THE LAST GOOD JOB IN AMERICA

WORK AND EDUCATION IN THE NEW GLOBAL TECHNOCULTURE

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I

ACCELERATED LIVES
Perhaps you know the joke: we are born, we go to school, we get a job (either for wages or unpaid work at home), we get married and have kids (or not), and then we die. The joke is about the life cycle and is meant to convey the utter banality of human existence. The banality is taken seriously by many biologists who hold that humans—like other life forms—have only one task from the evolutionary genetic perspective: reproduction of the species. Once achieved, we are better off dead. In the social significance of the concept, the notion of “reproduction” defines much of what we mean by the everyday. Like the labor process (which, for the most part, is organized around the repetition of predetermined operations based on a division of labor that reduces each participant’s labor to a fraction of an elaborate continuum), the practices of everyday life resemble repetition more than they produce difference. We must eat to live, we usually prepare and eat three meals a day, and most of us habitually sleep a certain number of hours. We spend a great deal of time shopping for our daily bread and a certain amount of time cleaning—the house, the daily dishes, our clothes, and ourselves. Parents, usually women, spend a great deal of time raising their children; for the middle class at least, child-rearing activities tend to merge with the inevitable routines of homework and preparations for twenty years of schooling.
Etta Kralovec and John Buell have argued that homework “disrupts families, overburdens children and limits learning.” Its main purpose is to keep our collective noses to the grindstone. School homework is not coded as an intellectual adventure but has become closely integrated into the everyday life of households. From the point of view of the system, everyday life is the best discipline. In sum, we are habituated to system maintenance—a series of activities that freeze historical time.

The first line of Henri Lefebvre’s study of the May 1968 uprising in Paris, “Events belie forecasts,” tells us that while we are prone to prediction and control—indeed, this seems the very essence of modernity—the outcomes of human action are underdetermined by the conditions delineated by social scientists. Seen from the bottom, making history entails a break in reproduction, the life processes by which, through their everyday activities, we maintain the prevailing system. A demonstration in Seattle “gets out of hand” and persuades both participants and onlookers that difference is possible and that the repetition of difference is better than the repetition of a social regime of atemporality. In that same city, a strike by engineers against overtime and speedup forges new spaces of contestation, and raises the question whether the proletarianization of qualified labor is an ineluctable feature of capitalism’s conquest of all of social space. Throughout this book, capitalism designates a system while capital designates a social actor or agent.

In the following pages, one finds a piece on UAW Local 595, a labor union in the automobile industry that resists the prevailing model of pure and simple business unionism by preserving the union hall as a public sphere. Rank-and-file movements that insist the norm of democracy oversee the internal governance of their labor organizations, and that successfully challenge an entrenched leadership only to confront the practico-inert, are also discussed in the following chapters. The question arises—and it is a question about historicity—Will the insurgents in power reproduce the past or produce new social spaces? In short, will they make a real difference? It is always a question; unlike the practitioners of cynical reason, I assume the answer is indeterminate because forces are overdetermined by the self-perceptions of the actors and by the conditions they find already at hand. True, the odds are that the institutional features of established organizations—bureaucracy, “integration” into the dominant system, the logic of hierarchical power—are likely winners. The struggle addressed in some of these chapters is, how is another outcome possible?

What do I mean by the time and space in the title of this chapter? Social time consists of “clock time,” the so-called objective measure of labor and leisure; what some have termed “subjective time” is how we experience duration. Clock time, a precursor, a condition of, and a consequence of postagricultural pro-
duction, is well known: time is divided into seconds, minutes, hours, and so forth; for many, it is the basis for discipline, especially at the workplace and at school, for wage payment, and as a marker of social life—reservations or starting times for dinner, starting times for television broadcasts, movies, theater performances and concerts, or appointments to meet friends. Subjective time is a constellation of experience that stands in contrast to the clock. It expresses our feelings of boredom, the anxiety of being rushed, the sense as we grow older that time is fleeting, the sense of the young as much as the old that they have too much “time on their hands.”

The interaction between clock time and the experience of duration is heavily conditioned by historical contexts and by social structures. Agricultural societies measured time by seasons, by the movements of the sun, and by watching and interpreting the motion of the heavens. The main timepiece was the sundial—a childhood toy of mine—which, under the sun, by the spatial geometric movement of a “hand,” approximates the imprecise phases of a day—sunrise, midmorning, high noon, midafternoon, sunset, and finally night, the more or less undifferentiated condition of darkness. There was a time for planting, a time for harvest, and a time for maintaining, repairing, and improving the implements of work such as horses, carriages, and plows. Since these activities occupied between a third and a half of the year, the peasant or farm household was a space of human and animal repair. As urban industrial society encroached on the autonomy of rural life, the space/time of the household diminished as the laboring days grew longer and household time withered. Gradually, peasants and small farmers were obliged to spend their time away from working the soil by laboring in factories or workshops because their debt to landowners, banks, and merchants skyrocketed beyond the value of their crops. Eventually, everywhere on the globe, hundreds of millions of farm families were driven from their land into the cities. The structure of industrial labor overwhelmed the structure of feeling.

Industrial civilization brought objective time to its zenith of sovereignty but was, nevertheless, contested. Men, women, and children were obliged to sell their labor to employers “from the rising to the setting sun,” but their work was measured by the relation of volume of production to the smallest units of time possible. Thanks to scientific management introduced by Frederick Winslow Taylor in the 1880s, the results of their labor were measured in seconds. The point of technological innovation, both in machinery and in management (a term we employ for industrial organization and supervision), is to reduce the time necessary for the production of the commodity. From the earliest years of the factory system in Britain to its later development in the United States, labor challenged the common sense of the twelve-hour day and resisted the rationalization
exploring the Net for some piece of random information, the time extends to two or sometimes three hours a day. When the machine freezes (as is the wont of the Windows series) or the e-mail program screws up, sometimes my evening is spent finding ways to unfreeze or restore my equipment. It’s easy to say “walk away and read a book,” but sometimes it seems that my blood is made as much of bytes as white and red corpuscles.

We are accustomed to hearing that older people experience time as a kind of express train or jet airplane, but this feeling now extends to large chunks of the professional managerial class and to students as well. Generations of computers, modems, and other engines of communications have become faster and faster. We can collect huge quantities of information, send and receive dozens—perhaps even hundreds—of messages in a single day. The cognitive processes that are the condition of reflection and individual and collective capacity to differentiate ideas are overrun by the speed of the machine that compresses time. If Taylorism was a way to reduce labor to repetitive operations which only management could coordinate and comprehend, the application of computer-based work and communication tends to inhibit the individual from discursive competence by framing communications in completely instrumental terms. Even our dreamwork sometimes appears in digital configurations. In short, in the new economy, the divide between labor and leisure tends to disappear as waking and sleeping become part of a continuum regulated by electronic processes, and individuality fades from view. In the process, the proudest achievement of the labor movement—the weekend—is consigned to memory. We yearn for “downtime” but it remains elusive. Paid and unpaid labor become an end rather than a means. As an end, labor tends to dominate our entire existence; it’s not all about money, it is equally about what and who we have become.

One of the wiser mottoes of union organizers is that “the boss organizes the shop.” This is a double entendre. On the one hand, the design and flow of production have the force of nature and many workers find it difficult to imagine a different process; on the other hand, despite its effort to achieve rationality embodied in a segmented division of labor, absolute authority tends to be arbitrary. If not inevitably, then frequently, the boss will violate his (or her) stated policy of justice by speeding up the work without explanation, firing a popular worker, showing arrogance and thereby demeaning the workforce, or cutting or freezing wages or benefits while taking profits in the form of higher executive salaries. As Louis Dumont and Barrington Moore discovered, people do not revolt because they are oppressed in general, but only when their conventional entitlements have been violated by those in power. In the current vernacular, they become attached to their culture, the sedimentary social practices by which they reproduce their place in the social hierarchy. They may be at its bottom,
but it is their place. Thus did the Indian untouchables refuse the government’s effort to improve their conditions by “liberating” them from their time-weary job of shoveling manure and dirt from the streets. They knew that once they lost this economic niche, the heavens would shake and their lives would be disrupted. Although the government promised them equality, all they saw was that they would face the insecurity of the marketplace. For them, the brave new world promised by the modernizers was a nightmare. The lesson is that however much they may grumble (since people are often habituated to their subordination), if the boss lets well enough alone, the chance of rebellion against the status quo is small.

The wager is that the vicissitudes of the economic and political system compel the employer, the government, or those at the commanding heights to violate the tacit social contract with those whose consent is a central precondition of their power. Clever or not, power will concede only those demands it deems necessary in order to maintain itself. When things are relatively quiet, pressure mounts from within the hierarchy to make a move against the contract. In labor agreements, the parties agree to a grievance procedure because it is expected that the boss will violate the contract in fairly small ways. Many employers make incursions against traditional work norms by unilaterally introducing new technologies, raising productivity requirements, trying to change work schedules so that they are not required to pay premium rates for overtime, or speeding up the operations. The larger social contract, which is tacit rather than explicit and is embedded in cultural expectations, is subject to impersonal forces over which the boss has little or no control. When the normal working procedures of the Boeing engineers were dishonored by management, the engineers reluctantly took to the streets to restore their professional expectations. It also works the other way. For example, most things being equal, only an incompetent businessman would refuse to move a plant or other workplace to take advantage of lower wages and concessions (such as tax abatements or a new plant built by local authorities without cost to the employer). The employer may regret that he is depriving employees of well-paying jobs, but if competitors are moving out of town, he is likely to follow.

Take the case of consumer expectations. As this chapter is written (fall 2000), farmers and truckers in France are blocking roads as a protest against higher fuel prices just as truckers undertook similar actions in 1995 to dramatize their wage claims and other grievances. Within three or four days, fuel shortages were reported throughout the country. In the United States, where direct action is (for most contests) not a cultural norm—even strikes often have a ritualistic appearance—blocking roads to express protest is considered extremely provocative, although farmers have occasionally taken to driving their
free market. The concatenation signifies the identification of freedom with the
deregulation of capital, “free enterprise,” and privatization of public goods.
Consistent with seventeenth- and eighteenth-century English classical political
economy and political theory, freedom is clearly connected to property, prima­
rily productive property but also residential, transportational, and various other
forms of personal property. The overwhelming fact that there really is no free
market (and there has never been one) does not deter those in or seeking power.
In the face of the abuses of the private management of the bulk of health servic­
es, a presidential candidate confidently asserts that private insurance companies
and service providers can do the job better than a universal, publicly run serv­
ice. The absurdity is compounded by the fact that nobody laughs.

The cognitive dissonance between what many know and what they accept as
permissible political discourse may be explained by the aphorism that politics
is the art of the possible; the reason that common knowledge is beyond the
realm of the practical remains to be explained. I contend that the political agen­
da is framed by the configuration of the universal—but not denotative—concept
of “freedom” with a series of anomalous metaphors that do not correspond with
experience but resonate, instead, with desire. The market seems to provide a
denotative referent to freedom when all other referents, including participatory
democracy and individual autonomy, have lost credibility in the wake of the
growing authoritarianism of everyday life. Perhaps market ideology works
because it provides hope and perspective for the relatively affluent who, after all,
constitute the most influential segment of the polity, itself a minority of the pop­
ulation. Reversing this dystopia is up to the anonymous majority to reassert its
own political will.

In 1967, philosopher Herbert Marcuse returned to Germany, his homeland, to
deliver a series of lectures on the theme “The End of Utopia.” He did not return
to Germany as an ordinary academic. The 1964 publication of One
Dimensional Man, a gloomy statement of our inability to think critically and to
achieve freedom due to the advent of technological society, had made this sixty­
six-year-old scholarly professor an instant celebrity. By the “end of utopia,” he
meant that capitalism itself had generated most, if not all, of the material condi­
tions for genuine freedom; humankind finally possessed the material means for
solving the historical problems of scarcity, not only in the advanced industrial
countries but also in the developing countries of Asia, Africa, and Latin
America. Marcuse argued that humankind had achieved a unique moment in its
history, the potential end of material scarcity, which would open the way for the
full flowering of Eros. Potentially, we were no longer in the technical thrall of necessity that made work the primary human activity. We were on the cusp of a new age of freedom, if by freedom we meant our liberation (at least in a large measure) from the necessity to measure life by the time we spent in paid labor. Accordingly, the steady advance of "automation," including the computerization of many types of work and the consequent quantum leap in labor productivity, permitted us to anticipate the abolition of alienated labor in agriculture as well as in industrial production. Under proper circumstances, namely new political and social relations, society's collective technological might could be employed in the virtual eradication of poverty.

The burden of Marcuse's argument in the Berlin lectures was that there could be no more utopias, if by that term we meant an impossible dream of a qualitatively different and better life; utopias were impossible because the material conditions for emancipation were not yet in existence. Marcuse did not question that life could be better; nor did he repeat the by now hackneyed Panglossian claim (pronounced most famously by Francis Fukuyama) that the triumphant capitalist system is the best of all possible worlds. Marcuse had already asserted that, objectively, we no longer needed to earn our daily bread by working for long hours at routine, often backbreaking, jobs that might shorten our lifespan and deaden our senses. Moreover, science had so matured that we might envision the gradual end of epidemic diseases that regularly decimate whole populations—the latest is the effect of AIDS on perhaps a third of the people of the southern African countries. Abandoning the long-held socialist project of worker control of the production process, he offered the alternative of less necessary labor. Freedom begins with shorter labor time and greater time for the full development of individual capacities. Absent constraints imposed by the system of social domination, Marcuse declared we had the opportunity to enter the realm of freedom no longer consigned to a distant future but imbedded in the present.

