

Richard Ohmann, Administration and Articulation

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Richard Ohmann's work as an administrator is rarely spoken of in tributes to him in this volume and elsewhere, but to think carefully about his influence is to realize that he has never been the kind of person who diagnoses the academy's ills without taking steps to ameliorate them. As Jeffrey Williams points out, Ohmann was one of the very few members of his generation to "do" administration. (The late Wayne Booth is another.) For the record, let me count the ways: He served as Editor of *College English* and an *ex officio* member of NCTE's College Section Steering Committee. He served briefly as chair of the English department at Wesleyan University, until he and his colleagues worked out a plan for turning the department into a chairless collective. He also served as Wesleyan's Director of the Humanities Center, Associate Provost and interim Chancellor at Wesleyan; he co-founded *Radical Teacher* and Radical Caucus. He organized the "rebellion" at MLA. He served on a Massachusetts school board. He was president of the Society for Critical Exchange.

Such work involved not only generating "big picture" analyses but also addressing envelopes, mastering rules and procedures, raising funds, talking on the phone, meeting with unhappy students and their irate parents, working to change tenure requirements, establishing interdisciplinary programs, and even turning his (crimson-draped) back on McGeorge Bundy. How did he go about being a "marxist administrator" in a time of incredulity toward grand narratives? And what can we learn from him about agency and accountability in the university in the era of flexible accumulation?

As universities become more corporate and professionalized, and as surveillance at the state, federal and multinational corporate levels intensifies, the number of administrators has grown. Moreover, persons who are technically classified as "non-administrative" faculty have been more frequently required to perform such administrative functions as the coordination and supervision of various kinds of labor, the collection, maintenance and reporting of various kinds of "data," the establishment and maintenance of

WORKS AND DAYS 45/46, Vol. 23, Nos. 1&2, 2005

“standards,” the enforcement of intellectual property laws and customs, and, of course, the seeking of corporate and government funds.

Administration, especially at the level that Ohmann calls the “educational bureaucracy,” is about multiple, incommensurate demands on your time and interpellations of your subjectivity. I find this especially to be the case in what I’ll call the “lower middle professional managerial class.” I need this unwieldy term to discriminate the provosts and chancellors and vice presidents (who might actually make policy) from the persons whose administrative tasks involve much responsibility (or, in the more current term, “accountability”) and little power over the institutional circumstances of their lives. It is, I think, in the offices and electronic inboxes of the department chairs, the directors of undergraduate studies, the assistant and associate directors of programs and institutes, and perhaps most of all, the comp directors, where administrative problems are most keenly experienced but (in the context of what Dick calls “Big History”) *least* understood. Comp directors, especially, so (relatively) recently professionalized, so recently allowed in from the (relative) margins, often simply don’t see the explanations for and consequences of their administrative work (as Marc Bousquet reminds us here and elsewhere). By precept and example, Ohmann shows such administrators how to be aware of the ineluctable modalities of multinational capital without being paralyzed.

To investigate and celebrate the ways in which Richard Ohmann has helped me (and many others) figure out what to do, I shall juxtapose Dick’s own brief and modest accounts of his administrative work with a theoretical analysis of administration provided by Stanley Fish in “Nice Work If You Can Get Them to Do It.”

In “The Personal as History,” Ohmann mentions that, as associate provost and later interim chancellor at Wesleyan, he had a part in reducing requirements, fostering more interdisciplinary studies (e.g., African American Studies) and less autocratic tenure procedures, but he says little about the process of effecting these changes. No one who has ever attended a department meeting can think that these achievements were easy. Later he remarks that his administrative activities were sometimes amusing—offering an account of the time at Mount Holyoke when, representing Wesleyan and wearing Harvard regalia, he turned his back at commencement speaker/“war criminal” (*Politics of Knowledge* 213) McGeorge Bundy. No one who has ever engaged in a repugnant ritual for the sake of decorum—or refused at her professional peril—can imagine that it felt all that funny at the time. In the conversation with David Downing, Jim Sosnoski and me in this volume, he even describes fund raising. Richard Ohmann did all the things that administrators have to do, all the while remaining committed to marxian ideas. How?

