

Appreciation

Reflections on Dick Ohmann as MLA Activist

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Dick Ohmann and I have been comrades-in-arms in the Radical Caucus of the Modern Language Association (MLA) for about twenty years now. Perhaps it bears mention, though, that we first met through common literary interests. I was working on my first book, a Marxist study of the documentary novel, and I came across some of Dick's early work on speech-act theory and definitions of literariness. This work proved enormously useful to me as I was attempting to work out some kind of materialist understanding of fictionality. Unlike so much of the theory I was reading, his writing was clear, cogent, and—even on these topics—laced with wit. And he insisted that the situations and institutions defining literariness and literature were historical, social and above all—gasp—political. I was trying to train myself as a literary Marxist, having received scant help in this arena in my neo-Aristotelian graduate training at the University of Chicago. This Richard Ohmann seemed to be able to conjoin sophisticated theory with a down-to-earth appreciation of the practice of writing and reading.

I wrote to Dick with some questions, and he graciously wrote back; I especially recall reading with delight his description of himself “giving Bronx cheers” as a resisting reader. I had to get to know this man! We met for lunch in Hyde Park (Chicago, not London) in the early 1980s. I hadn't even read *English in America*, but I instantly became an admirer. While he talked brilliantly about speech-act theory, he also told me a bit about his participation in the antiwar movement, which included the burning of draft cards the day before the historic 1967 March on the Pentagon. (I subsequently realized this scene is described by Norman Mailer in *The Armies of the Night*.) It struck me that Dick Ohmann had come about his Marxism the honest way. I've been a big fan ever since—and over

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the years a friend, too. It is impossible to get to know Dick and not like him—really like him.

The ability to join theory with practice has always been, for me, the essence of Dick's contribution to—and leadership in—our work in the MLA Radical Caucus. For years after I met Dick, though, I was not aware of the role he had played—along with Louis Kampf, Florence Howe, Ellen Cantarow, Bruce Franklin, Lillian Robinson, Paul Lauter, Elaine Reuben, Martha Vicinus, Frank Battaglia and others—in turning the MLA inside out in the years 1968-72. He is not one to blow his own horn. Although Dick was not prominent in some of the more dramatic events of 1968—Louis's arrest, along with two graduate students, for trying to prevent antiwar posters from being ripped down; Bruce's turning the MLA hotel lobby into the site for a massive teach-in on the Vietnam War—Dick's role was equally crucial. Highly esteemed in the academy for his theoretical work on style and for his editorship of *College English*, Dick was also cagey about the mysteries of MLA procedures. He was, according to the testimony of his former co-conspirators, "point person" in the general meeting of the MLA membership, engineering the nomination of Louis Kampf for Second Vice President in 1968. (The Executive Secretary despairingly put his head in his hands when he saw that Dick was using his insider's knowledge of the rules to effect this rupture of the chains of tradition.) An enduring image from the 1969 convention, his friends report, is the mimeograph machine in the hotel suite he and other RC activists shared; it took up most of the space and created no small amount of mess to be cleaned up on the last day. An enduring image from the 1970 convention is Dick's intervention as mediator in explosive debates among literary radicals over what it meant to be a Marxist critic, after more than 500 people packed the Imperial Ballroom for a session sponsored by the Radical Caucus on behalf of the embryonic Marxist Literary Group.

My own association with the Radical Caucus began in the mid-1980s, when Dick and I were both members of the Delegate Assembly and worked together on resolutions opposing U.S. participation in various dirty wars in Central America. My memory of the particulars is a bit hazy, but I recall being impressed by his insistence on using the term "imperialism" in such a way as to demonstrate its necessity; he was allergic to jargon but equally alert to the pitfalls of mushy liberal thinking. I also recall his ability—it struck me as so healthy—to channel political anger, and sometimes frustration, into humor. ("Another reason to hate the very rich" is a phrase that I heard him utter back then; I have appropriated it and put it to much use, both therapeutic and educative, ever since.) In the mid-1980s, the Radical Caucus had a reduced activist presence in the MLA, and for a while it was sustained through *Radical Teacher* meetings in Middletown, CT. By the late 1980s, though—largely through the injection of energy by the wonderful Constance Coiner, who died so tragically in Flight 800—the Caucus underwent something of a rebirth. Dick and Paul—along with Susan O'Malley, who had joined later in the 1970s—carried forward the banner from earlier days, and new

people became active in the steering committee, which by the mid-1990s began to meet in New York City.

Since its inception the Radical Caucus has sponsored sessions at the MLA Convention addressing left-wing and working-class literature; race, gender and sexuality; and the politics of the academy: the canon was being busted by the Radical Caucus long before revisionary literary history became the vogue. Over the past decade the Radical Caucus has been active in the Delegate Assembly around all the key issues: academic labor, the defunding of higher education, the impact of welfare "reform," resurgent racist ideology, campus connections with sweatshop and prison labor, and, most recently, the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the militarization of society, and the neo-McCarthyism embodied in the so-called "Academic Bill of Rights." We have had to deal with the stonewalling of an MLA leadership that went into retreat during the culture wars of the late 1980s and never reemerged to reconnoiter the terrain. But my topic here is not the Radical Caucus overall, but rather Dick's role in it.

A few qualities stand out in the comradeship and leadership Dick has consistently brought to our work in the MLA. (I can't speak here about the qualities he has brought to his success at the poker table, though I suspect they are not entirely remote from the strengths we have come to appreciate.) One is his acuity. Dick thinks long and hard about the politics of the academy in relation to the political economy of capitalism; his grasp of the particular in relation to the general is firm—indeed, just about unerring. His contributions to Radical Caucus sessions, as both speaker and chair, have been invaluable. Another feature is Dick's ability to work for common goals with people of varying political perspectives: he is ecumenical without sacrificing an ounce of principle.

Also a noteworthy quality is Dick's complete lack of arrogance; Dick is willing to do as much grunt-work as anyone, and in fact more than many, continually acting on his own conviction that one should not make a proposal for action without being willing to work on its implementation. He has reliably drafted many of our resolutions and motions and public statements, patiently incorporating the range of emailed-in gripes and criticisms and turning out witty, terse and elegant prose. (Since the MLA has in recent years been requiring resolutions to total no more than 100 words, including both "Whereases" and "Resolveds," this talent is of no minor importance.) Dick also recognizes the importance of mentoring and encouraging younger radical scholars. Our valued Michael Bennett was deeply alienated as a graduate student, and considering abandoning the profession, when he was urged by Dick—and Paul—to become active in the Radical Caucus and set up a session addressing the relationship of left politics to pedagogy. Mike realized that there could be a "home" (his word) for him in the academy after all, and has since then taken the lead in all our initiatives relating to the superexploitation of academic labor.

Finally, Dick's fellow Radical Caucus members value Dick's plain old lucidity and courage, which are as apparent nowadays as they

were when our organization was first doing its bit to move and shake the terrain of professional study of the humanities. When Richard Ohmann stands up to speak—whether at a Radical Caucus-sponsored forum or at a Delegate Assembly meeting in one of those cavernous hotel ballrooms—he compels attention and often applause. His makes his co-conspirators proud.