In this respect, he claimed, we were at the "end of history," if history signified the more or less rapid transformation in the conditions of human existence, especially the unfettering of the productive forces as an absolute precondition for the "Good Life." The Good Life could be achieved here and now; for Marcuse, the remaining obstacle was the prevailing social arrangement. If labor's discipline and capital's ideological hegemony relied on the imperative of work based on scarcity, Marcuse argued, the stage had been set by capital itself for its own demise. Capital could no longer claim that work without end was intrinsically necessary, but this did not prefigure, at least in the short run, a new birth of equality and freedom. Even though the productive forces were developed under capitalism rather than awaiting a revolution to unchain them, to
achieve the emancipation of labor from the thrall of alienation, radical action remained necessary—but it would not be easy. Although technological change systematically reduced the necessary time required for the production of goods, under capitalist relations, labor was still the measure of value of commodities in exchange. In the era of late or advanced capitalism, the state, its bureaucracies, and other institutions have as their defining task to hold back the imminent tendencies of present-day society for human liberation. Most of us in advanced societies, Marcuse declared, live in a condition of relatively comfortable “unfreedom.” We may own a private home or an apartment as well as a late model car, and be free of the privations associated with hunger, but we are increasingly deprived of the ability to shape our own lives. We have exchanged power for comfort.

If a revolutionary futurity depends on our capacity to imagine difference and to act on the hope that we can really make life over, this comfortable unfreedom subverts the intensities of desire and of hope. Miraculously, in the midst of material plenty, capital has reimposed scarcity as a social and psychological category; it has filled the hearts of millions with the fear of obliteration. In recent years, women and men work harder and longer to stay in the same place. Marcuse calls the failure of most advanced countries to severely reduce working hours in the wake of the existing technological possibilities “surplus repression” because most labor has become socially unnecessary and hence, surplus. By these formulations, Marcuse foresaw the termination of “social time” (the distinction between past, present, and future) and the possibilities of difference and of indeterminate change—indeterminate because the pace and direction of change depend on human agencies. In Henry Ford’s felicitous words, “history is bunk” because modernity nullifies all tradition. Marx was no less direct.

Constant revolutionizing of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones. All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they ossify. All that’s solid melts in air, all that is holy is profaned.5

The cultural significance of the bourgeois epoch is that—amid the turbulence of buying and selling, the powerful labor displacements wrought by technological innovation, and the sovereignty of the new and the wholesale casting away of the old—all that matters is the present. If capital has an overriding agenda since the rise of the labor movement, it is to foster, however unconsciously, historical amnesia in order to preserve social relations. Oppositional classes and
the welfare state and dismantled most state regulations—themselves the result of the historic compromise between an insurgent labor movement and capital. The state maintains its interventionist role by, among other measures, using the Federal Reserve to manipulate interest rates in order to stimulate investment and consumption. Thus, even if the “objective” conditions have matured for ending the dominance of the realm of necessity over the realm of freedom, the “subjective” conditions (a self-organized and politically conscious proletariat) have opted out of their “historic” mission to end capitalism and its repressive social relations.

The irony of the postwar era is that a highly organized working class of the most advanced capitalist societies has become so successful within the system’s framework that it no longer entertains, let alone embraces, ideologies of emancipation from capitalism. Indeed, in every capitalist country, the working class has entered into a series of compromises. The most important of them was the working class’s renunciation of its claim to social rule after World War II, in return for which it gained a highly elaborated social wage (welfare state). Facilitated by a generous credit system and by fairly high wages for a substantial minority, workers acquired a purse by which to engage in a level of private consumption approximating that traditionally reserved for the middle classes. These compromises neither abolished exploitation at the workplace nor eliminated alienation from civil society, the sphere in which citizens engaged in the debates that determine the direction of their public life. Workers were still obliged to stage strikes, mass demonstrations, and other disruptions of production in their fights against speedup (management’s arbitrary exercise of power) and sometimes against a union leadership that increasingly identified with the interests of the employer and, for this reason, signed long-term collective bargaining agreements, according to which strikes and other job actions were prohibited. In turn, as work-without-end for nearly every woman, man, and (illegally) many children as well, displaced civic life, citizenship was reduced to the ritual of voting—which the organs of mass propaganda assured us made a real difference. Meanwhile Labor, Socialist, and Communist Parties, and in the United States, the liberal wing of the Democratic Party, conceded more ground to the parties of capital. In all Western countries, these parties fashioned themselves as parties of government rather than as oppositional parties, which left their constituencies with only the tools of direct action to express their rejection of mainstream policies.

By the mid-1960s, in Europe as well as the United States, labor’s “integration” into society seemed complete. For the relatively few remaining critics of capitalist society, such as Marcuse, the American sociologist C. Wright Mills, and a handful of other radical intellectuals, the question was no longer when
fundamental social transformation might occur and under what circumstances but whether it was still possible. Marcuse went a step further than most. Although he firmly believed that revolutionary consciousness does not precede practice but emerges alongside, and in consequence of, social struggles that often begin with a relatively modest set of demands (and escalate only if power refuses to bend), he was convinced that the precondition for the development of struggles that might lead to setting the terms of a new series of social relationships was a working class in a position of radical opposition to the existing state of affairs. That is, he embraced the Marxist evaluation that the working class, whether or not it was fully conscious of its situation, was both the subject and the object of capitalist social relations. The chance that a qualitatively different future might actually emerge depended upon its ability to understand and act on its situation.

Marcuse's evaluation of the contemporary situation of the late twentieth century was that the working classes of all advanced capitalist societies were no longer a class in radical chains; they were in—but not of—society. They had accepted the terms and conditions of the prevailing system of domination. Although still subordinate to the rules of capital, many had won substantial benefits from the system; their collective thought was ensconced in its intellectual frameworks, dictated in a great measure by technological rationality. They could no longer imagine an alternative, let alone possess the desire for fundamental change. Even if, as Mills opined in his study of the ruling circles, The Power Elite, the labor unions were “dependent variables” of the political economy (or in the popular vernacular, junior partners), workers' organizations were often at the tables of power. They often bargained the conditions of their own subordination.

If many critical intellectuals had given up the possibility for genuine emancipation from the thrall of arbitrary power, a relatively small group of Italian and French social theorists disagreed. In Italy, Mario Tronti argued that the workers' movement was a perennial threat to the capitalistic system not so much because it adopted the socialist alternative but because workers understood labor as the theft of free time. Their lives were increasingly eaten up by a workplace that offered nothing but endless subordination under the whip of arbitrary managerial control. Rather than raising the traditional socialist demand for “workers control” of the terms and conditions of production, the workers' rebellion in the auto factories of Northern Italy was conducted over the “refusal to work.” Wage strikes were accompanied by struggles over what Andre Gorz later termed the “prison” factory. Beyond traditional forms of labor protest, the 1960s witnessed the emergence of a new social type: the slacker. Young workers were prone to take Mondays and Fridays off, to walk off the job if pressed
to be consigned to "poetry," the resting place of much utopian thinking, and not to politics. The May 1968 French and the autumn 1969 Italian uprisings, upon which Negri's ruminations were largely based, remain powerful components of radical mythology, but until recently utopian hope, on the ground, suffered its inevitable tie to the grim realities of Soviet-style state socialism, and even before the collapse of communism in 1991. Moreover, neoliberal economics had all but replaced the Keynesian welfare state as the dominant paradigm of politics, economics, and social policy by the 1980s, and even before the collapse of communism in 1991, scientists and engineers seemed safely ensconced on the side of capital.

After years in the suffocating environment of the pit mines, coal miners routinely contract a disease known as black lung, just as textile workers suffer white lung as a result of the sedimentation of lint from the loom in their respiratory systems. Stress is the black lung of the technical classes. Of course, the event that signaled to the technical class that the powers-that-be would not concede their demands for relief against stress and fatigue was President Ronald Reagan's unceremonious firing of eleven thousand air traffic controllers in 1981, after they conducted perhaps the first major strike against stress in the history of the American labor movement. Having lost its commitment to solidarity—and more importantly, its nerve—the AFL-CIO responded to the president's provocation by holding out the tin cup of mercy. Reagan had no change to spare and he ushered in the new era of sanctioned scabbing with its consequent concession bargaining. Indeed, for a decade thereafter, the defeat seemed to confirm the bad utopianism of those who would reassert the possibility of historical time. With the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and most of the communist governments of Eastern Europe shortly thereafter, any hopes for what Arthur Schlesinger Jr. posited as thirty-year cycles of great social movements (the last having peaked in the late 1960s) seemed dashed. Although democratic governments around the world exulted at the end of that corrupt, brutal, and authoritarian empire, many saw these events as confirmation that history had, indeed, ended (in the Marcusian way of thinking).

For most of the 1990s, there was scant evidence of a qualitatively different future from the all-too-visible present. As the decade wore on, battered by runaway capital and rapid technological change resulting in the loss of millions of relatively well-paid industrial jobs in advanced countries, labor movements everywhere in the West continued to slip in power and numbers. The once-buoyant ecology movements of Germany, France, and the United States seemed safely subsumed under social-democratic and social-liberal tents as well. Having lost on many points of their radical social agenda, many feminists settled for more access to professional and managerial jobs and, buffeted by a conservative cultural backlash in the United States, were preoccupied with saving
abortion rights. Although the professional and technical classes constituted the core of the ecology and consumer movements, they gave few indications of uprising at the workplace. For nearly two decades, they quietly suffered from corporate downsizing, causing many to move from their homes to more modest surroundings or even to leave the region.

Most disappointing to those who, in the face of the apparent collapse of the opposition in the West, followed the formula that only in the East and South were revolutions possible and alive, China led the way among developing countries in adopting the neoliberal program of privatization. Less-endowed nations, such as Vietnam and the new black-led governments of South Africa, were similarly caught in the embrace of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, leading institutions of the new global capitalist empire. In the 1980s and 1990s, many poor countries were obliged to pay back World Bank loans at interest levels rivaling their gross national incomes. By the turn of the twentieth century, more than a billion and a quarter people on the globe were unemployed or underemployed, real wages in the United States and third world countries actually declined, infant morality increased in about one hundred of the poorest countries, and pestilence—most notably malnutrition and AIDS—afflicted wide areas of Africa and Asia, leading to millions of deaths.

Perhaps one indication that the conflation of the present and the future was temporary, at best, was the demonstration of more than fifty thousand protesters at the much-heralded Seattle meeting of the World Trade Organization in December 1999. The meeting was intended by its sponsors, the leading transnational corporations and the most powerful nation-states, as one more nail in the coffin of the already weakened labor movement, a major turning point in their twenty-five-year effort to reduce living standards in the most developed countries and to open labor and capital markets in the rest. More than thirty thousand trade unionists (mainly from steel, apparel, and transportation sectors) joined environmentalists, student antisweatshop activists, and feminists in a bold attempt to disrupt the meeting. The demonstrators perceived the treaty as an invitation to large transnational corporations to seek countries that offered plentiful low-wage workers and child labor to pour goods across national borders, regardless of their effects on domestic industries or whether they met decent labor or environmental standards. Ostensibly, the goals of most of the demonstrators were fairly modest. The unions wanted restrictions on investments that did not meet an international fair labor standard and, in order to protect jobs in the major industrial countries, demanded that unfair price competition be regulated by the WTO. Others boldly focused on the characteristic secrecy and elitism in the leading global institutions. They demanded open proceedings and broader democratic participation in decision making by non-
governmental organizations. The demonstrators all but shut down the WTO meeting and seriously crippled everyday business activity in the city for almost a week. At the same time, the progressive International Longshore and Warehouse Union (the organization of West Coast dockworkers) shut down ports from Puget Sound, Washington, to San Diego, California. For an entire day, no cargo moved in or out of the coast’s cities.

Much has been written about this event. Recognizing the limits of national politics and genuinely impressed by the unprecedented participation of organized labor, the most optimistic assessments forecast a new global alliance of labor, environmentalists, and other social movements with enough power to set a new agenda for economic and political life. In the year that followed, however, American unions proved somewhat shy of taking on the major institutions of global capital, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Bank. Their primary task in a presidential election year was to elect the Democratic candidate, Al Gore, whose position on world trade is a carbon copy of the Clinton administration’s neoliberal policy. Labor agreed with Gore to disagree over this issue and promptly fell in line behind his campaign. Except for some local groups, unions were noticeably absent in a follow-up march in Washington, when parts of the coalition that organized the Seattle events attempted to disrupt a meeting of the International Monetary Fund. This time, the police were ready; the far smaller demonstration was successfully contained within a few blocks of the Capitol. Needless to say, demonstrations at the Democratic and Republican conventions were conducted without labor’s participation.

An emerging global movement marked the first public presence of a new phenomenon in the history of contemporary radicalism, the anarchist wing, mainly composed of young intellectuals and activists whose main contribution to the movement was to advocate and to practice direct action. Civil disobedience in the streets of Seattle certainly succeeded in making the issues visible, especially because the civil authorities were apparently caught napping. When they attempted to counter the effects of the demonstrations, they reacted cruelly and elicited widespread criticism from both the Right and the Left. The adroit tactics of the anarchists provided a refreshing departure from the usual arsenal of march, speak, and go home that has characterized recent political protest.

