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CLASS POLITICS AND DEMOCRATIC CULTURE:

An Interview with Steve Parks

Tony Scott

Steve Parks is Associate Professor of English at Temple University. He is the author of *Class Politics: The Movement for the Students' Right to Their Own Language* (NCTE 2000), which studies the relationship between 1960s politics, academic and political organizations, and composition studies. At Temple he is the director of Teachers for a Democratic Culture, a national organization of progressive and liberal academic activists. Along with Dr. Eli Goldblatt, he is also the creator and director of the Institute for the Study of Literature, Literacy, and Culture at Temple.

In the following interview, Steve discusses some of the major themes of *Class Politics*, including the importance of leftist political organizations to the genesis of contemporary composition studies. He also discusses present trends in the discipline and the various activities of Teachers for a Democratic Culture. The interview took place at The 2001 Conference on College Composition and Communication in Denver.

TS: Can you give a basic overview of *Class Politics*, at least the major thesis?

SP: The motivation behind the book grew out of my own economic situation. I was a graduate student at the University of Pittsburgh with no money and two kids. My partner and I were paying 800 dollars a month in childcare and getting 800 dollars a month in a teacher stipend. So we were working several jobs. I was looking around for a tradition that would explain my situation and link it to activism in the field. I didn't see any of that in any of the histories I was reading. This was back when the North book and the Berlin book were just coming out. Gilyard hadn't written his piece yet.¹ So part of the motivation behind the book was that I wanted to make apparent and real the tradition of committed political work done by faculty. I chose the students' rights² because I liked the idea behind it, but I also like the fact that you can trace it out to being the result of political activism – and not just political in the sense that you are active in your department and you create a new curriculum. While departmental activism and new progressive curriculums are important, I was looking for moments when faculty was aligned with community groups and larger social justice movements. One quote that summarizes the book nicely is by Al Haber. At the Radicals in the Profession Conference, he argued: "A radical cannot see his loyalty as being to the profession or institution in which he works. Our loyalty is to our political comrades and to the political aims for which we are organizing." I think that summarizes the book; I was trying to show this tradition. I probably have a bit more faith in the work of our profession now, but when I was writing the book that quote rang in my ears.

TS: In *Class Politics*, you write, "perhaps more than other disciplines, composition studies owes its

current status to the counter-hegemonic struggles waged around access to higher education. Without the efforts of the New Left, the Great Society, or Black Power, the reconceptualization of nontraditional students in the academy during the 1960s might not have occurred. Mina Shaughnessy's *Errors and Expectations* (1977) would not have had an existing market to formulate. David Bartholomae's 'The Study of Error' (1980) would not have the same bureaucratic and institutional framework through which to be read" (3). Could you articulate the contrast between your history of composition and the other histories that have been written? You are telling a very different story from the ones told by North, Berlin or Connors – one that identifies the political context that made work like Shaughnessy's so broadly influential.³

SP: Actually, Berlin was going to write the introduction to my book, and then, unfortunately, he passed away. I know that I couldn't have written my book without Berlin's book, because there had to be a general record of what happened historically before specific interventions could be made. I like to think that my book took his politics and made them manifest in terms of what people had done in the field. Actually Steve North gave me the contract for the book. His book is set-up more around the disciplinary fields, and with that set-up you can't concentrate on the way that people cross disciplines, cross rhetorical subgroups to engage in political work. He has this idea of practitioner knowledge, but he chose to limit it to classroom practice. He didn't investigate all of the practitioner knowledge that people have in terms of how do you get a community group to support you to do this? How do you link your class with a community? Of course, one book can't do everything. As colleagues and academics, we are always building off each others' work.

TS: You seem to be saying in the book that when composition was forming as a distinct discipline, it needed these general types of histories to create a separate identity – composition needed its own story.

SP: Yeah, I admire the work Berlin did as a historian and as an activist in the field, but there was a way in which Berlin codified a history for us. I make the case in the book that Berlin codified our history in such a way that it left out all of the other political work that had happened. And I do think that composition has so wrapped itself up in professionalization that it has left behind a lot of the political work that made it possible. I think that graduate students, graduate student unions and adjunct issues are really the motivating force that could revitalize composition. I think that they could reconnect us with the issues that initially formed composition. I quite enjoy the perks that being a full professor in composition that a research university can provide. I also realize that such a focus can make us so comfortable in the academy that we forget that we are supposed to be this counter-hegemonic force, pushing people to be more honest in their politics and more open with their viewpoints. I don't want to lose touch with the issues that informed the book in the first place, so to some extent, I have to always stay one step removed from my "profession."

