Campus, and as a member of the Modern Language Association Radical Caucus. What I'll be stressing is the necessity for progressive-minded academics to develop--and act upon--a class analysis of the current crisis in public higher education.

Clearly our colleagues "down under" inhabit a slightly different situation, with the patent links between the universities and business (especially mining) interests on the one hand and the higher level of faculty unionization on the other. But I think our situations are more similar than different, and that the same paradigm needs to be brought to bear. Only at our peril do we ignore the basic dynamic underlying the attack on public higher education everywhere--namely, the imperative of capital to lower the cost of labor by decredentialing significant sectors of the workforce. As international capitalist competition has become sharper, conditions of work and living have become leaner and meaner for the great majority of the world's workers. And given the recent collapse of many national economies, and the dire straits in which all others will soon find themselves, we can only anticipate that the situation will become much worse, with massive unemployment, poverty, and--in a significant portion of the globe--starvation. Safety nets have been shredded or entirely removed in the industrialized nations; for workers elsewhere, they never existed anyway. In the coming major recession, public sector support for higher education is going to be one of the first things to go; the battles we fight now are nothing compared with what is to come.

This situation has been created by capitalism; and to borrow a phrase from Carole Ferrier, it is--in my view--a situation that capitalism cannot fix. So, to borrow another phrase from a source that needs no naming: What is to be done?

To be sure, the present state of affairs for those of us in public higher education is depressing, frightening, and cause for ironic commentary; I thoroughly sympathize with the rueful tone of the symposium participants. Yet whenever elites bring down the iron fist, as they have of late, they expose themselves for what they are and give us an opportunity to counterattack (the military metaphors are, alas, unavoidable). The worst thing for us to do is to go on the defensive--which brings me to the friendly criticism I wish to offer of a number of positions put forward in the symposium and the University Reform Group report.

First, it is crucial that we not promulgate any illusions about the class function of higher education, which is and has always been to reproduce the existing class structure and to insure the continuance of exploitation. Analyses of the present situation which hinge upon the argument that universities have been "corporatized" or taken over by "businessmen" or "bureaucrats" are essentially formalistic. For they mistakenly read current moves to rationalize labor costs in the universities, to slash humanities budgets, and to view students as consumers and/or products as signaling a qualitative alteration in the nature of the universities themselves. Institutions of higher education have always served primarily as ideology factories, and secondarily--in the modern era--as furnishers of technicians and managers to capitalist

enterprises. To the extent that they have provided students with the ability to perform "critical thinking," this function has been in the main reserved for students in more elite institutions, who--whether as bankers, English professors, biotechnicians, or engineers--could generally be counted on to use those abilities on behalf of capital. And while public higher education has, it is true, always enabled individual members of the working class to rise in the ranks, it has at the same time guaranteed that society as a whole remains stratified, with the credentialed directing the uncredentialed and the accumulation of capital either being rationalized or obfuscated. Let us be very clear: there never was a golden age in higher education that we can in good conscience invoke as our standard and goal.

Much as I feel myself smiling and nodding as I read the symposium and the URG report, then, I find that both finally lack a sharp class analysis of the nature of the university--and the role of faculty--and therefore end up reinforcing various illusions about who "the enemy" is and what we should do. Is there such a thing as "intellectual culture" that needs unproblematically to be defended? Can we really speak of "the university" as a "critical and knowledge-producing agency"? I found it somehow bizarre that the URG report cited Matthew Arnold without irony, and that some symposium participants even saw a positive model in the medieval university--that popular institution par excellence--as a "community" meeting "the requirements of intellectual life"! Has there ever really been "faculty control," and is calling for more "democracy" --departments appointing their own chairs, for instance--really going to change the ways that our colleges and universities are being retooled to meet the latest needs of capital? Is unionization the outer limit of the class consciousness that faculty--and for that matter TAs and adjuncts--need to develop? Teachers can after all see themselves "as workers" and still embrace racist, sexist, and other reactionary paradigms; some of the most politically backward professors at R-N are staunch unionists. In the symposium and the URG report, class emerges far more often as subject position rather than as the basic category in a structural analysis of social inequality, and the class position of teachers in institutions of higher education--and of the institutions themselves--is accordingly obscured.

