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INTERVIEW WITH BARBARA FOLEY

The following interview with Barbara Foley took place Friday, November 10, 2000 in South Orange, New Jersey. It has been edited for clarity.

LP: Barbara, I had several concerns in preparing for this interview. I'd like to begin with my impression that the trajectory of your career is distinguished by what appears to an observer as a seamless weave of scholarship with consistent political activism. Many *Workplace* readers will know that your professional career is marked by long record of activism inside the MLA's Radical Caucus and, before that, as a consistent advocate that MLA should more aggressively oppose racism, sexism, and imperialism. What they may not know is that you have been, for a decade or more, an activist right here in your home state with New Jersey NOW. I'd like to discuss that as well, but I'd like to start the interview by focusing on your own student activism. I went back to something you sent me some months ago, the draft of an essay you were preparing for a book edited by Amitava Kumar entitled *World Bank Literature*. The essay's title is "Looking Backward 2000-1969: Campus Activism in the Era of 'Globalization.'"

I'd like to begin by asking about this essay, especially the narrative of your political activism as a member of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) when you were a graduate student at the University of Chicago. As your title's play on Bellamy's novel indicates, you return to "the scene of the crime," and briefly retell the story of SDS in the late '60s. As the result of some student demonstrations against the administration, you and your comrades were charged with "*disrupting the normal operations of the university.*" That ironic phrase and its multiple interpretations might serve as a good jumping off place. What actions precipitated this charge?

BF: Okay. A lot was going on. Before I begin, though, I want to say that while from the outside the interaction of activism and scholarship my look "seamless," believe me I've had to face many of the same existential issues in my life that most people have to deal with. Anyway... It was only in the last year of my undergraduate work, in March or April 1969, that I became involved with SDS. My serious involvement as a leftist began the following fall, when I went out to Chicago for grad school.

What was going on? *Everything! Everything was going on.* This was about a year after the conspiracy trial of the Chicago Eight, following the 1968 Democratic Party convention. In the fall of '69, Edward Henrhan, the State's Attorney in Chicago (a very bad guy, a gutter racist), ordered the raid on the Black Panther Party headquarters in Chicago in which Fred Hampton and Mark Clark were blown away. The Vietnam War was in full swing. The anti-racist movement was in full swing. The first speech I ever gave was at the site where the university proposed to build the Pahlavi Institute, to be financed by the Shah of Iran, then seen as one of the biggest fascists in the world, I think, by near-universal agreement. When built, the "Pahlavi Building" was to be the new home for U of C's Center for Middle Eastern Studies and for the Adlai Stevenson Institute, a counter-insurgency institute specializing in defusing the rebellion of

rising-up-angry masses from Chicago's South Side to Ethiopia to Iran to Vietnam.

What I was charged with—"disrupting the normal operations of the university"—occurred in the context of what we in SDS were calling the "campus worker-student alliance." This entailed a number of things. *First, the plan was to involve students in pro-working-class politics in such a way that we would all develop a deeper class analysis and class consciousness, an awareness of where we fit into the capitalist system.* (The way in which this strategy differs from some aspects of contemporary emergent student movements is something we can perhaps touch upon later.) I was involved with the part of SDS called the Worker Student Alliance Caucus, and we were working on developing, in practice, what it meant to engage in class-based anti-racist struggle. At the University of Chicago, as at so many other places, the blue-collar campus workers (cafeteria and janitorial workers, for instance) were almost all workers of color, in this case African Americans. So, we were trying to find a strong principled basis for an anti-racist alliance between students and workers. The students involved in the campaign, need I say, were primarily white.

There had been a strike some months before by cafeteria workers around several issues, one of which was simply to win free meals for those workers. Sounds small, but it turned into something big. The SDS chapter took up the slogan "Free Meals for Cafeteria Workers," and one day we shut down the major public cafeteria on campus. Militantly...we blocked the entrance! It was quite a scene because a group called Students for Capitalism and Freedom—a right-wing split-off from Young Americans for Freedom, led by the son of the very conservative University of Chicago economist Milton Friedman—formed a flying wedge and physically confronted our group. Fists flew. In any event, we did successfully block people from going into the cafeteria. A group of 11 of us were subsequently charged with "disrupting the normal operations of the university."

Now, this phrase is full of terms that, as we in language and lit say, need to be "unpacked." Obviously, on one level, what the university administration meant was keeping the cafeteria open; we'd prevented that. But it was very clear to all involved that the reason the administration was opposed to what we were doing was that we were anti-capitalist radicals who had a very large agenda. I think they had some sense, as we did, that the "normal operations of the university" extended beyond keeping the cafeteria open. So we turned that charge around. We had a very political trial and talked about what those normal operations of the university were. Obviously, the most immediate issue — right on the table there — was that the normal operations of the university entailed racist superexploitation of campus workers. We wanted to make that case loud and clear.

LP: Can you make clear the distinction, at least as you see it, between exploitation and superexploitation?

BF: Sure. The term "exploitation" can be used in a broad way, to refer, for example, to instances when women are sexually used by men in ways above and beyond the economic—hardly an unimportant meaning. In the more technical marxist sense, though, exploitation means that a worker who works for a boss produces surplus value for that boss, which is realized as profit. Another way of saying this is that the wage relation is inherently one of unequal exchange—of wages for labor power, which then creates additional value, which is appropriated by the capitalist. The worker may appear "free" when she or he enters into the wage relation, but in fact it is a coercive relation. The great majority of people in the world who work are workers compelled to enter into this kind of wage relation if they are to live. *Superexploitation* refers to the fact that there are certain groups of workers who are delineated by "race," sometimes by gender, sometimes by nationality, for yielding bonanza profits for the bosses. Superexploitation is contingent on these workers being categorized as belonging to a particular social group who presumably deserve to be paid less. So, I would say, many black workers in this country remain superexploited in relation to the rest of the labor force. Ditto most latinos/latinas and most immigrants. Then if you refer to, say, Indonesian Nike workers, they are superexploited by virtue of their

location, often their gender, their "race," the whole caboodle. Is that clear?