I should add that since the book has come out, folks have been pointing out its flaws. The Black Caucus of the NCTE/CCCC has been very forceful in arguing that my book fails to take into account the impact of their organization and African-American activists in the production of the "Students' Rights" statement and progressive politics at CCCC. I want to state publicly that they are quite right. I think my book does some important recovery of a tradition of activism, but it is partial at best. NCTE, who published the book, and myself now really have to create publications and forums where these equally important parts of our histories can be told. Much in the same way that my book works off Berlin's – a response to the gaps I was sensitive to – other scholars can use this book to push against and to get us where we need to be as a profession. Keith Gilyard, in his recent article, looked at the history of how black politics emerged in the profession. Our field needs to support more of this type of work, examining not only African-Americans, but Latinos, Asian/Pan-Asian, and Gay/Lesbian histories as well. Otherwise, my book will only block other important stories that need to be recorded and told. I can't imagine a more terrible legacy for the book.

TS: I was talking with some people last night about academic work issues, and someone said, "why don't we have more graduate student activism in CCCC's, like they do at MLA?" It is a good question, and I have heard it several times at this conference. My feeling is that maybe it is a function of the health of the market for Ph.D.'s in composition right now – the general feeling is that if you don't make any waves, you have a realistic chance at getting a decent job. Also, if you are getting a Ph.D. in comp/rhet, early on in your graduate education there is a tendency toward self-identifying primarily as a WPA. This is logical because so many compositionists are WPA's – it comes with the territory – but maybe with this self-identification comes a tendency to also identify with institutional concerns?

SP: Yeah. I think that there is that, definitely. A lot of comp programs will have one or two comp faculty who are administrators and maybe hundreds of faculty who are part-timers or adjuncts. So part of the professional model is to educate you to think of yourself as someone who manages labor, as opposed to being a laborer – I think that is very true. But I also think comp just refuses to recognize the ways in which it is built upon the exploited labor of others. To recognize that would make us ask why are we sitting in a hotel in Denver drinking vodka and talking about students who can never afford to be here being taught by people who also can't afford to come. It is a willed blindness. When I was a graduate student, and when I was a part-time person, I was always offended when I would pay my way out here and nobody would talk about it. I think it's the moral obligation of folks in our position to stay offended.

Why graduate students aren't as politically active at 4C's. . . I don't know. I think a lot of graduate students who teach comp tend to leave it behind and move into literature. I also think we have a larger part-time exploited labor pool. Part-timers have a harder time attending conferences like this one. They are not coming to Denver. So, we don't do a lot of job interviewing here. I think that if we had a more overt connection to the labor market it would be easier to organize.

TS: I was listening to a speaker at a conference last fall who made the case that academic work is labor, and then she talked about all of the different work that a WPA has to do – a lot of different tasks, a lot of different hats to wear. Among the things she mentioned was managing adjuncts and training graduate students to teach classes – without ever recognized the work of those adjuncts and graduate students, or how poorly compensated they are – it seemed as though they were just a part of her work.

SP: I don't know how representative that speaker was of the WPA. Many of the folk in that organization have moved to seeing their job as supporting worker rights. But I think her comment is indicative of that whole middle-management mindset. It goes back to my earlier point about seeing ourselves as professionals – a label that blocks an identification with other workers, whether they are part-timers, graduate students, administrative assistants or custodial staff. I think that type of professionalism was being battled against in the 1960s, and then it just lost out with the triumph of academic discourse.

TS: Politics lost to professionalism?

SP: I think so. Look around. Ninety percent of this conference is white. Our students are so much more diverse than that. What does it say about the professionalization of composition when it has failed to bring in people from various backgrounds? We don't think enough about how to bring in different people with different subject identities through the graduate school process and into the profession.

TS: Can you talk about the current place of the university in our culture?

SP: I always frame this type of question as the place of the university in the community within which it exists. I think sometimes we talk about the university as this huge, monolithic thing, and then we talk about culture in huge chunks, but maybe it would be better to begin by asking what my university or my

program can do locally. In that context, I imagine the university at the local moment being very committed to those pockets of self-identified community groups who are struggling to gain more economic security and get themselves culturally recognized. I run a community press out of our writing program. We are doing a book on the Kennett Square migrant workers who come from Mexico and pick mushrooms just outside of Philadelphia. Nobody in Philly really knows about them. They have no access to the media. They have tried for ten years to unionize, but they can't get their story out. So we are working with them to create a series of events which will garner the media attention you can get through a university. And by utilizing the university's expertise with oral histories and publications, we are going to do a book that we are going to circulate in Philadelphia. And then we are going to link all these efforts to a writing center we are setting up in the community around self-publishing and literacy work.