He gives us little in the way of descriptions of his decision processes. One exception to this reticence is his *College English* editorial in the issue for January, 1977. The issue published

responses to a call for papers on "Literacy and the Basics." The call (in April, 1976), prompted by media reports of a "Back to basics" movement, asked

Is there a decline in literacy? In writing ability?
 If so, what are its causes?...
 If, on the other hand, there has been no significant decline in reading and writing ability among college students, what explains the outcry? What can English teachers do to correct public misconceptions? Is our responsibility confined to the classroom, or does it include social and political action? (819)

The editorial expresses disappointment with the responses. He and his associate editor, William B. Coley, report that, although the original "call invited larger perspectives," the contributors only offered descriptions of "successful programs, competency requirements, college- or university-wide assaults on the problem...discussed by contributors as if divorced from social, economic or political factors" (441). Nonetheless, he published these narrow and disappointing contributions. How and why did he decide to do that? Some editors would have denounced the profession's stupidity. Others would have accepted the "public outcry" as "true."

Obviously, his decisions were contextualized somehow in a marxian thought. I use the term "thought" here (rather than theory) in part because Ohmann himself says in "Teaching as a Theoretical Practice" that he prefers the term "ideas" to "theory." This very nice move brackets some of the questions that have concerned many others for many years: is Marxism a science? Is Fredric Jameson an idealist after all? Can totalization be avoided? To what extent is Marxism a grand narrative about which one should be incredulous? And so forth. While so many men of his cohort were addressing these questions, Richard Ohmann was negotiating with women faculty and African American students, orchestrating the MLA rebellion, and founding *The Radical Teacher*. And so forth.

I emphasize these circumstances because relations between administration and "theory"—especially postmodern skepticism about grand narratives—have been an issue of late. A few years ago, an MLA-sponsored discussion of "Administration after Post-structuralism" raised the question whether the suspicion of master narratives fosters a political quietism among administrators. (Jamie Owen Daniel, in this volume, alludes to this discussion.) In the absence of foundational principles, the organizers of the session asked, is it possible (or desirable) for a postmodern administrator to behave in a principled way? In response, Stanley Fish asserted that post-structural theory is "of no consequence" for academic administration. "The reason [he says] is that post-structuralism is not the name of a way of doing...administration...[but r]ather...an account of the way things are done, an account that says that things are not done according to clear and determinate rules or abstract moral values or procedural norms or any other master narratives or meta-

narratives." Although Fish thinks that "the poststructuralist account...is right," his claim is "that its rightness doesn't matter... [in the context of] generating a program or a strategy or even a minimal list of dos and don'ts" (15). He explains:

Say you're a dean faced with a dilemma or a crisis or a garden variety decision. And as a good poststructuralist you remind yourself that independent grounds for making your decision are unavailable, that power is disbursed through the nodes of a network in which you are multiply embedded, that the categories of understanding with which you and your colleagues move are revisable and could have been otherwise, that disciplinary distinctions are historical artifacts and not platonic realities, that academic freedom is the self-promotional name of a set of vested interests and not a neutral principle, that there is no such thing as free speech and it's a good thing too—and therefore, and therefore? And therefore *nothing*....You are still left with your problem in all its particularity. (15)

I'll forego the temptation to engage in debate with Stanley Fish about the definitions of "theory" and "consequences." I'm prepared to grant that no theory will tell us—with certainty—whether to admit Jennifer Smith to Comm 300 even though the class has already reached its limit. Nor does incredulousness toward master narratives allow an administrator to decline to decide. Rather, I'll observe that in making his claim, Fish concerns himself with logic, a calculus of certainty ill-suited to the uncertainties of life in multinational capitalism. All that one can do, according to the hyperlogical Fish (See Sosnoski), is to separate the category of discourse called theory from the category of remunerated professional activity called "administration" and to assert that theory as a system cannot have consequences for administrative decisions. That proposition enunciated, Fish's (logical) task is concluded (although the problem of what to do with Jennifer and whether to increase her teacher's workload without increasing his salary would seem to remain unsolved).

It is important, however, to point out that Fish is silent about *how* an administrator *perceives* a problem in "all its particularity." What focuses his perception? What, if anything, helps her to decide what is to be done?