Beyond their passion for direct action, their disdain for social reform, and their scorn for electoral action, the anarchists have contributed few new ideas to the movement. More interesting than their lack of new ideas, however, is that a new generation of political activists has disdained the traditional Left’s reliance on the electoral process and other institutional forms of protest. This new refusal to “play the game” often takes the form of elevating the “streets” to the
salaried physicians sprang up in several cities. For the first time, the American Medical Association, a historic opponent of professional unionism, sanctioned unions among physicians. The main doctors’ unions became affiliated with Service Employees, although psychologists joined the AFL-CIO teachers’ union and podiatrists became members of the Office and Professional Employees Union. Protesting the reluctance of America’s largest air carrier, United Airlines, to meet growing demand by new hiring, pilots refused to work overtime and brought the huge corporation to a virtual standstill. After protracted negotiations, United settled and agreed to hire new employees rather than continuing to rely on its existing workforce to meet rising demands.

Overworked and systematically excluded from access to the “new economy,” wireless industry technicians and telephone operators for the newly merged Verizon, members of the Communications Workers of America, and the Brotherhood of Electrical Workers staged a two-week strike against compulsory overtime, to obtain access to jobs in the growing wireless sector, and to force the company to remain neutral in the union’s organizing efforts among that sector’s workers. As controllers of the repair and maintenance of the vast Northeastern and Midsouthern telephone systems, the line workers used their knowledge and access to the system’s nerve center—the telephone lines—to subdue the largest regional communications company in the United States. In another case, the least-heralded but perhaps the most interesting vindication of the thesis that the future belonged, at least in part, to the rapidly expanding qualified and educated workers, Boeing engineers walked off their jobs in a remarkable protest against speedup and other management policies designed to subordinate them to a conventional industrial regime. In both the Verizon and Boeing strikes, the issue of time framed the dispute. Despite all the talk of the “new” economy of immaterial production, management still insisted on controlling the labor process and arrogated to itself control of employees’ time. The strikers emerged victorious because they used their considerable power at the workplace.

The Boeing strike revealed the contradictions of professionalism. Although they had a collective bargaining agreement, only about seven thousand of the sixteen thousand engineers had joined the union; the majority believed their professional training and credentials would be sufficient to protect them against abuse and further believed they did not need a union. Constantly pressured to work faster and according to prescribed procedures, despite its minority strength, the union decided to risk a strike to ameliorate or end these onerous conditions. To the union’s—and the company’s surprise—nine thousand nonunion engineers joined the strikers. Through its policies, the company itself had persuaded the engineers that they were mere workers, in essence, and that they would have to prove their professional standing by force, not by creden-
tials. It took only a few days for the company to realize it was facing a united workforce and Boeing yielded to most of the workers’ demands.

These are still straws in the wind. Most doctors and lawyers have not recognized themselves as well-paid wage laborers even though, on an hourly basis, many of them earn little more than a highly skilled plumber or electrician. Nor have the preponderance of engineers in the private sector chosen the path of unionization. When these professionals form associations, they are the professional kinds that rarely address the growing tendency of corporations to treat them as knowledge producers and evaluate them on productivity criteria.

The great exception to the still-scattered appearance of unions among intellectual workers over the past decade has been the veritable explosion of organized graduate assistants in some of the nation’s major universities. In virtually all cases, the main issues were salaries and the graduate students’ belief that their time for study and for writing was being taken up by the university’s insistence they teach nearly full work loads in exchange for “stipends” or “fellowships” that were barely enough to live on. The nine thousand assistants at the University of California and thousands in a number of Big Ten schools, such as Iowa, Wisconsin, and Michigan, have won union recognition; there are active campaigns in Illinois and Indiana. Rutgers and several community colleges have separate adjuncts’ unions and New York’s City and State Universities have had adjuncts in their faculty and staff unions for three decades. In the private schools, active campaigns were under way in the year 2000 at NYU and George Washington University, following an earlier unsuccessful effort at Yale. There are now more than thirty union contracts for graduate assistants and adjuncts in American universities.

For decades, the National Labor Relations Act has afforded few protections for workers wishing to form unions of their own choosing. The Taft-Hartley Amendments (1947) and a series of Supreme Court decisions have allowed employers wide powers to thwart union efforts by intimidation, firing employees for union activity, conducting speeches in the workplace that threaten to move the plant or office if the union wins an election, and so forth. In the case of professors at private colleges and universities, administrations and boards of trustees have resorted to crass flattery and the spurious argument well known to industrial workers of yesteryear that unions will bring a “third party” into the close relationship between faculty and administration, thereby sundering the collegiality of the community. Most full-time faculty enjoy tenure, a position that reduces the effect of employer efforts to dissuade them from unionization in the state schools.

The revival of the previously abandoned demand for the repeal of the Taft-Hartley Act may lead to genuine labor law reform or, as Staughton Lynd has argued, to a reappraisal of the concept of labor law itself. Lynd insists that the
Given the accumulation of labor’s grievances against the neoliberal policies of a Democratic administration, it is a wonder that the WTO demonstration took so long to be initiated. The picture becomes much clearer when we take into account the fact that, during the Clinton years, labor law enforcement—with respect to the right to organize and issues of occupational health and safety, child labor, and corporate violations of environmental standards—has been weak. Neoliberal economics requires that its proponents disdain all regulations that might impede growth, including those that protect workers. There is little doubt that, pro-union rhetoric aside, Democrats and Republicans are united in their determination to continue their policy of maintaining a flexible labor market in which contingency, rather than job security, is the watchword. If some companies are obliged to hire full-time workers again after two decades of “flexibility,” a September 11, 2000, report in the pro-business Financial Times questions whether these trends will continue in an economic downturn. In the face of such considerations, organized labor—at least at the top echelon—is curiously complacent. Its passion for the lesser evil overcame any lingering doubts during the 2000 U.S. presidential election. Apparently, the fight for human rights begins at the border.

This raises the question of rights-based discourse, which has dominated “progressive” politics since the beginning of the Reagan-Thatcher era of the last quarter century. The demand for “rights” usually signifies that the protagonist seeks some form of distributive justice but accepts the prevailing relations of power. Thus, grievances are confined to access to existing opportunities within the system rather than making such claims on it that might alter relations of power. The mass strikes of the period before the Supreme Court’s 1937 sanction of labor’s rights embodied in the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA) were, perforce, claims on power that had no rights basis. With the notable exception of the failed national textile strike (betrayed by its own leadership, which called off the strike when it was assured by President Roosevelt that he would settle it in their favor), three local struggles—in Toledo, Minneapolis, and San Francisco—all culminated in labor victories without a legal framework that guaranteed labor’s rights. Autoworkers, truckers, and dockworkers respectively were able to mobilize all of organized labor and a substantial section of the city’s nonunion labor force as well to support their demands, including recognition by employers.

The historic function of the New Deal was to channel protests of many types, preeminently those of workers, into carefully regulated and sanctioned activities that left space to punish violators. Violators were those who engaged in acts of civil disobedience, such as factory occupations (sit-down strikes) and disruptions of production in the forms of strikes and selective job actions dur-
ing the life of a collective bargaining agreement, and in the sphere of civil socie-
ty, broke racist laws by sitting at lunch counters and other public accommoda-
tions or refusing to accept military race segregation. Always sensitive to both the
commanding heights of political and economic power (which wooed them
 shamelessly even as courts and the executive branch imposed fierce discipline
on the labor movement) and the threat posed by their own constituents (whose
demand for democratic sovereignty over union affairs they brazenly opposed),
key American labor leaders eagerly embraced the Roosevelt coalition in which
rights and justice were the watchwords. One of the more remarkable achieve-
ments of the coalition was its successful incorporation of the leadership of the
newly formed industrial unions, many of which underwent literally and linguis-
tically a baptism of fire. Having gained power over organizations that recruited
millions of new union members, the new leaders—among whom were a fair
number of communists and socialists—were eventually pleased to take their
places in the pantheon of the New Deal. After the 1937 sit-down strike, the bat-
tering ram of militant industrial unionism was declared illegal by the courts and
all but abandoned by the unions themselves.

Until the direct-action phase of the black freedom movement (1955–1965),
no significant social movement was willing to confront power directly. Even if
the aims of the Montgomery bus boycott and the subsequent sit-ins were to
secure access, the road to social justice entailed a program to smash the white
supremacist hold on public institutions. However, the Civil Rights and the
Voting Rights Acts of 1964 and 1965 may be seen as parallel to the NLRA near-
ly thirty years earlier. As in the 1933–1937 period, the movement was divided
between those who relied on the law and the courts to achieve desegregation
and those who relied on direct action. As in the earlier struggles, the resolution
of the conflict was to persuade the movement to forsake civil disobedience for
the law.

The last thirty-five years have witnessed a shift in the emphasis of the lead-
ing civil rights organizations from concerns with issues of inequality to issues of
access by blacks and other excluded groups to opportunities for social (that is,
middle-class) mobility—that is, opportunities to achieve unequal status and
position. Erstwhile militant civil rights figures exemplified by Jesse Jackson, for-
mer SNCC (Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee) chair John Lewis,
and Julian Bond have chosen to focus, chiefly, on whether blacks are hired by
corporations, are provided bank and insurance company loans to start busi-
nesses, and have chances for elective office. The main strategy to achieve these
objectives is to lobby, cajole, and otherwise beseech corporate America and the
Democratic Party to make room for “minorities.” Since the object is to strength-
en the black middle class rather than black labor, civil disobedience is shelved.
Meanwhile, the economic and social gap between the black working class and the professional and managerial class, black and white, widens.

The incorporation of the once-vibrant feminist movement into the American political and social systems is among liberalism’s stunning achievements. Emulating the early civil rights and labor movements, feminists marched, demonstrated, and engaged in acts of guerilla theater and civil disobedience to advance their programs of abortion “on demand,” equal pay for equal work, and in its most radical form, sharing with men all the tasks associated with the reproduction of the household—cooking, shopping, cleaning, and especially child rearing. As Arlie Hochchild and others have argued, this occurred in an era when, for feminist reasons as well as for those of economic necessity, women entered the paid labor force in large numbers, and most were subject to the “double” shift. Contestation over these questions rose in the late 1960s and early 1970s to a level that matched the earlier labor and civil rights movements and, in some respects, posed even more fundamental questions. What was the substance of full equality? How can women achieve citizenship beyond the vote if they work from dawn to midnight? What are the implications of time-sharing in the home as well as paid labor for the constitution of working hours?

In the clamor of the women’s struggle, the United States Supreme Court stepped into a space that neither the Congress nor the executive branch of government was prepared to fill. In Roe v. Wade, it deployed the privacy argument under the Constitution to grant women the right of abortion. Feminists and their supporters greeted this decision as an unexpected but great victory. In the intervening years, religious and other social conservatives have been unable to rescind abortion rights but have chipped away at the local level by sponsoring legislation that, among other things, restricts its practice. Moreover, Congress has consistently refused to fund abortions for poor women and remains a serious obstacle to its universal application. In many states, physicians have performed abortions despite threats of violence, boycott, or severe harassment. While advocates have shown considerable power to mobilize tens, even hundreds, of thousands of demonstrators when abortion rights were directly challenged—as in the 1989 Webster decision—the leading feminist organizations have mainly emulated the civil rights movement in redirecting the thrust of their activities towards issues of educational and employment access. Like the NAACP, they have become fully integrated as junior partners into the leading circles of the Democratic Party.

We can see the role of law in taming the oppositional fervor of large social movements. In the instance of the feminists, the movements were partially disarmed by the courts and came, for this reason, to rely on them. However, the Reagan-Bush years have been marked by a sharp rightward turn in the courts.
There's a wonderful museum of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century material culture in Shelburne, Vermont. Last summer, our family joined thousands who marveled at exhibits of toys, miniatures of soldiers and battle scenes, and the many transported authentic artifacts or replicas: of living rooms, kitchens, pantries, and other objects of everyday life. The Shelburne museum has two purposes: to help in the current revival of the Vermont economy by attracting tourists and to remind us, through reenactments of popular material culture, as well as representations such as artworks, how rural and small-town people once lived and worked. My favorites were the working blacksmith and print shops. The print shop reminded me of old movies about courageous small-town editors crowded into a single room with their presses. The Shelburne presses were more industrial but the technology was the same. Amid the clanging hammers hitting the forge, the fire, and the heat, one had a vivid picture of what skilled manual work might have been like before the automobile displaced the horse and buggy, cold type all but destroyed the old printer's craft, and modern techniques eliminated the need for the blacksmith's endurance.

These were good jobs. They paid well and, perhaps equally important, engaged the mind and the body of the worker. Apart from the laborious task of typesetting done by hand, the printer had to carefully set the controls on the machine just right. It was a time-consuming but supremely intellectual activity.
The blacksmith enabled our daughter, Nona, to participate by forging a metal hook. Walking through the museum’s sprawling acres, I could not help drawing in my head an analogy with the disappearing professoriat. One day, some academic entrepreneur—a future *Lingua Franca* publisher such as Jeffrey Kittay, for example—will hit on the idea of exhibiting mid-twentieth-century academic material culture. There will be replicas of a professor’s study. On the desk will sit an old Olympia typewriter and some yellow pads filled with notes for an article, book, or the next day’s lecture. Another ornament of the bygone time is the inevitable ashtray. The study will be lined with books, many volumes surfeited with dust. A leather jacket and denim work shirt will hang on the door’s hook. The magazine rack will be filled to the brim with scholarly journals: the *New York Review* and *Lingua Franca*, those quintessentially academic feuilletons that went out of business about 2010 because there were too few professors around to read them.