LP: Yes. I asked because in the essay "Looking Backward" to which I referred earlier, and in a great deal of your other work, you talk about the ways in which the concept of exploitation has been misused on the Left. Can you say more about that?

BF: Sure. Actually, this is an important point to keep in mind when considering current anti-globalization activity, which is inspiring in many ways. I've found that in the discourse of people involved in that movement, there's the common notion that a worker in a Central American *maquiladora* is "exploited," but a worker in this country making \$8 or \$9—or, indeed, one making \$25 an hour—is *not* exploited. What's implicit here is the idea that if "we" (in some kind of undifferentiated non-class conscious sense) can simply get all workers in the world working at a wage level equivalent to, say, the median wage of U.S. workers, then everything would be A-OK. So what's essentially happened in this discourse is that what a marxist would call "superexploitation" has become "exploitation"; the rest of us presumably earn a "fair wage." From a marxist standpoint, though, as long as a worker's labor is generating surplus value for a capitalist, for a boss, *there is no such thing as a fair wage.*

May I be permitted a swipe at another of my least-favorite terms? (I have quite a laundry-list here, starting with "subversion" and "contribution," moving through "empowerment" and "community," and ending with "resistance"!) That is: "classism," which we hear a lot these days. Insofar as it represents some kind of break with an identity politics insisting that gender, "race," and sexuality are the only important categories of oppression, the term implies a welcome return to the "economic." But I don't like the term because, number one, it usually turns class into one more subject position, rather than invoking marxist structural analysis, and number two, because it implies that disliking someone because of their class is wrong. I think it would be fine, just fine, if more people detested the ruling class.

LP: Yes...and there's an implicit tension between what "classism" seems to signify and the political charge of "class reductionism." However, the amazing irony is, inevitably, it is the people who identify marxism as economic determinism who practice economic determinism. Marx and Engels certainly had no such thing in mind. There is no realm of the economic that is not also political. To insist on a division between them is very unmarxist and usually makes for bad politics. But, on the subject of uniting the economic with the political, can you relate how the things you were doing at Chicago, in the context of what you described as the campus worker-student alliance, are relevant to the kinds of labor-oriented organizing on and off campus that you talked about in "Looking Backward"? For example, what were you doing thirty years ago that today might lead to a qualitatively different kind of political analysis and activity?

BF: Okay, let me take a crack at that. This actually brings me back to the point that I wanted to circle back to anyway, which is your original question about that phrase "disrupting the normal operations of the university." When putting forward our defense in this public and political trial, we were saying that the normal operations of the university far transcended the superexploitation of campus workers, although we were targeting this issue very seriously. The main reasons that universities exist, after all, are not to exploit—or superexploit—campus workers. The main reasons universities exist are to provide the rulers with obedient workers possessing various important skills—that is, to be both skills factories and *ideology factories* for the capitalist class. Universities are not neutral sites for disinterested inquiry. They are all about perpetuating the existing systems of inequality in the world and then either celebrating them as the fulfillment of human nature or regretfully conceding that things just have to be this way. (I can develop this proposition if you wish.) In any event, as we campus radicals back in '69 were engaged in what looked like a very local struggle around wages and benefits for campus workers, we were trying to bring in—here's the first in my laundry list of favorite marxist words—a *totalizing* class analysis of the situation. We wanted to develop—and win others to share—an understanding of the essentially

exploitative nature of capitalism as a national and world system. We had our eye on the big one.

Maybe what differentiates that movement from some of the movements now (again, I don't want to minimize the seriousness or the intelligence of today's activists) is that, essentially, *we saw—and, to tell you the truth, I still see—the university as part of the problem, not the solution*. We weren't about the business of purifying the university of its nefarious labor practices so that it could be true to its actual mission of disseminating truth and serving humanity. We thought the fact that the university was attempting to build a "research" (counterinsurgency) institute with money given by the Shah of Iran was part and parcel of its superexploitation of campus workers and tied in with just about every other function performed by the university in society—from hosting CIA and Dow Chemical recruiters to teaching neo-Aristotelian formalism.

To be perfectly honest, though, I have to admit that this last wisdom came the hardest to me. People were barely talking "theory" in those days (though I knew that the neo-Aristotelians didn't like the New Critics). I took one grad course in marxist criticism that was idiotic. I didn't consider myself a marxist critic until fully a decade later. I basically experienced for years what I now see as a near-schizophrenic division between my dealings with Faulkner and Eliot on the one hand and my marxist, in fact pro-communist, political activism, on the other. To bring together those two parts of my life in something that looks—I'm so glad you said it—"seamless" [laugh] in fact entailed for years the yoking together by near-violence two apparently disparate realms of activity and thought. (Didn't Eliot say something like that about the conceits of the metaphysical poets?)

LP: Like so much in life, it's about appearance and essence.

BF: Yes...right! [laugh]

LP: Let me throw down a friendly challenge. A great deal of current left analysis and activism in higher education is based upon the conclusion that what's important about changes in the university is a result of changes in the global economic system, what's loosely called "globalization" or, in the case of U.S. universities and colleges, "corporatization." *The idea seems to be that higher education is now a place for capital accumulation*. This works itself out in such a way so that what falls under the rubric of global IMF and World Bank mandates for "structural adjustment" to debtor nations reappears as a series of structural adjustments in the domestic economy. I'm referring to corporate management strategies which have appeared in universities and colleges during the last two decades—TQM, Total Quality Management, etc. The extensive use of flexible or contingent labor is one such adjustment all too familiar to *Workplace* readers.