It seems to me what Dick Ohmann has taught us so spectacularly throughout his working life is that it's not so much logical *consequences* as historical *contexts* that we should be thinking about as we address a problem in all its particularity. To confront a problem, an administrator frames it in some way. One might call these frames "ideas," or "history," or "beliefs," or "schema" or "ideology" or "neuroses." I'm inclined to say, though, that a frame in this instance functions *like* a *theory* insofar as "theory" is definable as a generalized account of something to which a particular instance

might be referred. Mentoring TA's, for example, might be framed, within the lines of certain feminist theories, as care, or in Foucauldian terms as discipline or in Marxist terms as reproducing the means of production.

The salient difference between Fish and Ohmann then would seem to be not epistemological but rather tactical. In practice, both Ohmann and Fish analyze problems. Fish writes about the analysis. Ohmann, while a brilliant analyst, figures out how to ameliorate them. Fish's tactic allows him to ignore (but not deny) the structural interrelations that it has been Richard Ohmann's life's work to elucidate.

Dick's framings of his decisions have (as I mentioned in my introduction) brought a generation of academics to Marxism. It's impossible for me to imagine Dick confronting an administrative problem in all its particularity *without* reference to Marxian "ideas." And I suspect that many administrators reading this volume have addressed their own particular problems *in the context* of their readings of Ohmann's work.

Still, he never strikes us as the Scalia of the left—an "originalist" Marxist. Although he avoids a fundamentalist "credulity" toward even Marx's master narrative, Dick finds ways of articulating Marxian "ideas" in such a way as to address administrative problems. While he is always aware that other decisions are possible and appropriate in a given context, he nonetheless operates in a "principled" way. I see his administrative actions instances of what the Birmingham School calls "articulations." I understand "articulation" as both a saying and a connecting, that is, as an effort not only to name a problem but also to see it in many of the interconnecting and contradictory (theoretical) ways in which it is describable. In Birmingham School cultural studies, articulation is both a theory and a method. Fredric Jameson helps to explain its usefulness. An "articulation is...a punctual and sometimes even ephemeral totalization" ("On Cultural" 32). Jameson's point, as I apply it to the questions at issue, is that even though totalizations are, in a sense, foundational (and hence theoretically naïve), still, one must name a problem, describe it, and theorize it somehow in order to address it. You avoid the trap of totalizing by understanding that the discourses you bring together are a punctual and ephemeral totality—coming together for only a moment. For example, although you realize that "solving" a problem for "race" in a particular instance might create another problem in terms of class or gender, you nonetheless privilege race "for a punctual and ephemeral moment," not for all time.

Dick's accounts of the commercialization of the university, the professions and print culture help him—and us—to construct an articulation of a problem in all its particularity. For me, the day-to-day problems of administering first year writing or serving as a department officer give a local habitation to the abstractions of marxian thought. At the same time, theoretical accounts of the commodity form, hegemony, and structural causality give a name to inchoate feelings I've experienced as an administrator at three institutions.

I illustrate with three narratives about problems I encountered at a place I'll call Rust Belt University. Each of these incidents occurred more than fifteen years ago, and I've been brooding about them ever since. That brooding comes because of course (as Fish would point out) there was no one set of unambiguous principles to appeal to. Yet a decision had to be made. Over the years, reading Dick's work, thinking, and administering other programs, I've learned to understand them better by contentualizing them in "Marxist ideas."

1. Corporal Mike and President George H. W. Bush

When the United States bombed Baghdad for the first time, in January of 1991, a Marine corporal named Mike, who taught composition part-time at Rust Belt, was immediately called back to active duty. The semester was only a week old, and as Director of First Year Writing, I felt that I had no choice but to find someone else to teach his classes. His departure left his partner, like him a doctoral candidate, unable to pay the rent on their apartment. Unlike the young men of my generation and Dick's, Mike was not drafted—or, more precisely, Mike wasn't required to become a Marine by the Department of Defense. It was more like Mr. Bush's Department of the Treasury, or Interior, or Labor, or all of the above. Like many young men and women in the current Iraq conflict, Mike answered to an economic draft. His salary as a Marine reservist helped him to work on his PhD at a nearby university as part of his effort to belong to the professional managerial class, to become a professor, like me. I don't think that he particularly wanted to engage in armed conflict. He needed the money. And his country needed the oil.