Some symposium participants might agree with this general assessment of the historical function of higher education but still insist that the recent entry of larger numbers of working-class and ethnic minority students, coupled with "new knowledges"--especially in the humanities--has made universities worth defending as never before. It is surely true that the last thirty years or so have witnessed some democratization and some dissolution of former apartheid practices in higher education: even if upward mobility for individuals does nothing to alter stratification for the mass, then, we must fight all the recent attacks on this broadened access to higher education. (Hence the importance of the current struggle to "save CUNY," as well as of the resolution the MLA Radical Caucus is sponsoring at the 1998 MLA Convention on just this issue.) And it is also true that the canon-busting scholarship of recent decades, coupled with post-structuralist-based paradigms that decenter the raced, classed, and gendered subject, have called many old certainties into question. But I think we are sadly deceiving ourselves if we believe that by virtue of either of these developments universities have become institutions that serve the working class. Multiculturalism, with its salads and patchwork quilts, has proven itself eminently assimilable to the needs of present-day ruling elites; indeed, by portraying national history as a series of "contributions" and stressing empowerment through representation, it has strengthened both patriotism and quietism.

Moreover--while I can only assert, not prove, the point here--I'd propose that the "radical forms of knowledge" that have devolved from post-structuralism and seeped into the postmodernist groundwater have been premised upon an antipathy to totality that precludes the kind of comprehensive and materialist theorizing essential to an understanding of global capitalism--and of the place of universities within it. While neocons may gripe about multiculturalism, feminism, and "deconstructionism," these critical approaches have in fact proven--as David Harvey argues--eminently suited to the dispersed and decentered appearance (if not reality) of the current modes of capital accumulation. We must move beyond the far too influential Foucauldian paradigm, which describes our antagonist as a vague nexus of Power/Knowledge and restricts our fight-back to subversion, oppositionality, Gramscian wars of maneuver, and resistance--all mantra terms that, for all their radical panache, essentially rationalize liberal

strategies of burrowing from within. What we need instead, in my view, is more--and of course always better--Marxism. Whatever opinions people may have about why movements for egalitarian societies run by the producers have derailed in the twentieth century--and this is an important debate for progressive-minded people to have--we should grant that the contradictions of capitalism are the basis for the current crisis in higher education, as well as of most of what else is wrong with the world. We should therefore at the very least take anti-capitalism as our point of departure.

What does all this mean in practice? I was particularly moved by the closing section of the symposium, where the participants anguish about what counts as "winning" at a time when most battles with university administrations seem to be exercises in futility, mere plugging of fingers into dikes. My view here--in contradictory unity with the critique I have posed above--is that we should involve ourselves up to the elbows in all the struggles that animate socially conscious students, faculty, and workers on our campuses: from defending affirmative action to supporting unionization to fighting the downsizing/closing of departments or programs. But we should do so in a way that insistently locates these issues in anticapitalist critique; that eschews accommodation and welcomes confrontation; and that, above all, does not obscure the class character of higher education even--perhaps especially--at its "best." While through our efforts we can perhaps win some small gains and stave off some still-worse disasters (and these are worthy goals) we should admit to ourselves that the kind of education of which many of us dream--one that truly "empowers" (another mantra term!) the producers and develops the human potential of all--is unavailable in a society based upon inequality and exploitation. Our principal project should be, finally, not to save institutions of higher education that in the current system are by their very nature deeply compromised and flawed, but to transform society in such a way that there would be no credentialed and uncredentialed, indeed no division of mental and manual labor. Which means, in fact, a society in which universities--at least as we know them--would probably not exist at all. Even as we fight like hell against the racist downsizing of CUNY and the assault upon humanities departments at Queensland, such is the paradox we face.

Barbara Foley, Rutgers University, Newark