By this near-future time, most of us will have been retread as part-time discussion leaders, freeway or turnpike flyers, and will manage only to scan the day’s video of the famous scholar’s lecture on whatever subject we’ve been assigned before meeting the fifty students at the local American Legion hall where the group meets. The actual postsecondary faculty member of the future might still own a desk but the shelves will contain as many videocassettes and DVDs as books, and there might or might not be a magazine rack.

**Thoughts on Daily Life**

It’s Wednesday, one of my writing days. Today, I’m writing this piece for which George Yudice and Andrew Ross have been nudging me for a couple of days. Our daughter, Nona, will return home about 3 P.M. and it’s my turn to get her off for her after-school music class and prepare dinner. As it turned out, she brought a friend home so I have a little extension on my writing time. I couldn’t begin working on the piece yesterday because I go to CUNY (City University of New York) Graduate Center on Tuesdays. Even so, after making her breakfast and sending Nona off to school every other day, reading the *Times* and selected articles from the *Wall Street Journal* and the *Financial Times*, and checking my e-mail, I usually spend the morning editing my Monday writing. But yesterday our Nona was home with a stomach bug and because Ellen, her mother, had umpteen student advisements at NYU, it fell to me to make her tea, minister the puking, get some videotapes, and commiserate. Anyway, Monday morning after my usual reading routine, I finished an op-ed for *The Nation* on the future of the Left. Otherwise, I would have started this article a day earlier.
Monday was somewhat out of the writing mode because I had a second (oral) exam to attend. I'm chair for a candidate who was examined in cultural studies (me), psychoanalysis, and feminist theory. She knew her stuff but took some time to get rolling, after which it was quite good. After the exam I answered my calls, wrote two recommendations for job applicants in the early evening, attended a colloquium given by Elizabeth Grosz and Manuel De Landa, and arrived home about 9 P.M., after which Ellen and I prepared dinner (Nona eats earlier).

On Tuesday afternoons I meet with students. At this time of year (mid-December), many sessions are devoted to discussing their papers that are due at the end of January. This semester I preside at a seminar on Marx. We are reading only four texts but a lot of pages: the early manuscripts, *A Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of the State*, *Capital*, and the *Grundrisse*. There are about twenty-five students in the group, who form three study groups that meet weekly to address the critiques and commentaries as well as study the texts more extensively than the two-hour session with me could possibly accomplish. Sometimes after class I meet with one of the study groups to help with the reading. Yesterday I did some career counseling in the early evening for a friend who is thinking about quitting his job to try to work for the labor movement.

Tonight I'll read *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* because tomorrow one of the groups is making a presentation. Yesterday, a few of them met with me individually to discuss, among other things, the merits of Althusser's argument for an epistemological break between the early and late Marx, the state/civil society distinction, and whether Marx's *Capital* retains the category of alienation in the fetishism section of Volume I. Tomorrow, after checking my e-mail, I will edit some of this stuff I am writing and arrive at school about noon to meet with a student about last semester's paper for a course called "Literature as Social Knowledge." Then I'll try to work on the piece until my office hours, which is simply a continuation of what I do on Tuesdays, except some of my dissertation students may drop in to give me chapter(s) or to talk. At 4:15, I'll meet my seminar, after which a small group of students has asked to meet about the publication chances of a collective paper they wrote on what the novels of Woolf, Lessing, and Winterson tell us about the gendering of social life. I'll probably get home by 9 P.M.

Friday is committee and colloquium day in the sociology Ph.D. program within which I work. I serve on no departmental committees; all of my committees, more than twenty of them this year, are as dissertation advisor or chair of a CUNY-wide committee that raised some money to help the faculty do interdisciplinary curriculum planning, but I will try to attend the colloquium. I often invite my advisees to meet me at home because life is too hectic in my office. My
office is a place where students hang out, there are myriad of telephone inter­
ruptions, and I am called upon to handle a lot of administrative business such
as change of grade forms, recommendation letters, and so on.

Over the weekend I’ll have time for my family, having hopefully finished a
draft of this piece. I also have to finish a longer collectively written article for a
book called Post-work, which came out of a conference sponsored by the Center
for Cultural Studies, of which I am director. The group will meet on Monday
evening to go over my collation. I may get it done on Sunday or Monday. Next
week, Jonathan Cutler, the coeditor of the volume, will work with me on writing
an introduction.

I am one of a shrinking minority of the professoriat who have what may be
the last good job in America. Except for the requirement that I teach or preside
at one or two classes and seminars a week and direct at least five dissertations at
a time, I pretty much control my paid work time. I can’t say that everyday life—
shopping, cleaning, cooking, the laundry, telephone calls, and taking care of the
car—my unpaid work time—is entirely thrilling but since we share most of these
tasks, the routines are not as onerous as they could have been. I carve out some
time for frivolous enjoyment: at night I watch the 10 P.M. crime slot on televi­
sion and the 11:00 news. Otherwise, evenings are taken up with the pleasure I
derive from talking to Nona and Ellen, and reading.

I work hard but it’s mostly self-directed. I don’t experience “leisure” as time
out of work because the lines are blurred. For example, I read a fair amount of
detective and science fiction, but sometimes I write and teach what begins as
entertainment. The same goes for reading philosophy and social and cultural
theory. I really enjoy a lot of it and experience it as recreation but often integrate
what I have learned into my teaching and writing repertoire. What is included
in academic labor anyway? In any case, much reading is intellectual refresh­
ment. Even though I must appear for some four hours a week at a seminar or
two, I don’t experience this as institutional robbery of my own time. It’s not
only that I like to “teach” (or whatever you call my appearance in the class­
room). I’m not convinced that even the best of my lectures has genuine peda­
gogic content, and I hardly ever give a “talk” in class that lasts more than ten
minutes without student interruptions, either questions or interventions. Most
of the time I work from texts; I do close with readings of particular passages,
inviting critique and commentary, and offering some of my own.

When I meet with study groups, it’s always of my own volition. Needless to
say, the job description really doesn’t require it; few of my colleagues encourage
such groups to form. My assent to serving on so many dissertation committees,
about a quarter outside the sociology program, and my agreement to a number
of tutorials and independent studies are by no means “required” by some man-
dated workload. Whatever I take on, it’s for the personal and intellectual gratification or obligation which I have adopted.

As a professor in a research school and a teacher of Ph.D. students, I feel I should also raise money to help support students, in addition to doing whatever I can to help them find jobs and getting their dissertations published. As director of a center, I need to find money for its public life: talks, conferences, and postdoctoral fellowships. I don’t have to do any of this work, but I feel that I should go back to undergraduate teaching if I won’t or can’t contribute to meeting these urgent student needs. So I raise between $15,000 and $50,000 a year for student support and for conferences and research projects.

Finally, for all practical purposes, my career is over; none of this work is motivated by the ambition or necessity of academic advancement. I am a full professor with tenure and have reached the top of a very modest salary scale, at least for New York. I earn $5,000 or so more each year than an autoworker who puts in a sixty-hour week, but less than a beginning associate in a large New York corporate law firm or a physician/specialist in a New York HMO. But most of them work under the gun of the managing partner(s), and in the case of the law firm, only five out of a hundred attorneys have a prayer of making partner. If they don’t, they’re out. With a two-paycheck household, we can afford to eat dinner out regularly, send our kid to camp, give her the benefit of piano lessons, fix the car, and own and maintain a couple of early- and late-model computers and a decent audio system. We pay a mortgage on an old, ill-heated farmhouse in upstate New York where we spend summers and some autumn and spring weekends. Because in my academic situation I have nothing career-wise to strive for, I’m reasonably free of most external impositions. Before every semester, my chair asks me what I want to teach. What’s left is the work, and even with the warts—administrative garbage, too many students (a result of my own hubris), taking on too many assignments, writing, and otherwise—I enjoy it.

What I enjoy most is the ability to procrastinate and control my own work time, especially its pace: taking a walk in the middle of the day, reading between the writing, listening to a CD or tape anytime I want, or calling up a friend for a chat. I like the intellectual and political independence the job affords. I can speak out on public issues without risk of reprisal from the administration or from my program. I am able to participate in many different kinds of “outside” intellectual and political activities, including union-related activism; starting, writing for, and editing radical journals; and working with educational and social movements. In its original intent, organizations such as the AAUP (American Association of University Professors) fought for tenure because contrary to popular (even academic) belief, there was no particular tradition of academic freedom in the American university until the twentieth century, and then
I work hard, but only peripherally for the institution. In this period of galloping reaction, some of which is coded as populism, these privileges may appear to some to be luxuries, our writing and our teaching merely the ruminations of a narrow academic elite. Some are even moved to attack my working conditions as evidence that the last good job should be ended. It’s subversive for a labor regime that is working overtime to close the doors to a democratic workplace and to freedom, and to pose endless paid work as the ideal to which we should all strive. For this tendency, I am one of a (thankfully) diminishing fragment of the professoriat whose privileges must be rescinded, the sooner the better. After all, if hardly anyone else enjoys these conditions, why should I? Accordingly, the task is to reach an equality of misery. I want to suggest a different perspective on academic teacher work.

At its best, the chief characteristics of academic teacher work are that (1) work is largely self-directed, (2) much of it is useful, in the direct sense, neither for the economy nor for the political system and may even be opposed to the institutions, and (3) the work entails little compulsory labor either in teaching or in administration. Rather than proposing an equality of alienated labor, we should fight to universalize throughout society the autonomy and shorter working hours of the senior professoriat at research universities, not just for those in higher education. We should resolutely oppose the tendencies within higher education that have created a large academic proletariat of adjuncts and that have subordinated most of the full-time faculty and staff to near-industrial working conditions by piling increased course loads and administrative assignments on them. To the claim that state systems of postsecondary education “cannot afford” to pay people to do their own work, including reduced teaching and administrative loads, we should defend the idea that the best teachers are in the first place intellectuals possessed of wide knowledge and excited about their writing and reading. Then we must learn to aggressively state the cultural value of the goal of shorter working hours for all. In short, to save the last good job in America, we need to stand for a wholly different philosophy and practice from that of the prevalent ideology.

A Little Political Economy of Teacher Work

Most of us who work for wages and salaries are subject to external compulsion throughout the workday. Signifying one of the most dramatic shifts in work culture, the ten- and twelve-hour workday has become almost mandatory for many factory, clerical, and professional employees. Forty years ago, looming automation was accompanied by the threat of unemployment and the promise of short-
er hours. It was also a time when the so-called mass culture debate exploded in universities and in the media: Would the increased leisure made possible by technological change be subordinated to the same compulsions as paid labor? Would television, for example, crowd free time? Or would the late twentieth century become an epoch of such innovations as lifelong education, the recreation of civil society (imagine all the cafés filled with people who have the working lives of full professors), a flowering of the participatory arts, a golden age of amateur sports?

One of the predictions of that period has been richly fulfilled. World unemployment and underemployment reached a billion in 1996, 30 percent of the working population. And this is the moment when part-time, temporary, and contingent work is threatening to displace the full-time job as the characteristic mode of employment in the new millennium. The part-timers have little space for individual development or community participation. You may have heard the joke: the politician announces that the Clinton administration has created ten million jobs in its first four-year term. “Yeah,” says the voter, “and I have three of them.”

This is a time of work without end for many Americans and work shortage for many others, especially youth, blacks and other “minorities,” and women whose jobless rate is higher by a third than men’s. Behind the statistics lies a political and cultural transformation that has already wiped out the gains of three generations. A hundred years ago, the dream of the eight-hour day animated the labor movement to a new level of organization and militancy. Today, for many, it is but a dim memory.

In the main, unions embraced technology because, if its benefits were distributed to producers, it could provide the material condition for freedom from the scourge of compulsory labor and the basis for a new culture where, for the first time in history, people could enter into free associations dedicated to the full development of individuality. In the aftermath of the defeat of the Paris Commune (where for a brief moment workers ran the city), Marx’s son-in-law railed against the dogma of work and insisted on the “right to be lazy.” Some workers, imbued with the protestant ethic, vehemently disagreed with this utopian vision—many of the best labor activists were temperance advocates—but did not dispute the goal of shortening the workday so they could fix the roof or repair the car. Whether your goal was to spend more time fishing, drinking, or at “productive” but self-generated pursuits, nearly everyone in the labor movement agreed, mediated for some by the scurrilous doctrine of a “fair day’s pay for a fair day’s work,” to do as little as possible to line the bosses’ pockets.

As everyone knows, we are having our technological revolution and the cornucopia of plenty is no longer grist for the social imagination; it is a material
possibility. As Robert Spigelman, Herbert Marcuse, Murray Bookchin, and others have argued, scarcity is the scourge of freedom and, from the perspective of the rulers, must be artificially reproduced to maintain the system of domination. Hence, working hours are longer, supervision—call it surveillance—more intense, accidents and injuries more frequent, and wages and salaries are lower. The poor may inherit the earth and God must love them because he has made so many of them; for the present, Marx’s metaphor—that the more the worker produces, the more he or she is diminished, enriching only the owners—seems more relevant than in 1844 when first he wrote these ideas.

Technology is deployed as management’s weapon against its historic implication of freedom. It permits radically shorter working hours but, instead, has been organized to produce a three- or four-tier social system. At the bottom, millions are bereft of the “Good Life” because computer-mediated work destroys jobs faster than the economy creates them. Many are fully unemployed; some still receive government support. Others are casual laborers who “shape up” everyday at the docks of companies such as United Parcel Service and FedEx for a day’s work or are migrant farm workers. You can see the shape-up any morning in the South Bronx or Chicago’s West Side where mostly Latino workers await a furniture or vegetable truck for a day’s hard labor.