A day or two after Mike was deployed, the Rust Belt administration announced to the local media that it would continue to pay the salaries of its reservist employees who had been called up. Amazingly, the university did not stipulate that this policy applied only to full-time employees. Gearing up for a full-scale administrative battle, I called the Vice President for Financial Affairs. Amazingly, anticlimactically, he said to go ahead and pay Mike. It felt wonderful to talk to his life partner on the phone, and tell her that she wouldn't have to give up their apartment and drop out of school to work as a waitress.

Administrative power! WOW! My self-satisfaction lasted for only a (punctual and ephemeral) moment. I opposed the first Bush administration's bombing raids. By enthusiastically loosening up the money to make Mike a happy corporal (and therefore a better warrior) I had made it incrementally easier for the United States of America to wage war. I thought of myself as a pacifist. Indeed, my absolutist pacifism during Vietnam had occasioned a lengthy estrangement between me and my father, who had commanded one of the first companies ashore at Normandy on June 6, 1944.

The Marines sent Mike to Norway, where he lost two toes to frost bite. He returned to Rust Belt U the following year, continued to

work on his doctorate, but he never did find a tenure track job in the academy.

How might one theorize, or frame, this incident? Did I have a class-conscious realization that I had more interests in common with Mike and his partner in their struggle to make ends meet than I did with an abstract pacifism? You could, Fish would say, call it a lot of things. "Class consciousness," as a framing, was useful. And that usefulness was, for me, beginning to be consequential.

2. Darryl and Toby, the Coach and the Dean

Rust Belt University's president badly wanted the football team to attract alumni dollars. He decided that TV coverage of the football games might help. He invited the cheerleaders of an NFL team to entertain at halftime in the Rust Bowl. He also hired a coach recently let go by a major football power. The new coach embarked on an energetic recruitment program.

One of his greatest recruiting successes was a punter we'll call Darryl. Throughout the season, the Rusties would reliably get into 3rd down and 35 situations, and Darryl would reliably kick the ball away. But Darryl's fall grades were so low as to render him ineligible for the next year, or even to practice in the summer—unless of course he could raise them during the spring term. Darryl took English Composition with an adjunct we'll call Toby, a really conscientious teacher who spent a great deal of time with his students, who thought carefully about every aspect of his life in the academy, and who had a generous revision policy. Unfortunately, at least in part as a consequence of his openness about his sexual orientation, Toby was often scorned by the more homophobic of his working class students. At term's end, Toby posted a grade of C+ for Darryl. Darryl's math teacher turned in an F and his American history teacher recorded a D+.

After spring grades had been filed, Toby received a phone call from the athletic department, asking whether the punter could rewrite some of his papers, or do extra work over the summer, to get his English grade up to the B he needed to stay eligible. (The other professors—*men of principle*—had already said no.) Toby and I tried out several articulations of the problem in all its particularity. I asked him whether he thought it possible to establish standards in a writing course, standards that could reliably and significantly measure, over two hundred seven sections and one hundred twenty-seven teachers, the difference between a C+ and a B-. He said he couldn't. Neither could I. We tried billiard ball causality, positing for a punctual and ephemeral moment the notion that this situation could somehow have been ameliorated, or even prevented *if only we had*.... If only what? We found it impossible to think of a way to get the situation back to the way it should be. We realized that we didn't know how things should be.

Next we wondered to whom or what we owed loyalty. Although Dick's essay "Historical Reflections on Accountability" (*Politics of Knowledge* 136-49) had not yet appeared, we certainly knew at some level that "[a]ccountability entails being able to show that the

efforts of an instructor or department or institution actually did move toward [some]... desired end (*Politics of Knowledge* 137-8). But to whom exactly were we accountable? And to what? The rules and regulations of an international athletic organization that countenances the recruitment of young men and women like Darryl, who go to junior colleges for as long as it takes to achieve the test scores that allow them finally to begin to play college athletics at the age of 21 or 22? (That principled organization, by the way, would have taken a very dim view of the coach's call.) Are we accountable to positivistic grading system that purports to be able to discriminate validly and reliably between a B- and a C+? Or to a tax-supported university that flies NFL cheerleaders in on a university plane and hires a football coach at five times an assistant professor's salary on the understanding that he will get them to a bowl game? Should we seek the esteem of alumni whose donations help lads like Darryl get around in sports utility vehicles and provide them with "company"? What about the taxpayers who were entertained by athletes who were prohibited from earning any capital for their labor, labor that might leave them permanently unable to earn a living doing the only thing they know how to do? The legislators who urge faculty to do more with less while coaches do less with more? The homophobes in Toby's class? The corporations that hire people on the basis of their grades in college? Truth?