I also think maybe if conferences were places where you came and met with all the players in alliances like this and actually shared this type of pragmatic knowledge, I would find conferences more valuable. But I am at the point now at which I seem to hear endless theories of what the university should do and very little "here this is what I am actually doing and here are the people I'm doing it with."

TS: Composition may be uniquely positioned to do the work you talk about though. We do empirical research, we do work with high schools . . .

SP: Yes, absolutely. The first thing that first year comp teachers should ask is, "who were our students as high school students?" Because that is really where they come from, and that leads us to have to work with the schools. In Philadelphia, one of the neighborhood public high schools might begin with a freshman class of one thousand and actually graduate two hundred. So, how can I in good faith claim that I am a part of a community if I am not doing anything about that? I think those moral questions all come out of the work of the sixties and I honestly believe that they were professionalized and left behind in the mid-seventies and early eighties. It is a different period now; maybe things are coming back, but . . .

TS: How would you characterize the period now?

SP: Um, that is a good question because I think – well here is my metaphor. There is a letter that C. Wright Mills wrote to the New Left in 1960. He predicted, looking at the scattered moments that were happening then, that there is going to be this great social revolution. Looking back, it turns out he was correct. What looked like a moment of calm with only scattered moments of activism actually turned out to be something much more substantial. I think that is where we are at now. I think the activism of graduate students reminded people of what our roots should be. That has brought people back who had gotten disgusted with what was going on in the 1980s – to think that they can do things again. I think the election of Bush has reminded us that the stakes are real. So I actually think that comp is about to make a shift back to an activist stance.

I also think you can look at what is going on at universities. Right now service learning is what it is being called for, but most people I know see it as a space for creating activists in college. So I think that we are about to make a big paradigm shift. I am actually really excited right now, because I feel like I wrote a book about a past period, but I am about to see the roots of a new beginning. I think it is not going to be necessarily my generation, but it is going to be the generation that follows us. We were caught in the middle of having to be professionals without any social movements around us. But the social movements are happening which free up and support people who have more of a radical, progressive and, I think, more sincere politics about how to work with students.

TS: How do you think that vision of a more progressive, more activist future of composition fits into the arguments made by Randy Martin, Gary Rhoades, Slaughter and Leslie and others who track the trend

toward the corporatization of universities⁴ – the vision of the future of academia as an efficiently managed work site that is set up primarily to supply skilled workers for the market.

SP: Yeah, but first off I think it is too easy to say that the corporatization of the university is necessarily affecting our teaching. A lot of places where the university is being corporatized – in terms of outsourcing certain services as way to gut union power, allowing corporate bookstores to take over university bookstores, and setting up budget practices that expand administrative power and shrink faculty pay – don't have an immediate connection to what we teach. So I think you can't always make the connection between corporatization and what we do in our classrooms exact. Sometimes the attempt to do that robs us of our agency as well as makes us miss other places where corporatization is affecting the university.

Making the enemy monolithic helps folks to forge coalitions and fortify stances, but mostly it makes for inexact practice that a more nuanced understanding wouldn't allow. That said, I agree with your general point that teaching is becoming increasingly controlled. Part of this is through funding of certain fields which seem to have an immediate connection to the work world – business, technical writing. But part of it is also an attempt to use the "standards movement" in public education to change what we're allowed to do. What I mean is that the attempt to get colleges to come up with standards/competencies for majors, etc., is an attempt to put a set of controls in place that will ultimately take power away from the teacher and give it to administration. More to the point, to the extent that such standards are framed in terms of the "real world" concerns of students, it also places us as servants to the corporate economy.

I think two things, though: one, I don't think students are buying it. I think you are seeing a lot more student activism now. There is a certain way in which they have a larger global identity and they can see how capitalism is linked to social injustice. So I think if we just followed the lead of the emerging student organizations, our classrooms can become vital places. This isn't to say all students feel this way. But, I think we need to continue to show them alternatives ways of being in the world. My second point, then, is that I think that service learning is a way in which comp can keep its politics, by choosing who they want to link with. Part of the corporate model is to say they want to prepare students for jobs. Faculty hears that as working for IBM. But you know there are people who work at the Kensington Welfare Rights Union who are out there planning homeless protests, or people who work for cultural organizations. The world of labor is not just IBM. People make very good, politically correct lives out of working. And I think our role is to have students see that, to expand the working world for them.