As you know very well, roughly half the teaching that's done in U.S. higher education is done by very cheap part-time, flexible, contingent labor. However, in disciplines such as English and the modern languages, the numbers are much higher—60% and greater. In first-year Composition, the numbers are so high that they are off the charts. All this inexpensive labor produces a surplus when balanced against revenue generated from FTEs in these courses. So, the perception is that what has shifted is a new form of capital accumulation....academic capitalism! Of course, advocates of this analysis point to other, equally important areas such as corporate control of research resulting in new processes and products and, most importantly, new technologies key to the growth of a capitalist economy, all from within the university. Certainly, capitalism has succeeded to a certain extent in socializing the cost of research and development through its ties to higher education. However, one new twist is that universities are seeking to profit from this process, establishing academically-based start-up ventures and other corporate entities in which a percentage of profit goes directly to the general revenue of the university. These are new opportunities, unknown before, and this phenomenon is often presented as if it were a new economic system called "academic capitalism." What's your response to that?

BF: You've given an excellent description of what's going on! Well, this is one of those situations where, in analyzing the large pattern, one has to be dialectical (I hope not evasive!) and say "yes and no." In other words, reality is always changing, and there's always a new aspect to things coming into being. So, certainly, with new information technologies and everything that flows from them, there is some difference in what universities are and do. I think there's some truth to the widely-discussed notion that higher education has been corporatized in a way that it hadn't been before. There *is* such a thing as academic capitalism, and profits *are* being made in universities and from universities in new ways. The question is whether we have entered into some qualitatively new moment in the life of higher education, such as to require from us a qualitatively new strategy. This is a huge and interesting discussion, and it's related to the larger—though not completely equivalent—question of whether postmodernity is, similarly, something new. Obviously, flexible accumulation is different from Fordism, if we're going to use those currently popular terms. But I tend to side with the David Harvey argument as opposed to the Jameson argument. That is, I think that "flexible accumulation" is a new strategy for producing surplus value, but used by the (more or less) same old capitalist class, rather than a dramatic and qualitative break understandable only through a new epistemological framework. It's still capitalism that we're living in; the university is still the bourgeois university.

Before our interview, we were looking over an old interview with Dick Ohmann. He makes the intelligent point—as he so often does—that when one is talking about the increasing use of superexploited labor in the academy, it's crucial to relate this process to global superexploitation. Agreeing with Dick, I think it's important, in talking about academic labor, to talk about superexploited workers around the world, as well as the burgeoning of prison labor in this country. Now, obviously I'm not saying that someone who's a freeway flyer in Los Angeles, teaching composition in four different colleges in order to patch together a still-marginal income, is equivalent to someone in prison. But I think it's important to see that there's a distinct kind of similarity. What's happening in the economy globally—everyone admits it; even the World Bank admits it—is in incredible polarization of wealth and poverty, not only globally between rich and poor countries, but within rich countries and within poor countries. By the way, if you want, I could say something about James Wolfensohn here.

LP: Great! One of my favorites. [laughter] Head of the World Bank...a man we love to hate.

BF: Yeah! I heard him speak...as a matter of fact, at the Harvard Club! Just a couple of weeks ago. I had never been there before. He was talking all about, as you'd guess, the World Bank, bemoaning his pillorying by ignorant radicals, from DC to Prague, who are unaware of his humanistic intentions and achievements. Interestingly, though, there was a kernel of truth in his otherwise smarmy argument, because he stated that the major problem in the world, and the greatest threat to the stability of financial markets, was *inequity*. (Of course, he didn't say *inequality*—he wouldn't go *that* far!) He made the point that inequity was at crisis levels *within* poor nations and *within* rich nations as well as between them. He appealed to his audience of enlightened and influential listeners to aid the World Bank in its effort to save us all. Naturally, I had to get up and say something!

LP: Why am I not surprised?

BF: [laughter] Well, first off I said that I was a member of the class of '69, with all that this entailed, and that I was an unreconstructed radical still convinced that capitalism was the root of all evil...Then I had to say that *my favorite comment on banks was from Bertolt Brecht to the effect that the crime of robbing a bank was nothing in comparison with the crime of owning one!* There was a bit of a titter in the audience, though a few well-suited people positively looked daggers at me! I felt I was in the belly of the beast! Anyway, I did end up asking him a question—namely, whether or not he thought there was a chance of serious global war—that is, seen as global from the point of view of capitalism, as opposed to the many smaller wars taking place around the world that are—except for in the Middle East—brush fires. I just wanted to hear what he'd say. Well, he hardly came out with what is—to me—the correct analysis,

namely that "globalization" is a dressed-up term for neoimperialism, and that sooner or later it will lead to large-scale global war. No Leninist he, Wolfensohn in fact sounded more like a neo-Kautskyite, in his evident belief that the world's bosses were ranged against the world's workers...He just didn't want things to get out of hand.

Perhaps, we have diverged a little bit here from how globalization relates to the campuses! *While it obviously points to real trends, I quite strenuously object to using the model of "corporatization" to describe the essence of what is going on.* I think it's just an aspect of what is going on, but that the main aspect of universities is now, and has always been, to serve the ruling class, if I may be so blunt. For the implication of the corporatization model, and of the anti-corporatization movement based upon it, is that we need to revert to some kind of golden age when, somehow, the university freely pursued knowledge. I don't think that ever was the case. Higher education has always reproduced social inequality and has always had different institutions for different parts of the population who are differentially inserted in capitalist social relations of production. The problem with the corporatization argument is like, in another context, the problem with the privatization argument, also often heard these days. For both imply that if we only could revive some mythic "public sphere," and keep the profiteering wolves out of the groves of academe, everything would be fine again. Come on. Do we want the university of the 1950s, ensconced in Defense Department research, training the ranks of gray-flannel-suited sheep, and intoning the truths of the New Criticism, all the while keeping most women and people of color from the door? Lord, is that what we want?

