

“The Project”

I often hear graduate students, always smart, usually male, come in and tell me about “the project,” a complex intertwining of basically predetermined conclusions at a number of levels. “The project” has some sort of Frankenstein quality to it; it has its own needs, its own demands. And usually somehow these demands curiously interfere with what graduate study should accomplish—learning new things and becoming a better researcher and scholar. If someone points to a fundamental problem in the way in which the ideas have been formulated, a research plan designed, and so on, we get back “But ‘the project’ is....” When they say what they are going to do, they say that “the project asks,” “the project examines” as if they were unable to do anything other than what the project tells them. And so if we see that there is a problem, there is nothing that can be done about it. This is always a very, very bad sign. I know of only one person who salvaged (or seems to have salvaged) this kind of approach and it took him perhaps 16 years in graduate school to extricate himself from the cruel and stupid demands of the project.

If you fall into this category you can jump off this car before it heads over the cliff. But do not wait too long, for the longer it goes on, the less real work you have accomplished, and so as a dissonance reduction strategy, you will increase your estimation of the value of the “project,” making it harder to walk away from (should this prove necessary). As a result of this dynamic, we generally see an inverse correlation in these matters between the actual value of “the project” and the subjective estimate of its value on the part of the slave.

How can you free yourself from “the project”? You must say to yourself, “There is no project. There is only me. I am a human being. I am capable of growth. It is good to grow. I can change at any time. Life is long. Attachment to sunk costs is irrational. I take responsibility for my own actions.” I AM FREE! IF THE PROJECT MUST DIE SO THAT I MAY LIVE, SO BE IT!