TS: And they need the same set of rhetorical skills.

SP: Exactly, you know, when the Kensington Welfare Rights Union does a press release, they do it with a rhetorical sense of audience and they do it with standard English. They also know how to do a street protest, though. I think students know that you need multiple skills. One of the things that I have against how the Students Rights statement was framed is the opponents of it made it sound like we were never going to teach the standard. Nowhere did anyone ever say that they are not going to teach the standard. So I think corporatization could become the bogeyman – the enabling myth that continues to allow comp to back away from its roots – or it could become the term with which we reinvigorate what the world of work could be. I am more interested in the latter, teaching students the multiple ways in which they can enter (and challenge) the world of work.

TS: In the book you trace the polarization in composition between people who embrace multiple literacies and people who would have us focus only on standard English. I really think you hit the nail on the head when you say that we argue about this in our professional conversations, but then most of us, no matter our orientation, go into our classes and recognize multiple literacies AND teach standard written English.

SP: I think that is very true. Maybe this isn't completely relevant, but I think thinking of ourselves as professionals who have to publish makes us write a lot of things that don't really need to be written. And we come up with a lot of fine-hair distinctions that are theoretically good, but we all know – you know, I teach Melissa standard English because Melissa wants to write a letter to the mayor because her school sucks.

TS: We sometimes just cruise for fights for the sake of publishing.

SP: Yeah. Of course, we are doing this interview on the second day of the conference and I am always a little frustrated by the second day.

TS: Let's move on to the Teachers for a Democratic Culture (TDC). Can you give an overview of what it is, and I think that it would be very helpful for people to know how you got it started and how it evolved.

SP: Okay, well, I can just relate it to the book. One of the latent stories I tell in the book is that academics are always forming political organizations and then they always fall apart. There was a Movement for a Democratic Society, which was sort-of mixed; there was the New University Conference; Aronowitz had a group called, I think, Intellectuals for a Democratic Culture, or something like that. Just recently, SAWSJ [Scholars, Artists and Writers for Social Justice] emerged, although it is not clear to me where SAWSJ is at currently. So these things rise and fall.

And so, TDC was another one of these groups that was trying to emerge when I was in graduate school. They were doing a lot of interesting stuff and I followed them while writing my dissertation. Just when I began being an assistant professor, an email went out saying that Gerald Graff needed someone or some organization to take it over. Looking at the history I just discussed, I felt that continuity was one of the problems with the left. We need to keep a name going for a period of time. CCCC's didn't get big overnight. You have got to stick in the game. I felt that the TDC had done enough good work battling against Lynne Cheney that it had a tradition that people would respect. It had really achieved a national voice for scholars to speak out against the conservative onslaught. It seemed wrong to let that credibility and stature go away. So as a second year assistant professor without tenure, no book, I convinced this man to let me have it. Quite a leap of faith on his part really.

One of the first issues I confronted was thinking through what TDC should actually do – what actual practices should it take on. One of my first decisions was that TDC should do more than a newsletter. If you look at a lot of academic groups, all they do is newsletters. I love the working class caucus, because they always ask what can I do at a conference or in my community that is politically active? I was thinking "what would be a set of activities that would sustain people and make them feel a part of a diverse progressive community?" So I wanted to shift TDC from being just another newsletter vehicle, to being a set of things that we do. But I also felt that the culture wars had shifted. They had shifted to standardized assessment; they had shifted to labor issues, and they had shifted to a lot of anti-gay bashing. So I wanted to shift TDC into a position to respond pragmatically to these new issues. In fact, to keep TDC in touch with these emerging trends and be aware of what's on the horizon, I wanted to create a board that would have people from all these groups, a floating board. With that, I thought TDC would always be a place that supported emerging social movements. So that is how I re-framed TDC.

The other thing is that many radical academic/community groups never have any institutional support. So too often, someone will take on too much work and burn themselves out. So I brought TDC into Temple and made it a part of the Institute that I had created. So that now, TDC has a graduate student assistant who does nothing but TDC. We have a secretary; we have an annual budget. I made us a non-profit, so you can give us money through the United Way. I created a system where the professional development

workshops that I do in Philadelphia provides money for TDC's coffers, so we actually have money – which is not a small thing, right? Because we have money, if we want to recognize graduate student activism, we can support a conference. We can do all the copying for a union that doesn't have money yet. It goes back to the idea that these groups have to do something in order to be valuable, because there are enough journals out there.