LP: Point taken. Earlier, you referred to our conversation before this interview began in which we talked about Jeff Williams's interview with Richard Ohmann in *minnesota review* in 1996. In that same interview, and I think this will relate to your analysis of the function of the university, I want to cite something Dick said that makes a similar point. In this section of the interview, he's been talking about changes that occurred in higher education in the U.S. after World War II (greater access to higher education for the working class through the G.I. Bill of Rights in 1948 and, later, the National Defense Act of 1957) that I think are relevant in broader historical context. He says:

The hegemonic process works in part because some of those people do in fact achieve their ambitions. The ideology of equal opportunity would not be so durable an ideology unless there were some truth in it. I think the truth is going to diminish and that the promises being implicitly made to working class students, that if they work hard in education, they will be able to climb above their parents, are increasingly false promises. This too is inseparable from the separating out of the world's work force into core workers and peripheral and flex-time workers. I think that more and more of those working class students who go to our colleges will find themselves driven toward very job-specific training. And it's also getting harder and harder for them to go to college at all. (66-7)

I'd like to get your response to that quote, but, I'd like you to consider that in the context of what you've already said about the nature of the university, how you've historicized certain relations between higher education and the needs of capital, about the charges that were brought against the SDS radicals at Chicago so many years ago—that you had disrupted the normal operations of the university. What's at stake in terms of the nature of the university as an agent of social mobility? It seems that what Dick was getting at in that quote was a radical examination of what social mobility implies. That is, the ability to rise socially and economically implies a systemic stratification within the social order. One has not only to climb over someone else in a competitive sense, but also to keep others below. For me, it implies the necessity of inequality. So, the question becomes: *Why, in the final analysis, should students ally with workers?*

BF: Let me take that on a couple of levels. First of all, "why should students ally with workers?" Most students are going to become workers; many of them in fact already are workers as they go along; certainly, that's the case at Rutgers-Newark. Most people in this country who work consider themselves

middle class. They aren't. They're working class. Most people who work in this country create a profit for someone else; they are workers; they are exploited. I think that this kind of consciousness cannot be drummed too much into people because every mythology in the world—even leaving aside the notion of advancement within the system—leads people to think that if they have a job, then they're not really a working class person, but a middle class person.

Now, as for this whole question of upward mobility, once again, things are contradictory, and we have to be dialectical. Let's go to the macro-level for just a moment. On the one hand, what I'm saying—as a marxist, as someone who wants to bring a communist world into being—is that *universities need to be understood as antipathetic to the interests of the working class primarily and, in fact, in need of being dismantled*. I don't think that, in an egalitarian communist society, we would have universities as we know them now, that is, gate-keeping elitist institutions bent upon preserving the distinction of mental from manual labor, a distinction that is one of the glues keeping capitalist society together. (I'm not saying that there wouldn't be higher education. There would be education of a richness that we can't even imagine right now. But there wouldn't be universities, at least not if I had my druthers.) On the other hand, universities are where we presently work—or try to work!—and where we have to get our hands in the dirt, even up to the elbows. So I am on the steering committee of the Radical Caucus of the MLA, among other things bringing before the Delegate Assembly this year a resolution on open access to the universities that calls for free universal higher education. A contradiction.

One encounters the dialectics of upward mobility most vitally as a teacher. On the one hand, I raise the kinds of things I'm talking about in this interview in my classes. I want the students in my classes to develop critical intelligence, and finely (or at least adequately!) honed skills of analysis and expression, so that they'll use that intelligence and those skills to undermine the system and shorten the regime of capital. But I also do everything that I can to impart these things to my students so that they can do as well as they possibly can do in this shark tank that is competitive life under capitalism. Ultimately, even if the university system serves to advance certain people—and it does— what's implied there (and I think both Dick Ohmann and you both make this point really clearly) is that in the process all upward mobility does is perpetuate inequality. Yeah, the whole notion of climbing upward *does* imply that there's someone you're climbing upward beyond, okay? Because if everyone climbed upward out of the working class, there'd be no one doing any waged labor, would there? And that ain't happening. In fact, more of the world's population is now proletarianized than ever before, both relatively and absolutely.

LP: Barbara, your analysis leads me to ask what kind of activism you believe is appropriate if the larger frame of education is social reproduction. If we're always demanding *more, more of everything, because people don't get enough of anything*, how does that context for activism translate for a certain kind of egalitarian social relations? From one angle, you might say the contrast is between reform and revolution.

BF: Reform and revolution! Well, that's an old one, but perhaps the most important one for leftists to be thinking about now, precisely because we're not in a moment when revolution is immediately on the horizon, are we? [laughter] So it would be very easy to get pulled to the right, to think that it makes no sense even to raise the categories of marxist analysis. I think that there needs to be lots and lots of activism. People who are on the left, who consider themselves marxists or friendly to marxism, have to find skillful but principled ways of uniting with people who don't see the world that way. There has to be a mass movement in this country in which liberals who are not necessarily anti-capitalist can be activists and feel comfortable, but where marxists also can and do put their politics forward in a principled way.

For example, look at the work of the Radical Caucus in MLA, which has worked on and off with the GSC for several years now around some critically important initiatives. Look at the kinds of things we're calling for, such as e.g., urging the MLA unequivocally to support unionization: if that's not a reform issue, I don't know what is. But also look at the current maneuvers on the part of some in MLA leadership who are trying to make that motion go through with *zero analysis* attached to it. They'd like all the

"whereas" clauses, which give the rationale for supporting unionization, knocked out of currency as something that people would have to think about when they vote; in fact, they want to have the vote on the "resolveds" *before* the consideration of the "whereases"! (Not a maneuver suggesting much respect for the role of argument in proposing conclusions!) In this instance, I think it's absolutely crucial that the Radical Caucus fight against this maneuver and hold out for the indissolubility of the "whereases" from the "resolveds," for it is only in this way that the vitally necessary anti-capitalist analysis of the crisis in academic labor can be put forward. If this analysis gets amended by the Delegate Assembly, so be it; but at least the debate has to take place! The way in which the Radical Caucus framed that motion draws the struggle for unionization for adjunct and graduate student labor into the context of an understanding of the totality of capitalist social relations—globalization and everything that goes along with it. If leftists don't fight for that kind of analysis, then we are just shooting ourselves in the foot, being very opportunist and, frankly, holding back the movement to transform—that is, abolish—the capitalist social relations that necessitate our having to fight these battles to begin with. For while I say that we all—anti-capitalists and others—need to work together in a principled way, I am completely of the opinion that capitalism, as a system, cannot be reformed in such a way as to provide a good life for the majority of the workers of the world. It's absolutely incapable of doing that. It's a system based upon producing profit rather than meeting human need.