At the pinnacle of the working class, a shrinking elite—industrial workers in the large enterprises, craftspersons, and technical employees—still have relatively well-paid, full-time jobs and enjoy a battery of eroding benefits: paid vacations, health care (with the appropriate deductibles), and pensions. In between are the at-risk categories of labor: laid-off workers rehired as “contractors” or “consultants,” both euphemisms for contingent workers; workers in smaller enterprises with lower paying, full-time jobs and fewer benefits; and, of course, the bulk of college teaching adjuncts.

As capitalism reorganizes and recomposes labor, the idea of a job in contrast to paid labor is increasingly called into question. I won’t dwell on the political economy of capital’s offensive. Many of its salient features are well known: sharpened international competition, declining profit rates, global mergers and acquisitions. But it is important to underline the crucial fact of the decline, even disappearance, of the opposition and alternatives to capitalism. The socialist project has fallen into disarray; powerful national labor movements find themselves unable to confront global capitalism with more than sporadic resistances.

Corporate capitalism and its fictions, especially the “free market,” have become the new ideological buzzword of world politics and culture. Corporate capitalism penetrates every itch and scratch of everyday life. Under the sign of privatization, public goods are being disassembled: health care, environmental protection, and, of course, state-sponsored culture, signified by, among others,
the legislative evisceration of the National and State Endowments; the Councils on the Arts and Humanities and their replacement by corporate-sponsored arts programs, notably those aired by PBS (the Petroleum Broadcasting System); countless corporate-funded museum exhibits; and the reemergence of corporate sponsorship of all kinds of music, especially middle-brow classical music. Sixty million Americans obtain their health care from health maintenance organizations (HMOs)—private consortia of hospitals, managers, and owners. The mission of these groups is to get rid of patients, not disease. All of these institutions operate under the sign of cost-containment; ultimate success is measured by the number of subscribers turned away, not the number served.

No more startling change has occurred than the growing tendency by local school boards to use their funds to outsource instruction, curricula, and other educational services to private contractors. Meanwhile, the drumbeat of vouchers gets louder as the public perception that elementary and secondary schools are “failing” prompts an orgy of straw-grasping. As a recent report using standard measures indicated, these arrangements do not seem to have a noticeable effect on improving school performance, but it is seems clear that panic will overcome reason. Teachers’ unions have resisted privatization but the propaganda campaign on behalf of “free choice” (the euphemism for privatization) appears, at times, overwhelming.

It was perhaps inevitable that the steamroller should have arrived at the doorstep of America’s universities and colleges. By 1990, in contrast to the general decline of the labor movement’s density in the work force, faculty and staff were joining unions in record numbers. By the 1990s, some two hundred thousand faculty and staff (exclusive of clerical workers) were represented by the three major unions in higher education: the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), the AAUP, and the National Education Association (NEA). Thousands of college and university clerical workers organized into a wide diversity of organizations, including the AFT, but mostly others such as the UAW and, in public universities, the AFSCME (American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees). To pay for rising salaries for clerical workers and faculty and to compensate for falling revenues for research, many administrations imposed tuition increases that exceeded the inflation rate and were beefing up their endowments with—you guessed it—large donations from corporations and the individuals who headed them.

The growing influence of corporate donations to private and public research universities has been supplemented by a cultural corporatization of higher education. Once limited to community and technical colleges, vocationalization has become a virus infecting the liberal arts undergraduate curriculum. In many institutions, social science and humanities departments have been reduced to
service departments for business and technical programs. Many colleges have agreed to offer degrees, majors, and specially tailored courses to corporate employees in return for company reimbursements of tuition and other revenues, and have accepted money from corporations to endow chairs in vocationally oriented fields. In some cases, notably the Olin Foundation, not only are chairs offered to universities but also the right-wing professors to sit on them.

This configuration is not confined to technical and managerial areas; it has become one of the solutions for the sciences, which have progressively lost public funding for research in fundamental areas. Many scientific departments must now justify their faculty lines by raising outside money to perform (mostly) product-oriented research. Most famously, MIT molecular biologists entered hotly contested Faustian bargains with drug companies that, in return for patent ownership, have subsidized research. This model has been reproduced in many other institutions and has, to some extent, become the norm. Of course, American scientists are accustomed to subordination to higher authorities; their involvement with the defense establishment is a sixty-year marriage.

Faculty unions are not entirely a solution to the conditions that generate them: an acute power switch from the faculty to administration and to government and corporations over some hiring, curricula, and academic priorities; sagging salaries except for the high-profile stars and top administrators; and, at least in the public universities, legislatively mandated budget cuts which, in most instances, buttressed the power switch and resulted in some layoffs, a much tighter market for real jobs, increased workloads for those who have them, restrictions on promotions, and pay raises calibrated to the inflation rate. In sum, the faculty sees their unions as a means to restore their lost autonomy and shrinking power as well as to redress salary and benefits inequities.

Academic labor, like most labor, is rapidly being decomposed and recomposed. The full professor, like the spotted owl, is becoming an endangered species in private as well as public universities. When professors retire or die, their positions are frequently eliminated. Many universities, as we have recently learned in the Ivy Leagues, convert a portion of the full professorship to adjunct-driven teaching—whether occupied by part-timers or by graduate teaching assistants. At the top, the last good job in America is reserved for a relatively small elite. Fewer assistant and associate positions leading to professorships are being made available for newly minted Ph.D.s. As the recently organized Yale University graduate teaching assistants discovered, they are no longer—if they ever were—teachers-in-training. Much of the undergraduate curriculum in public and private research universities is taught by graduate students who, in effect, have joined the swelling ranks of part-timers, most of whom are Ph.D.s. Together, they form an emerging academic proletariat. They make
grant-funded research, their writing, and their celebrity—even if in rather narrow circles. The distance is produced by the growing gap between the professoriat, who in the elite universities have almost completely identified with the institution, and graduate students, who increasingly recognize that collective action rather than individual merit holds the key to their futures. For example, when I was invited to address a meeting of hundreds of members of the recently organized Yale Graduate Assistants Union in spring 1995, I was dismayed but not surprised to find only three senior faculty in attendance, one of whom promptly resigned his job in the sociology department to return to the labor movement. The other two (David Montgomery and Michael Denning) and a few others who could not make this particular event are union stalwarts in this otherwise snow-blinded community of scholar-managers. Critics and scholars of the Left, along with more conservative faculty, were prominent by their absence. A year later, I was informed that a distinguished historian at the school renounced a graduate assistant who had participated in an action to withhold grades as a protest against the administration’s refusal to recognize the union.

The formation of an academic proletariat, even in the elite universities, must be denied by the professoriat that has gained richly from the labor of their “students.” The professors must continue to believe that those who teach the bulk of the undergraduate classes are privileged crybabies destined to become the new privileged caste. Strikes, demonstrations, and other militant activity are expressions of graduate students’ flirtation with outworn ideologies of class and class struggle and not to be taken seriously. It is not only that the professors are indifferent to the new graduate assistants unions; they are hostile to them. In effect, they take the position of the administration and its corporate trustees because they identify themselves as its supplicants.

Some who are acutely aware they hold the last good job in America believe their best chance to preserve it lies in becoming what the infamous Yeshiva decision alleges: that faculty in private schools are managers and therefore ineligible for union protections under the law. It is not merely that they are highly paid and enjoy the prestige of institutions standing at the pinnacle of the academic system. Their identities are bound up with their ornamental role. To break with the institution on behalf of graduate students would acknowledge that higher education at all levels is being restructured and that they may be the last generation of privileged scholars. This admission would prevent them from playing their part in closing the gates.

The Yale struggle is only the most publicized of a growing movement whose main sites are in state research universities. Iowa, Michigan, UC-Berkeley, UCLA and San Diego, SUNY-Binghamton, and the parent of them all, Wisconsin, are among the dozen major universities with graduate assistant
unions, many of them affiliated with conventional blue-collar organizations such as the UAW and in Iowa, the UE, and the AFT. In many cases, the AFT or AAUP contract covers adjunct faculty but graduate assistants must organize separately.

Academic unionism has, in general, not yet addressed the very core of the crisis: the restructuring of universities and colleges along the lines of global capitalism. Most of us are situated in less-privileged precincts of the academic system. We have witnessed relatively declining salaries and the erosion of our benefits. Like many industrial workers, we have been driven into an impossibly defensive posture and are huddled in the cold, awaiting the next blow. We know that full-time lines are being retired with their bearers, and that more courses are taught by part-timers at incredibly low pay and with few, if any, benefits. We are aware of the tendency of elite as well as middle-tier universities towards privatization, towards aligning the curriculum with the job market, and towards experiencing the transformation of nearly all the humanities and many social sciences into service programs for business, computer technology, and other vocational programs.

In short, although more highly unionized than at any time in history, academic labor has not yet devised a collective strategy to address its own future. We know the charges against us—that university teaching is a scam, that much research is not “useful,” and that scholarship is hopelessly privileged, emanating from a right-wing position which wants us to put our noses to the grindstone just like everybody else. So far, we have not asserted that the erosion of the working conditions for the bulk of the professoriat is an assault on one of the nation’s more precious resources, its intellectuals. Guilt-tripped by mindless populism whose roots are not so far from the religious morality of hard work as redemption, we have not celebrated the idea of thinking as a full-time activity and the importance of producing what the system terms “useless” knowledge. Most of all, we have not conducted a struggle for universalizing the self-managed time some of us still enjoy.
Kate Millet is unpatriotic. The author of one of the defining books of feminism, *Sexual Politics*, has for years enjoyed a large Bowery loft and pays the un-Manhattan rent of $500 a month. So what else can a red-blooded landlord do other than to throw her out? Nobody should pay that kind of rent for so much space in this day and age unless it is in Mount Olive, Illinois. If everybody adopted Millet’s attitude of fighting to stay put, slackers would again dominate Lower Manhattan and money would be crowded out. After all, hordes of young professionals and businesspeople are coming to the East Village neighborhood and are happy to pay $2,000 a month for a one-bedroom railroad flat; if he succeeds in evicting Millet, the landlord is likely to get $4,500–$5,000 for her loft. Millet has been living off the past for too long. It’s time to declare the Bohemia to which she came thirty years ago dead and buried. If Kate wants to live cheap, she might consider Jersey City. Or better yet, South Orange. And as for loft living for a writer of modest finances, forget about it. As the conservative ideologue and city planner Peter Salins wrote in his 1975 deadpan piece “New York in the Year 2000,” Manhattan (meaning almost every inch of real estate below 125th Street) is reserved for the rich, not even for the famous.

My first reflection on the end of New York’s Bohemia came when, in the late eighties, my friend and former editor Joyce Johnson published a memoir and postmortem of her life with the Beats, *Minor Characters*. It won the
National Book Award and I suspect the recent film documentary on the same bunch will be a strong contender for an Oscar. Whether clear or blinky-eyed, these recollections established that Bohemia was then. Johnson’s book followed a plethora of early eighties paean by and about the group known as the New York Intellectuals who, while not exactly bohemians in the traditional meaning of the term, often lived on the margins in the service of their writing just like artists and musicians. Before the 1960s, most of these writers were freelance, employed for substandard salaries by little magazines or, like theater people and musicians, working occasionally at temporary or part-time jobs while waiting for their breaks. As always, bohemian and other marginal lives look better in retrospect, but there are good reasons to wax nostalgic about this almost vanished breed.

Bohemians are the gypsies of late capitalism. For a century, they set down their tents at the heart of the cities only to be upbraided as exemplars of sloth, then celebrated as the new signs of romantic heroism, and then finally uprooted. Recently, some have pulled up stakes and moved to the periphery of the global city—from New York to Williamsburg, Greenpoint in Brooklyn, and other unlikely sites in the metro area. If the South Bronx and Jersey City are temporary havens for those who have stared into the heart of professionalism and the job machine and declared “the horror” and refuse to seek steady work, the question is whether these outposts can be defended against the encroachments of residential capitalism. The history of Bohemia since Baudelaire has signified art’s rejection of its commercial uses, but it has also been the unwitting tool of the renewal and reconfiguration of urban space.

The tradition of Bohemia is closely tied to the periodic rebellions, chiefly by artists and intellectuals, against the values of industrial and commercial capitalism. Unlike political revolutionaries who set about to transform society, bohemians seek social space to enable themselves to pull out of established social practices like steady work. Bohemians reject status and material rewards as long as its price is that you must enter the nine-to-five grind to perform in a job and, if a writer or an artist, selling your soul to the commercial magazines or ad agencies. Bohemia feeds on the limits of capitalism. The bohemian communities are the unintended consequences of residual housing space in working-class neighborhoods and of the creativity of those who make a personal and collective decision to live an alternative and often adversarial life in styles made possible by a trademark of the so-called free market, the select sites of inequality.