Finally, Toby and I arrived at this articulation of the problem in all its particularity: Should Darryl be permitted to continue to entertain taxpayers of Rustsylvania (at their expense) while we tried to teach him something?

We decided he should, and uneasily sent a grade change form forward to the dean. The dean did not endorse the change. Darryl's grade remained a C+ and he was dropped from the university. The following fall, though, his name appeared on the football roster. No one knew—at least no one would tell—who exactly arranged for him to be readmitted. Although he punted for Rust Belt until his eligibility was over, Darryl never graduated. He played for the pros briefly until he was dropped.

So what happened here, and why? The "solution" that Toby and I finally articulated was local and contingent (just as Fish asserts). We thought that if Darryl stayed in school, even for only one more semester, he had a better chance of "making it" as a professional athlete, a wage earner in some other occupation, or even as a human being. But we also knew that many people would not agree that staying in a school like Rust Belt was necessarily a good thing. And we soon became aware that Darryl's staying in school, at the end of the day, had nothing to do with our administrative decision.

Power has limits. And those limits are set by capital. I now see this incident as an instance of what Dick has called contradictions that have their source in history. I can't say that having read Dick Ohmann's work had the *necessary* consequence of making me decide to address it in a particular way. But I can say that the way in which I now articulate and understand this incident is a consequence of the way I see it in a context of Marxist ideas.

3. Michelle and the Adjunct Instructor

One day, a class of irate students came to my office to complain that their instructor (a member of Rust Belt's "contingent" working force, an African American woman whose spouse happened to be a dean in Rust Belt's law School) had missed several classes and often seemed unprepared and forgetful about assignments. But by far the biggest problem, so far as the students were concerned, was that the teacher had not returned their papers. They had no grades.

I was teaching in another building when the delegation arrived and so a secretary ushered the students into the department conference room to wait. By the time I appeared, they had made a documented list of grievances. They had discussed various arrangements of the items on their list. They had evidently given some thought to the kind of appeal they would deploy. And they had tried to acquire some information about their audience. Their spokesperson, Michelle, succinctly formulated a proposal for the redress of her individual grievance: "I want my money back and I want credit for the course."

Michelle's teacher, it turned out, was really quite ill. The university continued to pay the teacher until the end of the term but it was my job to "relieve her of her duties." My department chair and I took turns teaching the class for the rest of the term. One of my most painful memories of my time at Rust Belt was my trip across campus to retrieve the ungraded papers from the unsmiling Dean of the Law School. Michelle did not get her money back, but she did get credit for the course or, as she might put it, a "B."

It's not enough to see this episode merely as a conflict between the allegiances of the working and the professional managerial classes. Nor was it simply an instance of what Bill Readings called the "University in Ruins." The "traditional subjects" of education (according to Readings) learned in college how to form a part of the "culture" of their nation state. Now, however, in the place formerly occupied by the Subject of Unlimited Universal Reason (*if he ever existed*), we have Michelle, who lives in a world where the commodity market has become co-extensive with the globe.

At the time, I certainly realized that I could not position myself outside capital. But I didn't yet see myself as a wage worker. I did, at some level, still think like a member of the PMC, valuing myself for my professionalization. I thought of our "solution" as unsatisfactory—a stopgap measure, one that could not be allowed to become policy. In future, I would need to be more careful (as Wal-Mart is) to avoid hiring sick people.

