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A TRIBUTE TO BARBARA FOLEY

Barbara Foley has had a profound influence on me, intellectually and politically. She lives her political principles more than anyone I know, and it is rare to find an academic who will speak with such candor about the state of the world from such a radical perspective.

Flash back to the MLA convention in 1995: I was compelled to visit the delegate assembly meeting for the first time. I had just discovered the MLA's graduate student caucus and radical caucus and attended their sessions, and I wanted to find out how their resolutions and motions fared at the d.a. meeting. The meeting was a lesson in the dangers of bourgeois ideology, and a heads up for what was to come in future negotiations with this body. From the back of the room, cordoned off by the velvet ropes that separated us non-delegates from the delegates, Barbara Foley spoke numerous times, and always with biting clarity about the exploitative nature of our work, arguing passionately and logically as to why the assembly should vote for these proposals to change these conditions. I was both shocked at her brazenness, and shocked that these plain truths—that we are labourers whose exploitation has everything to do with the organization of our economic system—should seem so extraordinary, given the state of academic labour. I was even more shocked when, in the midst of discussing a resolution about unionization, a woman delegate stood up and suggested an amendment—that the words "global capitalism" be removed, because after all, the MLA couldn't produce texts that used such words—what would people think? To the amazement of all the progressives in the room—and in those days few of us were delegates—this amendment passed. So I appreciated all the more Barbara's courage in continuing to raise the critique of capitalism as the context for our efforts to change academic labour conditions.

I begin with this story of my first encounter with Barbara Foley because it encapsulates all of what I've come to appreciate about her. She is unflinchingly forward in her indictments of the harm inflicted by the capitalist system, and substantiates her critiques with solid arguments and empirical evidence. This integrity comes through in all areas of her life—her academic writing and research, her fights in the academic labour movement, her participation in academic conferences and organizations, and her strong involvement with social and activist organizations. Some academic friends of mine, some of whom enjoy great notoriety, have told me they believe Barbara Foley goes too far in her speaking out against capitalism, whether it be on the floor of the MLA's delegate assembly, or in her assessment of the work of other writers. Unlike her, these academics tone down the marxist and anti-capitalist dimensions of their topics of study, in both their speaking and writing. They avoid making recommendations for solutions to social problems that follow from a marxist critique. They carefully choose their arguments, eschewing any references to marxist categories, and walking the line between liberalism and something slightly more progressive. They choose this strategy, they tell me, in order to appeal to more people, who, they believe, might be too threatened by marxist perspectives. They believe that it is better to have more people receptive to a leftist liberal vision than to alienate them by being "too radical." They neglect to realize the pitfalls of such a compromised position, and I believe that Barbara Foley exemplifies the effectiveness of an opposite strategy. Who else would speak at the NOW national convention on the question: "Is

Workfare Slave Labor?"

4. Certainly, a publicly voiced, resolutely Marxist critique can have a powerful influence on many people. Not only have Barbara's outspoken communist critiques and unwavering commitment to activism inspired me—and countless others—like nothing else to work more diligently for revolutionary social change, they have also led to numerous changes and actions within organizations, including the MLA. I'm proud to say that I've marched beside Barbara—in my first march on Washington on May Day 1998, and in my first march at the MLA, in San Francisco in 1998, where the radical caucus protested the war in the middle east and the oppressive treatment of the University of California teaching assistants. I look forward to the day when such marches are commonplace, and are filled with hundreds of students and professors, when we recognize—when we take for granted, even, as Barbara does, that academic work and activism go hand in hand.

In her new book, *Profit and Pleasure: Sexual Identities in Late Capitalism*, Rosemary Hennessy describes the kind of academic and political work that is most needed at this time: "we need analyses that can make these basic social relationships of exploitation visible, analyses that will allow us to see both the social relations that comprise the big picture and the complex and often contradictory ways they are played out in particular, local, historical situations" (12). A succinct description of Barbara's work, from her research and writing on the evolution of Ralph Ellison from someone affiliated with communism to someone whose final draft of *Invisible Man* is decidedly anti-communist, to her contributions to the carefully crafted motions and resolutions put before the MLA by the radical caucus. Barbara's recent scholarly research that considers Ellison and, more recently, Jean Toomer, draws upon her thorough, unique archival work and forges a new model for literary history, one that considers the social and political milieu of the writer as it is situated within the economic system as a pivotal lens for textual analysis.

She also brings the neglected marxist perspective into the classroom, teaching courses on working class fiction and integrating overlooked historical texts into her curriculum. As an informal student of hers, I can only imagine how Barbara's students experience her in the university classroom setting. At the Marxist Literary Group's summer Institute on Culture and Society in 1996, Barbara appreciated my marxist-inspired critique of the imperialist ideology of cosmetics advertisements, yet she was insistent: *Laura—what about labour?* As the left in this country continues to move toward the right, inside and outside the academy, this is an important critique to make—to push us to ground our textual analyses in the real, material conditions of production.

Barbara brought her radical thinking to another conference last spring, the annual conference sponsored by a group of graduate students in the English department at the University of Florida, who call ourselves the Marxist Reading Group. The idea for our conference is to bring in well-known marxist speakers to deliver plenary talks and to participate in the sessions of presentations by graduate students and faculty, from UF and beyond. We are still talking about Barbara's intellectual and personal generosity that has left a lasting impact on our group, and on our department. Not only did she deliver a talk that dared to broach topics that are typically "taboo" in our neck of the woods, such as "class consciousness," but she was willing to interject challenging issues and questions from an historical materialist perspective during panel discussions throughout the conference. Members of our group were able to see first-hand how it is possible to intervene in post-structuralist arguments that belie class as more than an identity category, and that eschew systemic analysis. Barbara not only spoke out against the reformist tendencies within the conference; she also spent numerous hours talking to the graduate students here about our work. She helped us individually to think more concretely about our projects and about what it means to adopt a rigorously marxist perspective. She also helped us to see where we were giving up on each other, encouraging us to work through any differences or discouragement, to continue to rebuild and to appreciate the collective we had formed a few years before. Her keen critiques and boundless enthusiasm gave us the shot in the arm we needed, and also validated all the work that the MRG members had put into the conference.

Graduate students are clearly highly exploited as workers. We are clearly oppressed by our institutions on a number of levels. However, one dimension of our oppression that is often overlooked is that in every way—economically, socially, intellectually, personally—we are treated with immense disrespect. It has been my pleasure to have been so supported by a woman marxist academic activist who goes out of her way to treat all students—graduate and undergraduate—with the respect we deserve. I look forward to experiencing more of Barbara's provocative thinking and political rabble-rousing—and to continuing to have her as an interested and challenging audience for my own evolving thinking, writing, and activism.

References

Hennessy, Rosemary. *Profit and Pleasure: Sexual Identities in Late Capitalism*. New York: Routledge, 2000.

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