Thus it's not so much a matter of what the reform issue is, as it is of the way the issue is framed. Every reform issue that students and workers will fight around has the potential within it to point out the fundamental unreformability of the system. It's like the way Marx starts *Capital* by talking about "the commodity," which becomes a kind of hieroglyphic within which everything else is contained. That's basically true of just about any kind of demand that can be made on the campus or within the profession. So, we need to bring in that totalizing analysis as fully as possible, as often as possible. That's one example of activism that I'm involved in. I could also talk about things I'm doing with NOW New Jersey as well.

LP: Yes, I think readers will be interested in knowing about that.

BF: I move out to New Jersey in 1988, and I became active with NOW a year or two after that. I've been primarily involved with a group called the Combating Racism Task Force within NOW-NJ. I've also been an active member of the Essex County chapter, in the last couple of years revived as the Women of Color and Allies (WOCA) chapter. (Not my choice of a name, but there you go.) For several years, I've hosted a local public access cable TV show, and we've done maybe three dozen shows over the years, on all kinds of topics, ranging from domestic violence and AIDS to women and girls in education to how sexism hurts men to welfare "reform" and police brutality. Although the venue is different, there's a continuity between the kinds of things I do within NOW and the kinds of things that were going on with my earlier campus worker-student alliance activism. For one thing, anti-racism. *I don't think any movement in this country or anywhere else in the world, for that matter, can be anti-racist enough.* Racism is the cutting edge of fascist developments in this country, whether it's welfare reform or police violence or whatever. If so-called "white" people don't have an understanding of how racism destroys their lives, as well those of people of color, then they have another think coming. It's so crucial. And the women's movement sure as hell isn't going to get off dead center if it can't deal effectively with racism, both in the society at large and in the ranks of the movement itself. There are, I think, only two really multiracial NOW formations in the country. One is in Texas; the other is in New Jersey.

Both the Task Force and the WOCA chapter have been very active in contesting and exposing so-called welfare "reform," and we've had some fairly militant actions around this issue. A couple of times we went down and engaged in some pretty confrontational activity in the State capital in Trenton, going into hearings, upsetting a few apple carts (metaphorically!) and denouncing the politicians who have been—*incredibly hypocritically*—preaching "personal responsibility" and criminalizing welfare recipients. We've taken on issues other than welfare reform—for example, police violence as a women's issue. And

pro-choice: that's hardly a distinctively "white" women's concern. In fact, given racist economic disparities, women of color have even more at stake in the fight to keep abortion rights, which have always been more available to those with higher incomes. Amidst all the activity around these issues—and, once again, these are nothing but *reform* issues—I've done what I can to bring in the anti-capitalist paradigm. For example, the whole stigmatization of mothers on AFDC accompanying welfare "reform"—the charge that they "don't want to work"—cries out to be understood in terms of the time-honored marxist analysis of women's work—that is, of the unwaged labor performed in the home, which guarantees the daily and generational reproduction of working-class labor power, at no expense to the capitalist class. The fact that it doesn't yield immediate profits to some boss doesn't mean that it is not productive or socially necessary labor; quite the contrary. My NOW friends chide me for not voting, but we have unity around lots of important things. I'm pretty confident that the marxist ideas I've raised over the years have contributed to the strength and solidarity of our group, currently the best-organized and most active segment of NOW-NJ.

LP: Barbara, you've been stressing the importance of racism to the social order under capitalism and how important it is to wage anti-racist struggles on any number of fronts. You told me earlier about a campaign at Texas Tech to mobilize students and faculty in a campaign against the use of prison labor and products manufactured in prison. In the middle of that campaign, they traveled to the tiny town of Tulia, Texas where there was already a small, but very loud campaign of local workers against racial profiling and police harassment. Evidently, after more than a year, these events made the New York Times which revealed to a national audience these racially motivated and wildly disproportionate arrests. I think as many as 250 black men had been arrested. Can you explain what that struggle was all about?

BF: In a general way. I'm acquainted with a woman who teaches at Texas Tech; our acquaintance goes back to the days of the campus worker-student alliance. What I understand of the Texas situation is pretty exciting. There was a big campaign on campus, largely led by some of the African American students, against racist police profiling (which has been going on for decades, of course; only the name is new). The students rose up; a number of faculty joined in. Then the issue got merged with another, relating to prison labor. It emerges that so much of the manufacturing of Dell computers is being done in prisons now that Dell has closed down a factory in Texas. Workers who used to have those jobs, and are angered at the closing of the factory, have apparently joined forces with the campus anti-racist movement. For it seems that the university—like a lot of universities—has a contract to purchase Dell computers. When my friend, very much to her credit, found out about this University contract to buy Dell products, she refused to allow a Dell computer to be brought into her office (even though she could have used a new one), and she urged a number of her colleagues to do the same. What has resulted is a multiracial movement of faculty, students, and blue collar workers that fights against racist police harassment and racist superexploitation in a class-conscious way.

