

Introduction

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This issue of *Works and Days* celebrates the work of Richard Ohmann. The essays collected here describe his influence on English studies (including both composition studies and literary studies), cultural studies, sociology, politics, economics, history (both Big and little), and, of course, Marxist thought, over three academic generations. For the cohort that came of (professional) age in the seventies—*English in America* changed our understanding of ourselves as members of the academy. As a consequence of reading Ohmann's work, we raise research questions with more attention to Big History and teach our students not merely to contemplate texts but also to attend to the ways in which those texts (whether freshman themes or canonical poems) work in the world. In the eighties, *Politics of Letters* called for a re-examination of humanism, aesthetics and literary "value," teaching practices, literacy and power. In the nineties, *Selling Culture* explained the process of class formation and modeled a method that, although unconstrained by disciplinary boundaries was never unscholarly. *Politics of Knowledge* (2003) demanded that we come to terms with the commercialization of the university, the professions, and print culture.

Richard Ohmann exerted that influence by introducing his audience to what he calls Marxist "ideas" (*Letters* 116) in a particularly lucid and appealing way. The most significant and rhetorically successful part of this process, in my view, was his account of the professional managerial class. John Trimbur observes in "Language and Class Formation: Two Vignettes for Richard Ohmann," that

it is virtually impossible to think of Dick Ohmann without the PMC coming to mind...Ohmann took a cluster of ideas and images floating around the postwar US... and then shaped them into an ongoing investigation into the nature and ideology of professional work in class society. What must have started as a hunch...has turned into a method of inquiry and a means of political engagement (98).

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David R. Shumway, in "Resistance to History," asserts that Ohmann's focus on this class between labor and capital is important in cultural studies because "the emergence and development of mass culture is not fully explained in terms of [models] in which only two classes are socially and politically significant" (52).

Through his account of the PMC, Ohmann persuaded his audience of the relevance of class analysis and its relevance to our lives as scholars, teachers, and institutional creatures. Whereas other Marxist thinkers concentrated on the commodity form or ideology, conceptions that we might have, could have, and probably would have attended to as merely theoretical ones, Ohmann devoted his considerable rhetorical skills to elucidating for *members of English departments* the formation and function of the class to which they belong. Ohmann not only described the PMC, but also showed us that we are a part of it. It's easy for an English professor to see that an accountant, a marketing manager, and a real estate broker are part of the professional managerial class, but not so easy to see the ways in which one's own work "has a special role in the hegemonic process and in mediating relations of the other two main classes: the big bourgeoisie and the proletariat" (*Politics of Letters* xii). Ohmann's audience was and is the boomers, the flower children, the NDEA recipients and Woodrow Wilson Fellows, the sons and (importantly) daughters of the middle class who were the first in their families to make it to college, liked it there, and wanted to stay.

David Downing, in "What's an English Professor To Do with the *Politics of Knowledge*?" attributes Ohmann's rhetorical success to his linking of "the three main overlapping historical frames by which we might come to understand contemporary working conditions and social obligations for English professors: the story of capitalism, the story of the university, and the story of English" (Downing 25). Downing's essay is an elaborate bibliographical guide to these three stories as they become institutional history. One of those institutions, of course, is composition studies. In *English in America* and the magisterial "Writing and Reading, Work and Leisure," Ohmann examines the relations between the teaching of writing and the PMC, reminding us that efforts to "help" people by teaching the modes, drilling for skills, enhancing their t-unit count, affirming their right to their own language, fostering their "personal voice" have consequences in Big History. In "Richard Ohmann, Articulation and Administration," I describe Dick's influence on my administration of writing programs. As Linda Bergmann points out in "Richard Ohmann and the Development of a History for Composition," he showed that a decontextualized commitment to the modes of discourse "is successful in meeting its actual goal of preparing the select few for work with the mind, while teaching the rest to follow orders" (63). Bergmann also observes that Ohmann was one of the first, and still one of the few, mainstream male professors at prestigious universities to contribute to and critique the professionalization of composition studies. As the new field now writes its own history, he has become a prob-

lem: while both Robert Connors and Ohmann lament the professional reluctance to come to terms with the connections between writing and the way society is run, Bergmann says, “for Connors the problem seems more like the acknowledgment of personal failures than an analysis of the systematic self-preservation of an academic discipline” (67). In “Richard Ohmann, Articulation and Administration,” I describe Dick’s influence on my administration of writing programs.

Next, Richard Ohmann admonished us about the consequences of denying or avoiding this class recognition. Denial and avoidance take several interrelated forms:

I. Commitment to Disciplinarity

In “English and the Cold War,” Ohmann points out that the new critics, whose work offered grounds and warrant for claiming English as a discipline, constructed “fallacies”—intentional and affective—and heresies (e.g., of paraphrase) to disconnect a literary work from any propositional content.