In consideration of the elementary need to eat and pay the rent, some acquire the skills of table waiting or office work, or are adjuncts in the metro area’s many colleges and universities, but contrive to sell their services on a temporary basis because they believe full-time jobs are deterrents to their ability to perform real
work. The point is not to fit your own work or pleasure into the job machine but to fit the demands of the market into your life. For them, paid labor remains a concession dictated by necessity. Mostly—but not always—young, they prefer to be condemned as slackers and live in semisqualor to suffering subordination that is the condition of most wageworkers in the straight world. Meanwhile, some ply their various trades: writing, painting, crafts, music, sloth for almost no recompense except the enjoyment of their audiences, and work for wages only when the stomach growls and the landlord appears at the door with the marshal in tow. Sometimes they make part of a living by selling their work on the street—pottery, paintings, broadsides—or start magazines and publish chapbooks on a shoestring budget, which they distribute on the streets and, on consignment, to the few remaining independent bookstores that, like the saber-toothed tigers, are an endangered species. For example, two of my friends, Robert Roth and Arnie Sacher, publish an occasional journal of fiction, poetry, and politics, And Then, whose costs are defrayed by the editors and some of their friends. Robert distributes one of the NYU newspapers around Washington Square and Arnie lives on what remains of a modest inheritance. Both are always on the edge but seem to keep their balance.

The everyday life of a bohemian is a monumental struggle to capture as much time as possible from the “system” by winning and reconfiguring urban space in ways that are simply unavailable to those caught in the job machine. Bohemians attempt to enter the realm of freedom—life without (much) wage labor and without the material means. When it works, you arise when the spirit moves you, do your own creative work until all hours in the morning, and have plenty of time to spend with friends or alone at coffee houses or bars. The bohemian life is self-generated and self-controlled. It is not important to have fancy furniture, a late-model car, or to hit the in-clubs (in any case, who can afford these goods?); what counts are the pleasures to be derived from freedom to be with your friends and from the streets. There are things available in concentrated geographies that the Internet cannot hope to supply: personal contact when you are feeling blue, some butter or margarine or a spare can of beer, for example. Neighbors help each other out when they are strapped for cash or need someone to watch their kids, their cat, or their apartment.

Greenwich Village is the echt Bohemia of the twentieth century and now mostly lives on in the collective imagination of its former residents, scholars, and tourists. At the turn of the twentieth century, it bordered on the old Canal Street Irish ghetto whose residents worked on the bustling West Side docks and as lorry drivers, and the Village’s inhabitants were chiefly the Italian immigrants who came to sweat in Lower East Side garment shops, in other production industries, and in construction. These working-class precincts were the models
enormous role in helping the reform movement by exposing the shady dealings of city and state governments. Equally important, the *Voice* became the newspaper of record for countercultural art movements: the exploding off-off Broadway theater, independent film, the downtown galleries that were rapidly challenging Fifty-Seventh Street, and the remnants of a severely hobbled but still vital jazz scene that, after being run off Fifty-Second Street, gradually settled in the Village, only to migrate several times more, first to the east, then uptown to the edge of the Upper West Side.

As it turned out, it was not the already gentrified Greenwich Village that made the *Voice* a meeting ground for artists, writers, and the emerging cultural radicals but a portion of the Lower East Side which had acquired the name East Village, and those who migrated west of Hudson Street. Responding to the emergence of the new Bohemia in Lower Manhattan by the early 1970s, the *Voice* became hydra-headed; for the next fifteen years, more than half the paper was downright countercultural, much to chagrin of the staff populists, many of whom were premature social conservatives and wanted the paper to stick to its narrow economic and anticorruption political agenda, which still dominated the front of the book.

The flight of the bohemians at first took the form of the colonization of the West Village, an old working-class slum. When I moved from Newark to New York in 1962, my first stop was an unbearably decayed one-bedroom apartment at 69 Bank Street, just west of Greenwich Street. My rent was $82—about the same as my estranged wife, two children, and I had paid in Newark for a large, well-kept two-bedroom apartment in the Clinton Hill section. The West Village was slowly being cleared of its small factories and workers as the artists, writers, and a growing community of academics, activists, and a few lawyers crept in. My partner and I did what artists and intellectuals have done since the nineteenth century. We spent hundreds of dollars making this sewer into a suitable dwelling and prepared the apartment for its eventual tenants.

The West Village was home to the urbanist Jane Jacobs, whose *Death and Life of Great American Cities* became the virtual manifesto for those who were fighting the gentrifiers, and to artist-activists like Rochelle Wall. Jacobs’s claim was that neighborhoods like the West Village which, in the early 1960s, still had not a few factories, a working dock, several truck terminals, warehouses, and was the site of the larger of New York’s two meat-packing districts, were safer and more interesting than exclusive residential enclaves because people were on the streets at all times of day and night. Jacobs’s formula: you want to fight crime and promote conviviality, construct neighborhoods of “mixed” uses. What value, she argued, to reproduce the suburban desolation in the heart of the city, the program of the current and many former mayors. The emerging artistic
community heartily agreed and set about to join with the remaining working-class tenants to fiercely oppose conversions, co-ops, and other development schemes designed to make a playground for investors of this narrow-streeted area. Together with the residents of the Lower East Side and the remaining South Village Italians, they beat back, in successive struggles, David Rockefeller’s plan for a Lower Manhattan Expressway and its twin, the proposed beltway. As a result of their obstinate resistance, these diverse forces managed to hold onto a small number of their fortresses, but the encroaching gentrification forced the bohemians to retreat to a second-line defense.

The West Village bohemians got the city government to build artist housing, Westbeth, near the all-but-abandoned industrial section of the neighborhood; for this reason, clearance was made easier because relocation costs were less than in a densely populated area—but it was no longer a Bohemia. Soon, sprightly little grocery stores, charging top dollar and offering gourmet food, and upscale dry cleaners lined Greenwich Street. Facing exorbitant rents, many who were not able to relocate within the area, packed their bags, and moved east of Third Avenue or south of Houston Street as far as Chambers Street, which, by the 1970s, was experiencing its own deindustrialization.

From the early 1950s to about 1980, New York’s Lower East Side, including the section north of Houston Street renamed by real estate brokers the East Village after its quasi-bohemian character, was the refuge of choice for those feeling homeless in the vast wasteland of suburbs that surrounded New York City, and who also colonized it, especially Queens and Staten Island, and for the thousands of Midwesterners fleeing from what they perceived to be the living death of the dwelling places of subjects of Grant Wood’s *American Gothic*. As was their wont, they did their best to fix up their rent-controlled apartments in tenements, refurbished old buildings, including decrepit schoolhouses, as theaters, studios, and galleries, created cafes and coffee houses, and transformed working-class bars such as McSorley’s into mixed watering holes.

Then, as C. Carr pointed out, having attracted media attention, like the Village of the 1920s and the 1940s, its character gradually changed. Aided by sharp real estate developers, East Village became joined to Greenwich Village by the hip. Although the housing stock remains much more shabby than its westerly twin, its social composition has gradually become similar. There remains a much-reduced Eastern European enclave in some of the choice streets between Third Avenue and Avenue A because the Poles and Ukrainians were smart enough to buy the houses that were once working-class slums, and the older Bohemia remains, in spots. The barrio lives but no longer thrives in Alphabet City as the conversions make their relentless way and the old Puerto Rican neighborhood is rapidly fading.
Now we should not confuse the idea of bohemia with the equally evocative notion of the avant-garde. Not all those who lived in the neighborhoods where the poor rubbed shoulders with artists and writers were avant-gardists and perhaps most in the avant-gardes of New York and San Francisco—the leading Bohemias after World War II—were not bohemians. The bohemians are marked by their refusal of the trappings of the straight world: jobs, careers, and new things. The avant-garde may or may not share this disdain, but in any case it is mainly concerned with artifacts, political or aesthetic. For instance, while in the late sixties I occasionally attended the great avant-garde jazz musician Ornette Coleman’s Bowery concerts, held in a loft that sat next to a series of flophouses and not far from a soup kitchen managed by a Christian religious sect, many rebellious artists of similar originality played in top fortes and anthology jazz bands, most of which performed in mainstream venues long past their cutting-edge years. Coleman chose to perform at the heart of Bohemia, but many artists work in more conventional middle-class environments. Other jazz musicians found jobs that were far from their real artistic sensibility. By 1960, jazz itself had been marginalized geographically and culturally as well—some say by rock ‘n roll—so that a musician who had not been picked up by the major media or succeeded in attracting a cult following either squirreled around in the basement clubs of New York, Los Angeles, or San Francisco and barely kept body together in pursuit of his independent soul, got gigs with bands operated by one of the remaining Big Names, or practiced music as an avocation—or not at all.

A battalion of composers in the classical avant-garde found their way into the music conservatories, mostly those of universities and colleges. Elliot Carter and Milton Babbitt, among others, not only produced the American variant of Schoenberg’s serial rows but trained two generations of composers to follow them. The works of these musicians have always appealed to small audiences, mostly fellow musicians, and in time, their music was pretty much confined to the academy. In fact, their hegemony over the contemporary classical music scene produced a countermovement of minimalism and romantic tonality that currently rules the roost—but in no way is sympathetic to the modernist musical avant-garde.

The Bohemias were located in slum neighborhoods for one simple reason: cheap rent. Cheap rent meant that the artist or would-be artist could survive on part-time and temporary paid work or, if they sold their paintings, articles, stories, poems or, if musicians, got occasional performance dates, could live, even if not in comfort, let alone splendor. Sometimes they formed living communes without using that ideological name. As often as not, the rent was shared among an indeterminate number of tenants who cohabited in one of the many railroad flats that littered the Lower East Side or, if they craved space, moved into the
counterculture; and The Rat, a local sheet which tried to combine a countercultural esprit with revolutionary politics. Both papers failed to survive scorching splits over social issues, chiefly feminism. Women seized power at The Rat but couldn’t make it work when the conspirators split over ideological issues. The Guardian apparently survived its internal dissension but lost Old Left financial support and folded a decade later.

Bohemianism has fallen on hard times. Most have found that the margins on which they once made it have shrunk to a very thin line and only a small number have held out in the freelance. Although there are still remnants in the old East Village and Lower East Side haunts and there is some bohemian life in Williamsburg, the fight to capture control over time has shifted from geographic living spaces to the workplace. Seeing that they were often forced to choose between eating and paying the rent, some went to law school or graduate school, took editorial or publicity jobs with publishers or nonprofit organizations, or became editors and art directors of labor newspapers, corporate newsletters, or speechwriters for CEOs and other top officers of leading corporations. Most who managed to earn Ph.D. degrees have academic jobs, but not always full time. Although some enjoy tenured professorial positions, many have ended up as “lifer” adjuncts, eking out a bare living as part-time instructors in English composition or introductory social science. Many became computer experts and started small businesses as consultants to beleaguered users, often their fellow writers, academics who couldn’t handle the frozen screen and frequent text losses, or worked as information systems specialists for universities, public agencies, and private corporations.

The vast majority of artists and writers who became teachers or book, ad, and magazine designers are still groping for a way to fight the exploitation inherent in casual labor; some resist taking on the cultural trappings that usually accompany the workplace. Some don’t have much choice; from spatial margins they have entered the margins of the institutions that want to hire them, but only as casual labor. If teachers, they are often hired as adjuncts, full- or part-time substitutes in schools of all sorts, and frequently work without benefits. If artists, photographers, and writers, they are almost certainly freelancers but cannot make a living. Most will eventually seek full-time employment or regular part-time work.

Many bohemians find themselves confronted with labor issues but of a special type. They enter the workplace armed with the experience of having once enjoyed a measure of freedom and with the conceit that their credentials entitle them to some job autonomy. Instead, they find the law offices, corporate suites, and nonprofit agencies such as hospitals and schools have become knowledge factories that break your head rather than your back, and even if the pay is
II

EDUCATION AND DEMOCRACY
Not long ago I visited a small, alternative public high school in New York and attended classes on racial discrimination and corporate influence in contemporary higher education. The school is one of the twenty or so small, mostly teacher-run high schools the sclerotic New York City Board of Education is obliged to recognize and to fund in the 1990s despite its better judgment. The board and its chancellor distrust any schools they don’t control and for this reason do not leave the alternative schools to their own devices. In a system in which big is invariably viewed as better, they are called to account for every aspect of their operation: costs per student, number of enrolled students, their performance on standard tests, curriculum, and licensure of teachers and administrators. Like most others, this school was established by teachers rather than administrators, and for this reason, their ability to survive has remained in doubt for all the years of its existence.

They benefit from public perception that many large, board-administered high schools have failed by almost any measure: academic performance, graduation rates, college admissions, and of course, the volume of dropouts. Most importantly, the large secondary school behemoths fail to ignite students’ passion for learning, let alone fail to demonstrate their competence by conventional testing criteria. In the typical 3,000- to 4,000-student New York City public high school, kids say “nothing is going on” except what can be provided by the
occasional, unusually dedicated teacher who manages to overcome her role as a cop (keeping order is the highest priority in many of these schools) and a few energetic and entrepreneurial educators who have deigned to operate small programs to keep the most highly motivated from leaving the school.

The chancellor and his minions lose no opportunity to rail against these fragile experiments as cost-ineffective and irrelevant, but so far the administration has been unable to sink them because they are backed by parents and education activists and initially gained leverage on the system by raising outside foundation money to defray many start-up costs. The one I visited is among the more successful. Like many of its cohorts, it began as a small outpost within a larger school to “contain” some of the more discontented students and many who would drop out unless otherwise motivated. The central administration tacitly recognizes the alternative program as a convenient way to appease an increasingly restive public and to address some of the discipline problems in many of the large factory-like institutions.

With some 150 students, many of them Latino but also a substantial number of “whites” (some of whom have dropped out of the city’s handful of “elite” high schools) and blacks, the five-year-old experiment has graduated some students and helped others to pass the battery of tests devised by the state to winnow the school population. These small victories resulted in its being declared a free-standing institution with its own principal. In line with the general drift, this school is organized around a “theme” although the curriculum does not suggest much specialization.