*This kind of campus-based political practice is something we all should consider getting involved in. Since this issue of *Workplace* focuses on prison issues, I think we should make *actually doing something* that links up these issues a real priority. Besides, it's exactly that kind of multi-faceted activism, linking the fascism of the police and the prison system, and pointing to the implication of the university in this nexus of superexploited labor—it's just that kind of activism that helps to give people an understanding of the totality of the capitalist social relations shaping our lives. At the 1999 MLA Convention, there passed (and was later validated by membership-wide ballot) a Radical Caucus resolution condemning campus connections with sweatshop and prison labor. So we have a head start!*

I'd like to make a further point about prisons. On the one hand, I think it's really important to recognize that there are about 2 million people in prisons in this country, many of whom are involved in compulsory work programs and making something like 28 cents per hour on the average. We need to see that this kind of superexploitation enables the U.S.—which still has much higher wage levels than most other countries—to be competitive in the "new" globalized world economy. The hideousness of all of this was

recently brought home to me when I read somewhere that there's apparently a company in South Africa near Johannesburg called Kwalu which makes the plastic chairs used in MacDonal'd's — I assume all around the world. *They have found it more profitable to move their capital investments to Ridgeland Prison in South Carolina, where they earn a larger profit than they can in the townships of Johannesburg!* That gives you some sense of how incredibly cheap U.S. prison labor is, and how vital it is to the neoimperialism that is globalization.

On the other hand, above and beyond the super-profits to be made from that labor, I think we need to see that there's a whole movement afoot, fascistic in its essence, to criminalize huge sections of the population in a racist way. And to realize that this is primarily an *ideological* campaign, not immediately geared to the production of profit. It's important to see how the bourgeoisie as a class works on a number of levels all at once. It's hard to say where structural racism leaves off and programmatic and purposive government policy begins, but the way in which black and latin young men have been criminalized in the public imaginary is going to stand the rulers in good stead when the next depression comes, and, the safety net having been removed, there's massive homelessness, starvation, anger in the streets, as well as intensified police repression of the kind associated with profiling and with the killing of Amadou Diallo in New York City, in a hail of 41 bullets. All this constitutes preparation for the more overt and widespread repression that's going to come down when the economy becomes highly unstable and/or collapses. The criminalization of young men of color—"scapegoating" is a mild term to describe what's going on—is integral to this process of creating an "enemy within."

LP: Returning to the issue of activism and scholarship, I've often heard you talk about the need to think of activism in higher education as actually getting involved with students in on-campus struggles, insofar as we claim a radical or marxist critique, and above and beyond whatever kind of radical pedagogy we attempt. Can you say something about that?

BF: Well, I can say something about that, looking over many years of teaching. Of course, the potentiality for a faculty member to have this kind of involvement with students is never completely under his or her control. In other words, it depends upon the level of campus activism. During my first years of teaching in the mid to late 1970s, when I was at the University of Wisconsin, the big movement on campuses—many people will know this—was the anti-apartheid struggle. Again, one could say it was "just another" reform movement, but it was a really important international anti-racist movement, and it was definitely anti-capitalist if it was framed in the right kind of way. When I was involved with campus activists around that issue at Wisconsin, at one point we were all headed up to the Board of Trustees meeting where the University's stance on its investments was finally, after much hemming and hawing, going to be on the table. Needless to say, the meeting, while ostensibly public, was held in a small room allowing for only a tiny audience—and it was held at the top of the tallest building on campus, to which the elevators were quickly shut down. A whole bunch of us—mostly students, but some community activists and a couple of faculty members besides myself—climbed the stairs and were chanting anti-apartheid slogans in the stairwell. Somebody had a screw driver and eventually got the door off its hinges so that we could break into the meeting room and, shall I say, make our presence felt. There was quite a melee with the campus cops, but several people got into the meeting. A number—including myself—got thrown down the stairwell; the sleeve was ripped off my coat. All this may sound a little dramatic, but, hey...ya do what ya gotta do! Whatever role the events of that day played, we'll never know; but soon thereafter the University divested its holdings in companies doing business in South Africa.

When I went to Northwestern, it was the 1980s, and there were a number of important campus issues. CIA recruitment was a big one. I was involved with a student group fighting against that. I was present at a sit-in, and I didn't quite sit in myself, but I was....pretty close by. [laughter]I was pushing the limits of what was possible. A very important campaign at Northwestern was one various student groups were having around getting rid of—and this may touch an unwelcome nerve with some people, but so be it! — a Nazi professor there...and I say "Nazi" advisedly. He was an electrical engineering professor named

Arthur Butz, and as soon as he got tenure, he started publishing Holocaust denial stuff—a book called *The Hoax of the Twentieth Century*, believe it or not—and editing a Holocaust denial journal—the *Journal of Historical Review*. He also gave talks to card-carrying KKKers and Nazis (and once spoke at a Farrakhan rally!). At one such meeting at a Holiday Inn out by O'Hare Airport, where he brought out blueprints and charts and graphs to demonstrate that the Nazis couldn't possibly have burned up all those people at Auschwitz, the tripod holding his slide projector was upset (ummetaphorically).... He was and is a sad excuse for a human being, and there was a movement to get him removed from his tenured position, in which I was involved.

In fact, one of the student groups came out with a pamphlet called "Keep Foley, Fire Butz." The context? As I think you know, Leo, and maybe some others do as well (though all this was about 15 years ago), I was ultimately denied tenure at Northwestern University, ostensibly because of my participation in an incident in which a Nicaraguan Contra leader was shouted down one evening on campus. The reason the university went after me in that episode was that I had been doing all these other things, I'm convinced. Do you want me to talk about the Calero incident?

LP: Yes, please.