With its emphasis on disinterestedness, disciplinarity prevents us from acknowledging our membership in the professional managerial class and establishing solidarity with other groups of workers. In “Undocumented ideas, or the Limits of the Ivory Tower: A Piece for Richard Ohmann,” Jamie Owen Daniel presents an imaginary scenario in which Stanley Fish scolds Raymond Williams for writing about the preconditions for the Welsh working class novel instead of the English drama that he was hired to study. She characterizes Ohmann’s work as “thinking-in-relation or critique” that ignores disciplinary boundaries as it looks at interconnections among workers (82). Ohmann’s willingness to traverse disciplinary boundaries, and to do the work that such crossings required, is the topic of David R. Shumway’s “Resistance to History.” Shumway argues that “the main reason Ohmann’s work has not received its due is a deeply ingrained resistance to history within not only cultural studies but Marxism and literary studies as well” (49).

II. Professionalization

Trimbur notes that as early as *English in America*, Ohmann had begun to show “how this industrial society organizes the labor of people who work with their minds and whose work is anchored in bodies of knowledge and theory.” An emphasis on the exclusiveness of these bodies of knowledge, closely held techniques, and self-promotion fosters an insensitivity to the material contexts in which we work. In “The Escape from Contingency, or, Students Are Already Workers,” Marc Bousquet comments that

[t]he tendency of professional workers and other labor aristocrats toward the more self-interested forms of self-organization suggests that worker self-organization is essential but not sufficient to the expansion of democracy and equality, regardless of whether one is talking about physicians, teamsters, or civil servants. (104)

David R. Shumway and Jeffrey J. Williams, in different ways, describe Dick Ohmann's own professional choices and the ways in which those choices affected his career. In "The Politics of Career," Williams shows how Dick's decisions differed from those of the rest of his cohort and exacted a professional price that he willingly paid. Shumway points out that *Selling Culture*, "while...well-received,...has not made the kind of impact it merits" (49). In "Reflections on Dick Ohmann as an MLA Activist," Barbara Foley gives a fond and detailed account of the early days of the Radical Caucus of the Modern Language Association, noting that Dick's "grasp of the relation of the particular in relation to the general is firm—indeed, just about unerring" (243), praising his "complete lack of arrogance" ...and his "plain old lucidity and courage."

III. Fascination with Theory

Richard Ohmann's relation to Capital T Theory is vexed, complex and exemplary. He has written that he prefers the word "ideas" to theory, and his work, as I suggest in "Richard Ohmann: Administration and Articulation," have more often addressed the historical and material contexts of problems than the abstractions of theory. He has not, as Jeffrey Williams notes, adopted "a particular vocabulary or doxa" (91). As a consequence, as everyone in this volume notes, his work is clearly, elegantly and straightforwardly written. Janice Radway, in "Richard Ohmann's Voice" offers an account of "how the voice of *Selling Culture* is constructed and how the book envisions and addresses its reader...[in order to] show how the rhetorical achievement that is the voice of Richard Ohmann opens up a new and much-needed narrative source from which to view the labor and products as well as the consumers of the culture industries" (13-14). Ohmann's voice, as Radway and others point out, is not the "distanced, disembodied" one of Theory but rather the tone of a person who is "deeply implicated in the story he has to tell" (15). It is, I think, because he is fully implicated in the story he has to tell that Richard Ohmann has avoided the quietism—the great postmodern "whatever" in the face of incomprehensible interconnections—that Edward Said warned against. At the same time, as Jeffrey Williams asserts, "Ohmann's work has consistently been fully theoretical, if theory is taken as the effort to provide a general explanation of the world in which we work and live" (91).

From theory come research programs and methods for pursuing them. John Trimbur remarks that Dick often generously "describes research agendas that he has no intention of pursuing but offers congenially as research topoi" (98). Three young contributors to this volume have invoked his historical methods, followed his hints, and pursued his inquiries to areas elsewhere in the era of flexible accumulation. In "An Homage to the Posthuman in Ohmann: Retailing Culture through Consumer Electronics," Ryan Moeller looks at what he sees as "the latest incarnation of the hegemonic processes he has devoted his career to exposing and work-

ing to change: mass retailers of consumer electronics" (152). In "Selling Christianity: Megachurches, Megatheory, Markets, and Class at the Turn of the 21st Century—In Homage to Richard Ohmann," Megan Marie examines megachurches and their commodification of religion by way of showing that Ohmann's analysis of our era is simultaneously darker and more realistic than that of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri. Luana Uluave's "The Revolving Door: Teaching and Not Teaching Writing at a For-Profit University," is a winsome but terrifying story of her experiences with corporate management and customers at "Hybrid U," where "students would work on real-world projects provided by their corporate sponsors [and...[t]he sponsoring corporations would employ students as low-cost labor during school and take first pick among graduates for new employees" (124). She has seen the future that many of the rest of us have yet to encounter.

David Bleich, in "Letter to Dick," describes Dick's work and active political life as an instance of "the project of tikkun olam—the betterment of the whole society" (209). Richard Ohmann has, in Bleich's words, "for a lifetime, reminded us of how, at every moment, our teaching, our scholarship, our uses of language, and even our MLA cash bars, we are responsible for the common welfare" (209). In the "Conversation with Richard Ohmann," edited by James J. Sosnoski, that closes this volume, we see yet another instance of that concern.

Works Cited

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