From the kids’ vantage point, “Alternative High” is a magical place. Unlike many of the bigger schools that are more day prisons than educational sites, students are not hassled by guards and assistant principals; even more importantly, teachers and administrators respect and care for and about them. For many students, this is a last-chance saloon: fuck this one up and forget about a diploma let alone college. Don’t make it and it’s back to the streets and maybe jail. Classes are about half the size of regular high schools, the teachers are mostly young, and several went to Ivy League schools. All work hard to engage kids in dialogue on the subject matter. The party “line” of the school is antiracist and antisexist. Possessing a modest degree of autonomy, teachers use materials such as newspapers, magazines, and books as much as possible rather than texts drawn from the board-prescribed reading lists. Under its “urban” program, students go out into the city to find out about neighborhood conditions, other schools, and about economic issues such as joblessness. The math and science teachers are trying to integrate their subject matters and to make them concept- rather than procedure-oriented. Faculty in all of the disciplines struggle to find the handles to simultaneously prepare students for the Regents Examinations, a required endgame
whose results have enormous bearing on whether the school will continue to exist and on what the teachers view as genuine education.

Among the teachers, the name Paulo Freire is iconographic alongside the luminaries of the women’s and black freedom movements; many staff members have actually read his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* or, in a general way, know something of what it contains. The actual practice of most teachers, although relentlessly dialogic (I observed no sustained classroom lectures that followed a prescribed “lesson plan”), remained at considerable distance from Freire’s own thought, however. At best, following the dictum of the medical profession, the school has achieved to “first, do no harm.” This is no small achievement in a system that routinely inflicts incredible damage on almost all kids, and not just on working-class kids from racial, sexual, or gendered strata. Alternative High’s students displayed veritable exhilaration at being there. They felt safe. I suspect that the school’s greatest accomplishment has been to establish relations of trust among the slender corps of administrators, teachers, and students. What is truly innovative about the school is its fealty to one of Freire’s prerequisites: respect for kids and what they already know. As to education, however, it has a long way to go. In fact, in concert with many liberal and radical educators, some teachers have interpreted liberal education to chiefly mean instilling humanistic values in a nonrepressive way. The school seems to be a massive exercise geared towards values clarification.

These are dark times for educational innovation and its protagonists. In schools and universities, “reactionaries” (as Paulo Freire calls them) have all but overwhelmed the “progressives.” Their agenda to construe the very concept of education as training dominates schooling in public universities and is steadily gaining ground in private institutions as well. To suggest otherwise is to commit an unholy violation of the new common sense that the highest mission and overriding purpose of schooling is to prepare students, at different levels, to take their places in the corporate order. The banking or transmission theory of school knowledge that Freire identified more than thirty years ago as the culprit standing in the way of critical consciousness has returned with a vengeance. Once widely scorned by educators from diverse educational philosophies as a flagrant violation of the democratic educational mission, this new common sense has been thrust to the fore of nearly all official pedagogy. According to this view, students are “objects” into which teachers pour prescribed knowledge, primarily mathematics and rote science. Where once liberal, let alone radical, educators insisted that education be at the core of an activity of self-exploration
through which the student attempted to discover her own subjectivity through intellectual and affective encounters, now nearly all learning space is occupied by an elaborate testing apparatus to measure the student’s “progress” in ingesting externally imposed curricula. Even more insidiously, this new “education” provides a sorting device to reproduce the inequalities inherent in the capitalist market system. In effect, the image of the learner (when not viewed as a bundle of uncontrollable animal urges) has reverted to Locke’s infamous tabula rasa. In turn, the teacher becomes the instrument of approved intellectual and moral culture, charged with the task of expunging destructive impulses and fueling the empty mental tank. The student must be permitted no autonomy lest the evil spirits which lurk in everyday life regain lost ground.

These perspectives have reached across the ideological spectrum. In various degrees, academics and school authorities have embraced the new mantra that the student and radical movements of the 1960s and 1970s internationally forced educational reforms (such as open classrooms, student-generated curricula, black, women’s, and ethnic studies programs) and introduced into the canon of many human sciences the works of Marx and the Marxists, Derrida, Foucault, Deleuze, and French feminists as intellectual terrorists—to the detriment of modern students (or so the new mantra states). Especially after the fall of the Berlin Wall, some discovered their own liberalism and others kept drifting rightward. In the United States, a range of erstwhile leftists—even those who had perpetrated what philosopher Sidney Hook once described as elements of academic “anarchy”—began to accept chairs and grant money from leading conservative institutions such as the Olin Foundation, to enjoy the company of the enemies of critical learning. For many, the radicalism of the 1960s and 1970s turned out to be a horror show of “political correctness,” a menace to the integrity of the academic enterprise, the highest value of which was dispassionate, disinterested scientific investigation. The radicals became “ideologues” because they took sides; the others were “scholars” because their side was the liberal academy with its panoply of discipline-based departments, professional associations, and literatures. For them, what America and the world needed was schooling that obliged students to keep their collective noses to the grindstone in order to imbibe the best that had been thought and said. The highest curricular value was the dissemination of the great traditions of what they called “Western Civilization.”

For example, the reactionaries have recently begun to eliminate “recess” in elementary schools, the small opportunity kids still enjoy to play during the school day. For the mavens of authoritarian education, such frivolous pursuits must be replaced by the industrial model that had been reserved for secondary school in former periods. In this age of the subsumption of the human spirit
world without exploitation, inequality, and cultural enslavement. Unlike neoliberals and some leftists, his conviction is not borne out by some “scientific” assessment of the current situation. Instead, Freire’s belief in the emancipation of “men and women” was rooted in an “existential” commitment to an ethical ideal rather than to historical inevitability. In our period of crass opportunism and crushed aspirations, his book is a beacon for those with whom he is affiliated: “the wretched of the earth, the excluded.” Unlike those who, sixty years earlier, despaired for a better world at the moment of fascism’s rise and could offer only the “Great Refusal,” a negative prescription to resist the totalitarian machine, Freire found affirmation in the achievements of countless teachers and students who defied the new authoritarian machine to conquer illiteracy, to assert their “critical curiosity,” to intervene. Careful to distinguish educational activity from revolutionary transformation, he nevertheless defended it as a significant break from the status quo and a necessary step on the road to a different future than that proposed by the reactionaries. Freire seems to suggest that a radical futurity depends upon the work of radical educators today.

Since the English translation thirty years ago of Pedagogy of the Oppressed, Freire’s work has suffered the misreadings of well-meaning educators who have interpreted his work as a “brilliant methodology,” a kind of manual for teachers who would bring out the best in their otherwise indifferent students. Such characterizations are undoubtedly fed by the common identification of pedagogy merely with compassionate teaching; what is taught is unproblematic; the only issue is how to teach on the basis of caring. The authority of the teacher as a certified possessor of legitimate knowledge is always fundamentally already established and the student’s position as a consumer of knowledge is equally unquestioned. Many read Freire’s dialogic pedagogy as a tool for student motivation and cannot recognize that, for him, dialogue has a content whose goal is social as much as individual change. In Freire’s educational philosophy, the first principle is that the conventional distinction between teacher as expert and learner as an empty biophysiological shell is questioned. Education takes place when there are two learners who occupy somewhat different spaces in an ongoing dialogue. Both participants bring knowledge to the relationship and one of the objects of the pedagogic process is to explore what each knows, and what they can teach each other. A second object is to foster reflection on the self as actor in the world in consequence of knowing.

Against the prevailing wisdom, Freire rejected the idea of teacher as transmitter of received knowledge. He also spurned the degraded idea that the teacher is chiefly a “facilitator” of commonsense wisdom and of values clarification. Alternatively, he argued for the teacher as an intellectual who, like the student, is engaged preeminently in producing knowledge. In order to create
the most controversial. Controversial to those who seek to root hope in the
dialectic of history, who would, despite all, refuse Freire’s problematization of
specific historical agents. Perhaps his shift from certainty to indeterminacy may
be ascribed to the circumstances of his own political experience, to the failures
as much as the successes of his own work, and to his observations of others’
ttempts to change the world by applying formulaic Marxism to concrete condi-
tions. In this and his more recent writings, Freire’s commitments are rooted
neither in the inevitability of historical transformation nor in the leadership of
revolutionary vanguards. Although Freire reminds us the teacher is an actor on
the social and political stage, the educator’s task is to encourage human agency
not mould it in the manner of Pygmalion. What propels his unceasing efforts to
marshal the spirit of “rebelliousness” is ethical rather than scientific conviction,
the belief that, having taken sides, the teacher is obliged to struggle with only
hope of realizing his own ideals.

He remains a humanist in two ways. His discourse is anthropocentric
despite recent ecological and paleobiological evidence that the link between
some mammals and humans is closer at virtually all developmental levels than
was previously believed. For Freire, humans alone have critical capacities, a
judgment which is certainly arguable. That Freire chose to assert this faith
should be seen in the context of the battles he waged against those who would
deny to education its critical function. His is a humanist ethic insofar as class
societies retard the development of the capacities of people to take control of
their own destinies. Holding that education is a form of “ideology,” Freire
believes the teacher takes sides between those who have appropriated the
wealth, the land, and the knowledge of the social and cultural system and the
dispossessed. Freire judged current social and political arrangements by the cri-
terion of whether they had taken steps to ameliorate (much less reverse) the long
tradition of authoritarian societies to exclude substantial portions of their pop-
ulations from participation in economic, social, and cultural life and whether
they further or retard humanity’s project of self-fulfillment. Finding that in his
native Brazil neoliberalism has done little to change the conditions of life for
ordinary people, he joined the opposition Workers Party and became its first
secretary of education when it took power in the city of São Paulo in 1991.

Pedagogy of Freedom is, in part, a reflection on this experience. Even though
there is little in the way of a memoir of his two years as a government official,
Freire tacitly admits the huge frustration of trying to undertake school reform
within a system that, in large measure, is deprived and, in turn, deprives stu-
dents of the most elementary tools of education: adequate funds with which to
ensure a full school day, materials, and safe facilities; a commitment to kids as
“subjects”; and teachers who are aware that theirs is a political as well as intel-
lecticual project. That in the face of bitter disappointments Freire sees fit to reiterate the principle of hope that underlies his life’s work is altogether remarkable. There is also a powerfully prescriptive side to this text. Even more than in its predecessors, Freire has delineated what a pedagogy of freedom entails.

Although written from Brazil in the late 1990s when the early promise of renewal after the passing of the military dictatorship has been betrayed by, among others, some of the very intellectuals who hastened its demise, *Pedagogy of Freedom* is more than an inspiring testament by an old warrior. It is nothing less than an invocation to those who seek an alternative to repressive education to renew the struggle for emancipatory education. First, it calls for a “rigorous ethical formation” in the teacher’s determination to combat “racial, sexual and class discrimination.” Second, it advocates the concept that education is open-ended “scientific formation” since people are conditioned but not determined by their circumstances. What does Freire mean by science in this regard? Surely not the humdrum formulaic techniques characteristic of most of our school pedagogies. Freire calls for the learner’s “critical reflection” on the social, economic, and cultural conditions within which education occurs; learning begins with taking the self as the first—but not the last—object of knowledge. Education does not stop with dialogue. The teacher is obliged to engage in “exposition and explanation” of those economic and social conditions that bear on the educational process and to expose students to many of the sacred texts without which education degenerates into opinion. For Freire, the self is a social concept, one that entails the whole world.

Finally, since the teacher is a learner as well, he is not a figure independent of the social process. Teachers are chronically underpaid, subject to onerous working and living conditions, and, I would add, often poorly educated. Part of Freire’s ethical idea is the absolute necessity of teachers’ self-defense of their own dignity, a struggle that includes their “right” to academic freedom, to have “autonomy” in the construction of the curriculum and of the pedagogic process. In this respect he invokes two separate rationales. Dedicated to the unity of theory and practice, the teacher can hardly make credible the link between education and action if she, herself, is not so engaged. Teachers cannot be effective when they remain in the thrall of an exploitative school system that robs them of their own voices.

These principles, enunciated on the heels of Freire’s more recent urban frame of reference and contrasted with his earlier focus on rural communities, especially in Brazil and Africa, should make his ideas more resonant to educators
and activists in more advanced industrial societies. São Paulo, a city of more than twelve million inhabitants, exhibits the full range of social, cultural, and economic conditions of any of the world’s large cities: Mexico City, New York, London, Los Angeles, or Atlanta. It is a place of wealth, basic industry, and grinding poverty born of the rural crisis and chronic unemployment. Like elsewhere, its middle class is embattled under the weight of multiple uncertainties wrought by globalization and political turmoil. Freire’s special concern has not diminished for the “ragpickers” and the “wretched” who live in favelas, those vast stretches of impoverished communities composed of the unemployed and underemployed, living in conditions of makeshift tin and cardboard dwellings in São Paulo and many other major cities of Latin America, yet he takes pains to speak of his pedagogy as “universal.” In this respect, we may take Pedagogy of Freedom as the basis of what Nietzsche calls “new principles of evaluation,” where the term “evaluation” indicates not a fixed set of criteria from which to make superficial measurements of social policies but a series of concepts by which to forge a new educational process.