BF: Basically, this guy Adolfo Calero was one of the leaders of the CIA-backed Contra directorate, which was bent upon overthrowing the Sandinistas. A former owner of the Coca-Cola bottling plant and several large hotels, Calero was well-known for his pledge to create a river of blood from Managua to the Honduran border. In the mid-1980s the Contras were making their first attempts to get legal funding from the U.S. Congress (when they didn't get what they wanted, that was when all the Iran-Contra subterfuge started). Calero was invited to campus by a conservative student group connected with an international right-wing movement. A huge demonstration greeted him; he was shouted down by a very angry group of about 400 people. Before he came in the room (where incidentally I taught my American Lit survey three times a week), I had gotten up and made a speech, as had several others, to the effect that people should shout him down *because he was a fascist, and fascists like him, whose words result in butchery, should have no right to speak*. (He boldly eyeballed a latina who was holding up a sign saying "You have raped and murdered my sisters"; he smiled the vilest smile I've ever seen.) He was whisked away by campus cops after some demonstrators—with whom, by the way, I had no connection!—raced down the aisle and threw a bucket of animal blood at him. I suspect that my view about Calero's speech rights is not one that that everyone reading *Workplace* is going to agree with! But what was interesting—you can play this free speech thing one way or another—is that I was denied tenure—by the Provost—on the basis of that *one* episode, which was dubbed evidence of "poor citizenship." Citizenship, ostensibly as determined by this single episode, was then conflated with service. (You know, tenure's supposed to be awarded on the basis of teaching, scholarship, and service—but I can't think of a single case in which "service" either figured for or against anyone, except mine!). Even though I'd been approved at all levels through the Dean, I was denied tenure. All this became something of an issue in the academy for a year or so; the MLA membership even passed a resolution calling upon NU to reverse the firing. I was at the center of quite a tempest in the teapot of the academy, for a brief while.

LP: Yeah, well, I think the category of "citizenship" is one that needs to be unpacked as well, if only for the ideological work it does in spreading the fallacy that governance in bourgeois democracies functions across a horizontal plane of social relations. You know, we're all equal before the law; we're all citizens. In reality, the actually existing social relationship is vertical, not horizontal. Citizenship seeks to make class stratification invisible. People do not have equal access to power or to instruments of power such as speech or the press.

BF: That's right.

LP: Barbara, we're winding down toward the end of the interview. If you can, I'd like you to speak the

about the traditions and scholarship that have influenced you as you have developed as a marxist critic and activist. And I'd like to ask where you see your work going.

BF: That's a big one! In terms of my perspective as a marxist critic, insofar as one can point to strands within marxism which to this day are strong and abiding, I would say I come more out of the Lukácsian-Hegelian tradition than out of the structuralist marxist tradition derived from Althusser. I think that structuralist marxism, particularly as it has devolved into neo- and then post-marxism, has encountered a real dead-end. When I teach the students in my classes some basic principles of marxism, I do, in fact, use some Althusserian concepts, such as the relation of the repressive to the ideological state apparatus and the notion of interpellation. But I think the kind of totalization that's available from the Lukácsian perspective is invaluable, absolutely indispensable, in spite of other problems with Lukács, most notably his stance on modernism. My first book, *Telling the Truth*, is in the Lukácsian tradition, a kind of Hegelian-marxist discussion of the growth and development of a literary genre, the documentary novel. I like the book all right but have since, I think, I moved beyond that level of abstraction.

My second book (which is the major project that I've done thus far that I'm proudest of, if I may say so), my book on U.S. Depression-era proletarian fiction, *Radical Representations*, was an important one for me to write, for a couple of reasons. First is the obvious canon-busting argument: most people don't know much about this literature, even though it contains a rich harvest of pro-working class, often revolutionary, poetry, plays and narrative. *It's very important for people to read this literature in a moment like ours, when revolution does not seem to be on the immediate agenda.* Lots of people—not just our students!—buy into the deeply ideological notion that egalitarian societies are impossible because people are intrinsically individualistic and greedy. Much proletarian literature gives its readers a concrete and powerful sense of a very different human potentiality, and of how this potentiality has manifested itself in history. Everyone with a shred of progressive consciousness should read some of these novels about working class struggle. One of my favorites (even if it is a bit creaky in its novelistic hinges) is Myra Page's *Moscow Yankee*, about a Detroit auto worker who goes to the Soviet Union during the first Five Year Plan. Richard Wright's *Uncle Tom's Children* is another winner; its tragic counterpart is *Lawd Today*.

Second, though, I did on my work on proletarian literature not just to celebrate it, but to subject it to critique, to—apparently one of Dick Ohmann's favorite phrases from Marx, and of mine, too—“*the ruthless critique of all things existing.*” Well, God knows, mainly this critique has to get directed toward capitalism. But I think it also has to be directed toward the Left movement in the 20th century. The fact that the first wave of attempts to build socialism and move toward communism got derailed by their own internal contradictions is something that needs, urgently, to be understood. If you aren't going to trot out a “human nature” kind of argument to explain this failure, then you have to have a concretely historical and theoretically coherent explanation, or set of explanations. To the extent that proletarian literature displays some of the fundamental errors of the old Communist movement—nationalism, sexism, reformism, and a host of others—I think we can learn from those errors in a sympathetic but, nonetheless, rigorous way.

What have I been working on more recently? Well, I have just completed a huge tome situating the New Negro Renaissance writer, Jean Toomer—and the New Negro Renaissance more broadly—in the contradictory context of early 20th-century left politics. The book is so damned big, I'm going to have trouble getting it published; it'll probably have to be broken in half. In addition, I've done quite a bit of work on Ralph Ellison, work that will probably take the form of another book. I'm dealing with Ralph Ellison in the context of anti-communism, but I've found out some really fascinating things in the drafts of *Invisible Man*, which in its first incarnation was much less anti-communist than the text we're familiar with. The reason I'm doing this work on black writers and the left is not only that it's so very interesting, but also that I see it as vitally connected to the larger project of articulating a class-based understanding of racism. This project is hooked in with the necessity of refuting the widespread and totally inaccurate notion that communism in this country was/is a white person's thing, and that, to the extent that African

Americans have gotten involved, it was/is as second-class citizens...that they were/are dupes, manipulated, all that sort of nonsense. By unearthing this very rich history of African American writers in the left in my scholarship, I feel that I'm doing what I can to help clear some muck out of the way. *If the struggle for an egalitarian society isn't deeply anti-racist, it's not going to happen, and if the struggle against racism is not undertaken from a class perspective, it's going to be hopelessly hamstrung.* So I think there's a lot at stake in doing this kind of research and writing, and doing it well.