It took the thoroughgoing analysis of *Politics of Knowledge* to make me see that in Michelle's discourse the opposition between thought and commerce is simply cancelled out in a seamless system of commodification. She had, in good faith, attempted to purchase credits; she understood that those credits would be represented as a grade in English Composition. She had not received the promised commodity, and was therefore entitled to have her money back. Moreover, Michelle knew that other providers offer

“double” or even “triple” your money back if you find their products unsatisfactory—and they let you keep the product. She therefore wanted some kind of punitive damages—not only a refund, but credit for the course.

To describe the commodity that Michelle expected, it will be useful to return to Marx. Michelle might agree with him that an introductory writing course, as a commodity, is an object outside us, but she would, I suspect have trouble with his notion that as a form, it satisfies human needs. Michelle would almost certainly feel no *need* for freshman English, but Marx attends to that problem in the *Grundrisse*, where he explains that a “capitalist searches for means to spur consumers on to consumption, to give his wares new charms, to inspire them with new needs by constant chatter” (287). (There is, in my view, no finer, more thorough account of that chatter than *Politics of Knowledge*.)

In the terms of more recent studies of the commodity, it might be said that Michelle’s need is to fulfill her desires. That is, it’s hardly possible any more to discriminate a need from a (mere) desire, a use value from an exchange value. Even though many traditional humanists, (including, perhaps, Stanley Fish) still understand education as an *activity* that produces Michelle as a rational subject, she thinks of the credit, and credit’s simulacrum, the grade, as a representation of time “spent” in a university, time expended, not only in classrooms, but commuting to school on the freeway, driving around in search of a parking space, and driving home again, time that might otherwise be spent earning money, surfing the net, perfecting a beauty regime, shopping. For Michelle, then, a degree is an expensive commodity—not only in terms of cash expended but also in opportunity cost.

“By its transformation into a commodity,” according to Fredric Jameson, “a thing of whatever type has been transformed into a means for its own consumption...the various forms of human activity lose their immanent intrinsic satisfactions and become means to an end” (*Signatures* 11). To articulate the ways in which Michelle transforms first year writing into a means for its own consumption, we might say simply that Michelle severs the end, having credit, from the means, learning how to write “better” and certainly from discussions about what writing “better” might mean. More precisely, Michelle’s consciousness skips over—ignores—processes of learning and goes straight to the “end”—her telos, the credit, or credit’s simulacrum, the grade. But for Michelle, the “end,” having credit for English composition, is neither final, nor particularly valuable. When she gets credit for English composition, she’ll go on to get more credit, until she has enough to trade for (and thereby consume as) a degree, which is in turn traded for a job, where her labor is traded for cash, which is then traded for a car and a condo. In Michelle’s scheme of things, the “credit” is a means to an endlessly deferred end.

Michelle’s commodification of her first year writing course is hardly surprising in this context. But an even more compelling reason to think of the course as a commodity is that Rust Belt

University forced her to do so by requiring her to take it. I'd suggest that students like Michelle tend to perceive first year writing as analogous with car insurance, an expensive commodity that you're required to buy, a commodity whose use value is (often indefinitely) deferred and whose exchange value is undecidable, or at least unpredictable. It's not that you can do anything in particular when you have the course, it's just that you have to have it. It's not that a degree will guarantee a job, it's rather that you can't even apply for a job unless you have a degree. So students like Michelle try to make sure that an insurance agent—or a university—doesn't sell them a top of the line "comprehensive" when all they need is "liability." The university had first constructed a "need" that she did not desire to fulfill. Then it delivered a product that was unsatisfactory even in its own terms.

To address the problem in all its particularity, one could make sure that TAs in first year writing courses understand that "students like Michelle" have a tendency to commodify. One could become an abolitionist: the argument would be that writing courses should all be elective because "students like Michelle" can't value a commodity that they are forced to consume. One could try to avoid dealing with "students like Michelle."

Finally, though, what Richard Ohmann's work as an administrator and a thinker has taught me is that "the problem in all its particularity" is most clearly visible as an instance of Big History in which pretty much everybody is "like Michelle." What to do? At the MLA rebellion in New York, on the steps of the Department of Justice in Washington, on a commencement platform in Massachusetts, on fund raising trips to Atlanta, chopping wood at his farm, Richard Ohmann shows us. Philosophers (and theorists) have merely sought to describe the world. The point is to change it, one lower middle professional managerial class administrator at a time, one articulation after another.

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