I also created this democracy fund. Because I have so much support for the TDC, I don't have to use membership fees to pay for any bureaucracy. So anyone who gives me money, I put about 80% of it into this democracy fund. And you can write to me and say, like, Ali Shehzad Zaidi did, "I am doing work at the University of Rochester about CIA influence, but I can't pay to see the information." So I am like, here is a check. So I gave him money so that he can refund himself, and now he can do his work. I think that what the TDC can do is support organizing moments, support scholarship that reflects the importance of that, and create awards that makes the field recognize that work. I realize that in some sense, the field will probably never recognize the value of what graduate students and undergraduates are doing now. We are too professional. But the field will recognize when Richard Ohmann and Cary Nelson and these folks say this book or this work is valuable. So the award is a way of telling the field they should rethink their goals. So that was the history of it.

TS: Where would you like to go from here with the TDC?

SP: When I wrote the book I felt like the last chapter was a set of ideas. I felt that I was making a promise by putting them into print — that I would actually try to do these things. So in the book I talk about forming coalitions of radical caucuses. So, like at this CCCC's, I am having the TDC hold an event where the radical caucuses can come together and decide if they can work together, and what that work would be. I am having the TDC give funds, I am announcing this tonight, to support people to do that work throughout the year. I am trying to create an infrastructure to make it happen. I want to test this idea at CCCC's – that is my most immediate community – then I will maybe shift to MLA. TDC itself is a multi-disciplinary organization. So at certain points I have talked to Paul Lauter about what to do in American Studies. So the organizing of political caucuses, I see that as a goal.

Basically though, I see the real goal as continuing to have a board that represents the politics of the current social dynamic within a larger historical understanding and using that board to help me determine what we should support. Right now it is graduate student unions. But in six months it might be something else. There has to be an organization that faculty and progressives can look to and say, "they are sticking in the game and can help."

Actually, I had a great conversation recently, a drinking conversation. We had been drinking vodka for quite a while, and we were all you know, bitter towards the stars – you know how you get. And we were like, what would be famous enough? It was just a fun question. And I was thinking about it, and I thought what I would really like is not to have a set of books, or a set of articles that are constantly quoted. It would be great that if in ten years TDC had a reputation for sticking in the game and being a valuable resource for progressives across the disciplines and outside of disciplines. That would be a tremendous legacy for TDC. I think in many ways that would be the legacy of the book. If the book doesn't lead to any practice, then it was just a tenure vehicle, and that would make me nauseous.

TS: What especially impresses my about the TDC is that it has a really strong local relationship and it is also a part of a national network of progressives, and because it is at once pragmatic and goal-oriented on the local level, and a part of a national movement, it seems like a really good example of postmodern activism.

SP: I like to think that, but I am not sure. Now that TDC has an infrastructure, we can begin to support local alliances of progressive academics, workers, and community members. In the past, the TDC had all of these chapters which struggled to be more than reading groups. What I want to do is use the money to give people in Arkansas seed money to start an alliance with a community group. I think that is the next stage. It would be more work centered.

TS: Do you think the progressive orientation of the TDC hinders your ability to work with local public schools?

SP: I don't think it does. I think the tradition of TDC is to open curriculum and engage debate. Engaging debate means you have to represent multiple sides. I think most people on the left would be happy if we just had a real debate – of course, we think we will win the debate, but at least have a debate! So I think folks respect our attempts to be even handed. I also think that there are many more progressive, committed public school teachers than we like to pretend. Academics like to pretend that we are the few, the proud or whatever, but you go into the schools and these people are there not for pay, but because they are committed to Latino education. So identifying myself as progressive has never, ever hindered me. In fact, when they hear that I come from this organization they are more open to having me come in. They know what my politics are and that I care about their students and that I want their students to succeed.

TS: Anything else you want to say?

SP: I suppose I'd like to say join the TDC. If your politics are progressive, you have to support organizations that support progressives. Giving 35 bucks to CCCC's makes sure that we can go to the Adam's Mark hotel. Giving 35 bucks to TDC means we can support progressive scholarship, community/academic alliances, and conferences that offer pragmatic organizing advice. We try to collect information, organize it into pragmatic tools, and send it back out – that is the niche of TDC. That 's just a sales pitch really.

More to the point, I'd like to say I've learned from the work of academic and community progressives. At my best moments, I like to think I've joined the tradition of their efforts and I hope my work honors their labor.

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Tony Scott, The University of Louisville