The next book beyond the Ellison project, I think, will be a book on representations of John Brown. I've always been fascinated by him, largely because he was willing to use violence—terrorist violence—to destroy slavery. To me, he's a heroic figure, though needless to say I'm not interested in hagiography. This past summer I read Russell Banks's recent novel, *Cloudsplitter*, and it absolutely fascinated me; but my interest in John Brown goes back a long, long way. I think, in addition, there are many important political and theoretical questions at stake here. For example, why is it that white people have an interest in fighting racism?

LP: You're anticipating all my questions. (laughter)

BF: John Brown, you know, has often been portrayed as a crackpot, a madman—something that tells you a lot more about the people doing the portraying than it does about Brown himself, I have a hunch. So I want to historicize Brown as an object of representation. I also want to get into the debates informing the new "whiteness studies" and in particular to interrogate the notion of "white skin privilege" which is prevalent among many anti-racist white liberal, progressive, and even radical people. I think it's a profoundly mistaken notion, for it implies that white people (which has to mean mainly white workers, because they constitute most of white people) materially benefit from racism just because they are—as a group—clearly treated differently than people of color. In a correlative way, I also don't think it's true that workers in this country benefit from imperialism, even though—as a group—they are clearly better off than most workers elsewhere in the world. I know these statements are controversial, and that I'm putting them forth quite bluntly here. But I think it's really important for egalitarian-minded progressives and leftists to get past a politics of guilt and to realize that *differential treatment does not equal benefit*, a phrase that I've cribbed from my respected friend, Gregory Meyerson, who's writing up a very cogent critique of critical race theory. Anyhow, these are some of the issues that are important for me in the projected book about John Brown.

One thing I could add is that while I don't see myself as writing a "theory" book, certainly not anytime in the near future, I keep my hand in by writing an essay on theory now and then. I just finished one which is a critique of post-positivist realism; it's coming out this fall in *Cultural Logic*. I believe it's really important for literary marxists to engage in theoretical debate around the implications of postmodernism (all bad, as far as I am concerned!) for our work. Postmodernist premises have gone into the cultural groundwater to such an extent that even people who see themselves as opposed to various aspects of it do not understand the extent to which it—and particularly its antipathy to totality—figures aprioristically in a lot of contemporary theory.

In terms of current influences, well, my friend Meyerson is certainly one. Other people whose work on race and class I respect, and have learned from, include Barbara Fields and Ted Allen. People doing important work on African Americans and the left include Gerald Horne, Bill Mullen, Bill Maxwell, Jim Miller, Faith Berry, Anthony Dawahare. Hey, this is starting to sound like the acknowledgments in a preface! Let me stop before I get in too deep! Let me also mention, in the zone of theory, the so-called Syracuse marxists....Mas'ud Zavarzadeh, Donald Morton, and Teresa Ebert, probably, above all. *Ludic Feminism and After* is a really important book.

LP: Barbara, on a final note, allow me to return to where we began, that is, the apparent "seamlessness" between your joint commitments to scholarship and activism. It would appear that the particular way in

which you fight to reclaim Marx involves asking people to see not only the continuing relevance of marxism as a lens with which to view all aspects of social reality, but also its indispensable character as an engine for egalitarian social change. What does it mean to you to be a Marxist? Let's conclude, then, with your response to that.

BF: Okay. There are a lot of people running around these days who say that they "use marxism," and that's all well and good. But to me, marxism is not just one approach among many, part of the pluralistic smorgasbord. It's a paradigm for grasping the interrelations among all phenomena having to do with culture and society. It's a totalizing paradigm, as I've said throughout this interview. So, a Marxist is someone who feels the dialectical method in her or his bones. A Marxist is also someone who takes the long view, who does not confuse appearance with essence, the temporary defeat in the movement to establish egalitarian social relations with the necessity for eternal capitalist rule.

At the risk of being trite, I have to quote that famous eleventh thesis on Feuerbach: "The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world in various ways; the point, however, is to *change* it" (123). There's a wonderful legacy of the activist Marx, one that flows from the dialectical materialist understanding of history and historical process. Many people have the wrongheaded notion that his "grand narrative" of the modes of production entails mechanistic determinism; history can't be rushed, and those who try to push things forward prematurely meet only with ironic defeat. Well, apparently, one of Marx's daughters once asked him—in words to this effect—"Daddy, who's your favorite hero in history?" To which he replied, "Spartacus." I find this answer fascinating because, in the rebellion in which Spartacus participated, and which he helped to lead, there was no possibility that the insurgent slaves were going to seize control of the means of production, smash the Roman state, and establish an egalitarian society run by the producers. Their act was, in one sense, "premature," and doomed to defeat. But in their heroic effort and failure, to which Marx paid high tribute, the Spartacus rebels are part of the "red line of history," the continuing class struggle in which millions have over the centuries engaged, and will—with some hiatuses—continue to engage until inequality is eradicated once and for all. Although much in currency these days, the wimpy stand-in terms "resistance" and "agency" cannot begin to approximate the dimensions of the marxist notion of class struggle, which is at once profoundly tragic and profoundly optimistic. What does it mean to be a marxist? To put one's shoulder to the wheel alongside the shoulders of others who are bent upon abolishing a system built around the grasping for profit. To help to bring into existence a system built around the creation of fully realized human beings. This vision of potentiality—that's what motivates me, what makes me a marxist.

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