Among these is the open, full-throated declaration that the idea of the educator as a disinterested purveyor of “objective” knowledge, the incontrovertible “facts” which form the foundation of dominant values, is itself a form of ideological discourse. If Freire does not go so far as to declare that there are no “facts” for which power is the underlying legitimation or that every statement about the world is an interpretation, he does criticize the doctrine according to which the “givens” of the taken-for-granted world must be viewed as the immutable starting points of learning and its companion, the privileged position of “methodology” for learning. How to square such principles with his oft-repeated dedication to “scientific” formation? Freire’s notion of science is difficult for Anglo-American readers because it seems to grate against conventional conceptions of science’s social “neutrality” and value freedom.

Freire stands firmly in the tradition for which the definition of science is critical and not positivistic. Educational formation becomes “scientific” when the learner grasps the link between theory and practice through a process whose assumption is that the individual is, in every respect, “unfinished.” The accomplishment of critical consciousness consists, in the first place, in the learner’s capacity to situate herself in her own historicity, for example, to grasp the class, race, and sexual aspects of education and social formation and to understand the complexity of the relations that have produced this situation. This entails a critical examination of received wisdom, not as a storehouse of eternal truths but as itself situated in its own historicity. Implicit in this process is the concept that each of us embodies universality but that universality does not necessarily dominate us. Thus, the active knower, not the mind as a repository of “information,” is the end of education.
The widespread acquiescence by students and their families to the rigors of technoscientific training may be explained by the artificial imposition of a new scarcity regime in the global capitalist system. As good jobs disappear and are replaced by temporary, contingent, and part-time work, competition among prospective workers intensifies. The school responds by making testing the object of teaching and, in the bargain, robs teachers of their intellectual autonomy, not to say intellectual function. As education is suppressed and replaced by training, students learn that critical consciousness is dangerous to the end of technoscientific formation because it may jeopardize their chance for a job, let alone a career. Critical educators may be admired but dismissed as propagandists; fearing marginalization, some teachers may try to reconcile their views with those of neoliberalism by arguing that Freire’s “method” might produce more creative employees for entrepreneurial corporations, or might lift some poor and working-class students from inexorable subordination to individual social mobility. After all, even the most conservative cultures require self-justification by picking out a few subalterns to promote as emblems of the system’s flexibility.

But Freire’s admirers should remember that in 1964 the military regime sent him into exile for his ideas, and that he was forced to roam the world for the next twenty-five years before it was possible to return home. The authoritarians in Western societies and the new liberal democracies of Latin America may or may not resort to exile or imprisonment to silence critical educators. The will to power almost inevitably requires that subversive ideas such as these be silenced or so mutated that only the husk is recognized as legitimate. Even in ostensibly democratic societies, those who would bring dialogic and critical practices into classrooms risk marginalization.

Under these circumstances, critical educators have no alternative but to organize through unions, study groups, institutes, schools, and other sites to actively propagate these new principles of educational evaluation. Needless to say, in this conservative era, the task is daunting. One of the most important uncompleted tasks before those who would preserve Freire’s legacy is to elaborate an educational philosophy and strategy for economically developed societies and for an increasingly economically and culturally interdependent world. Perhaps the most significant intervention would be in the raging educational debates of our time. In the current climate, liberal educators are hopelessly outgunned—intellectually as well as politically and financially. They have retreated from their humanistic positions, conceding the need for vocationalization of the lion’s share of the school curriculum in working-class communities. Even educators in elite schools are constrained to hold the line against corporate incursions. In major private universities, there is little resistance to the inducements
solutions as well as individual responsibility for intervening. His critique is political and not moral.

While a bold critique of the Right is urgent, a critical educational movement would be obliged to undertake a dialogue with the teachers in places like Alternative High as well as progressives in educational programs in communities, labor unions, and mainstream schools. While their hearts are pure and motivation impeccable, many in the alternative school movement have settled for providing a safe haven for troubled students and in the bargain have, often unwittingly, adopted anti-intellectualism as armor against those who would destroy even this basic gain. Teachers in mainstream schools feel embattled and are grateful to insert a bit of critical learning within the confines of the classroom. Trade union educators, especially in the United States, have narrowed their horizon to encompass the bare bones of union contract administration and a little legislative and political education. But “consciencization,” Freire’s perennial phrase for critical self-consciousness, requires the teacher be able to undertake “exposition and explanation” as elements of the dialogue. In order to facilitate the critical faculties and the intellectual development, the teacher must offer theoretical perspectives as well as a loving environment for student self-expression without conveying the message that these are “party line” standpoints and texts are chosen only to buttress them. As every good teacher knows, if students perceive that the teacher is pro-student there are few limits to possible manipulation. At Alternative High, students were well aware of the party line and it was a regular butt of their bitterly ironic humor.

This makes it necessary for the teacher to take the role of the “other” to present the most reasonable and articulate version of opposing views, to assign persuasive conservative texts, and to treat those texts seriously by means of exposition as well as refutation. In this process, the teacher is aware that well-wrought hegemonic ideas may persuade better than her own counterhegemonies. The risk of critical education is that if schools are constructed as genuine public spheres, outcomes are not guaranteed.

That Freire’s last testament should focus on the question of freedom may, at first glance, confuse some readers. Isn’t “freedom” the favorite slogan of the antiradicals? What, indeed does freedom mean and with respect to education? On the plane of politics, Freire clearly took his stand with those who would create the social and economic arrangements that, while dedicated to more equality, go beyond the urgent task of eliminating poverty, hunger, and disease. The good life is not merely having a job, enough to eat, and decent shelter. Authoritarians have, from time to time, been able to deliver this much, at least for limited periods. Freire holds that a humanized society requires cultural freedom, the ability of the individual to choose values and
In this essay I adopt the commonsense conception of violence in which someone has been physically assaulted by another or, in international relations, armies and whole populations are subject to weapons of destruction. Now, I do not deny the limited utility of ideas such as “symbolic violence” when applied to education, for instance, or the idea that communication may be fraught with linguistic violence that hurts feelings, bears on self-esteem, and so forth. I am aware that, in the course of describing relations between men and women, violence has become a descriptive and an explanatory tool for feminists and that many writers do not employ the word metaphorically.

But I am not inclined to accept the tendency, all too pervasive in the academy, to broaden the use of the term “violence” so widely that it loses its specificity. To equate invective, linguistic manipulation and the like with physical acts aimed at intimidation and which may threaten life itself misses the point of the rise of violence in this century and loses the grave consequences of its deployment. Moreover, when applied to communicative action its use conceals more than it reveals. For example, it is perfectly true that the power of schooling on kids occurs on more than the level of discipline. The curriculum is an unwanted imposition, but this insight hardly amounts to “violence.” At some point the student who sticks with the curriculum must buy in and succeed in its terms. How else could it be? And there is no question that many of the routines associated
with marriage and other gender and sexual relations hide the coercion visited by the structure on women. But how to distinguish acts of physical force from those that function at the institutional and psychological levels? There is, of course, such a thing as psychological warfare, economic warfare, and so forth. The stronger surely holds the advantage over the weaker combatant. But, even though the subtext of many instances of these forms of struggle is the possibility that the loser may be subject to force, the moments of involuntary detention, torture, and the prospect of death are qualitatively different from “symbolic” violence and its consequences. Let us grant at the outset that there is a continuum rather than a categorical break between language and force. But it is important to maintain the difference. So, although I shall have occasion below to refer to the more nuanced usages of violence, it is by way of illustration of the process by which insult may become physically imposed terror.

Spring 1999 was a bloody one in Kosovo, Yugoslavia, and Littleton, Colorado, among other sites where violence was the decisive method to solve political and social conflicts. Violence is not all that unites these incidents. Like most events in modern war they shared a tendency to rope in noncombatants who happened to be in the way of guns and bombs. Senseless? Maybe so. But there might good reasons for these bad outcomes which, however unjustified on moral grounds, often make good strategy. Having set up Yugoslav President Slobodon Milosevic as a reliable supplicant of the U.S.-dominated International Monetary Fund (IMF), and unconscionably dawdled during his ethnic cleansing program in Bosnia, the Clinton administration and its European allies, belatedly found reasons to turn on him. When, responding to mounting protests and guerrilla activity, Yugoslav troops entered Kosovo and drove nearly a million people from their homes, the Clinton administration wasted little time bombing military and civilian targets in Belgrade and other Yugoslav cities as well as in Kosovo. The relatively swift military response to the Kosovan crisis contrasted sharply with Allied hesitation during the earlier conflict when NATO remained paralyzed for months as Yugoslav bombs rained on Sarajevo and Serbian militia allied to the Yugoslav government killed and maimed thousands and forced many more to flee their homes.

For the purposes of this essay I want to reserve discussion of whether the wars against Yugoslavia and Iraq were “justified” on human rights criteria. I do not accept the idea advanced by many critics that since the U.S. actions were selective they should inevitably be shunned. “What about Rwanda and other African cases of genocide? After promising to support the Kurds why didn’t the United States stop Turkey’s victimization of its Kurdish minority?” Although I take the point that United States policy is more concerned with conflicts in
Europe than those in the South or the East, the logic of such thinking is that unless one is an equal opportunity human rights intervenor, no intervention that might save some lives is legitimate. Nor is the view promulgated by some nurtured in the Vietnam War era that any United States military action is to be condemned before the fact as evidence that as an imperialist power any American intervention must necessarily be an extension of a policy of aggrandizement. While it can be shown that U.S. intervention in Kosovo was surely not free of political motivations, only naïve moralists could plausibly demand as a condition of support that war aims be pure. On such criteria U.S. participation in the war against fascism could be, and was, condemned by those who were not pacifists. For the moment it is enough to note that unless one renounces the use of force to resolve conflicts between sovereign states under any conditions, the criteria for determining the difference between just and unjust war stand between approbation and condemnation.

Let us acknowledge that the issues are complicated. In the Yugoslav case, was the U.S. claim to have defended human rights undermined by the scope and the effects of the bombings? Or can it be argued that when the majority of the Serbian population knowingly supports acts such as ethnic cleansing the concept of “civilian” loses its traditional meaning? Note well the uneven parallel between arguments about murderous American raids on German cities such as Dresden during World War II, the nuclear bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and the recent Belgrade bombings. Although by no means equivalent in their destructive outcomes, they are held together by the common thread: punishing civilian populations as if they were complicit in the war aims of their leaders.

Should the whole people have been held responsible for the calumnies of its leaders? Fifty-five years after the fact, the debate about the degree of responsibility of the German people for the Holocaust still rages. And, even if this distinction is untenable, can it be shown that the consequences of these apparently brutal bombings shortened their respective wars, as Paul Fussell has recently claimed, and ultimately saved more lives than were lost? The U.S. government’s program of beating the enemy into submission by uprooting and terrorizing the civilian population, as well as disabling its military capability, is continuous from Dresden to the two Japanese cities, from the wanton bombing and arson committed by U.S. forces in Southeast Asia to Baghdad and Belgrade.

The policy may be viewed as an instance of a de facto rule of modern technological war: Once the major war aim is the enemy’s unconditional surrender, it is strategically criminal not to deploy every conventional weapon of mass destruction at “our” disposal where, after Hiroshima, “conventional” means any instrument of mass destruction but chemical and nuclear weapons. For it
does appear that, Fussell’s and Harry Truman’s argument notwithstanding, the political costs of using these weapons have become prohibitive. As a result modern warfare has trod a very thin line. Many conventional weapons have become so powerful that their use over a relatively short period of time can all but destroy in a matter of weeks the economic and military infrastructure of a country the size of Pennsylvania and, according to some experts, cause as much destruction as medium-sized nuclear weapons. In this regard, the willingness of some nuclear powers such as the United States to ban nuclear weapons may not be viewed with as much relief as might be the case if technologically sophisticated conventional arms were not nearly as deadly.

The saliency of my discourse on war to local acts of violence becomes apparent when we inquire into the question of the use of violence to resolve apparently local conflicts between groups. It may be objected that relations between nations are different from those between political groups such as Kosovan and Serbian nationalists within the scope of single nation-state. Yet, as we have seen, the concept of national sovereignty has come under substantial revision since the Vietnam war when perhaps a majority of the American people questioned the justice of American engagement in what was perceived as a civil war. Under the newly established rules of engagement it is possible for an external power to intervene in the internal affairs of a nation-state if it can persuasively claim egregious human rights violations by one or both sides. What seems remarkable is that the notion of a “civil war” about which the rest of the world may remain indifferent has, since the collapse of the Soviet Union, lost its traditional sway. Until the 1990s the Great Powers confined their support for one or another side to military matériel, money, and political power on the international stage.

But many would argue that personal relations are of a different logical type from political relations in both their international and intranational contexts. Indeed the distinction underlies the bourgeois-liberal insistence on the separation of the private and public. Theorists like Hannah Arendt have warned about the threat to freedom posed by the increasing tendency of liberal-democratic states, let alone those of the totalitarian variety, to intrude into the private sphere. Of course she does not deny that private life is increasingly subject to public scrutiny and state regulation, and she reminds us that in advanced industrial societies the space for freedom is ever narrower. Even if it is true that, despite the rightward turn in American politics after 1968, on questions of political speech American courts have made at least a ninety-degree turn to protect the First Amendment since the 1950s, no national administration except for the Nixon presidency has done more to set the clock back on civil liberties than that of Bill Clinton’s.

Since there is no serious political opposition in the United States, political repression has been displaced to wider police surveillance and control of the
"A hearty omnivore of knowledge, Aronowitz can barely be matched in the craft of opinion-making. In these essays he is at his very best, offering a range of political commentary that gives you the big picture without sacrificing analytic detail."

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