

The Unbearable Immaturity of Academia

Before I became a sociologist, I didn't really understand either organizations or social psychology, and so I did things that, at the time, I thought of as heroic or at least obviously justified—things that now, when I remember, I wince at. Not because they were stupid (they were) but because people who knew better were obviously humoring me. They were willing to humor me to preserve my ego, rather than hold up the mirror that I needed, because they probably figured I might do even more damage.

That's not so bad—a pretty common story. The truly horrible part is: I'm talking about things that stretch into my mid-30s. That's a time of age when, outside of academia, most people are full fledged adults. Oh sure, they might not have attained true practical wisdom, but they aren't being humored as part of their daily routine. If it were just me, that would be funny, but it wasn't. I want to tell you first *what* I am talking about. I'm not sure about the *why*. I'll give two key examples.

The first is the unionization campaign that the graduate students at Berkeley tried (we lost). This was, overall, not a crazy idea. At the time, graduate students did not have guaranteed funding: they needed to work, and the University *needed them* to run. And we were in school for a long time (I was there 10 years). Our analysis was that universities were going to increasingly offload undergraduate teaching onto graduate students, and that for most of our careers (“we” being those in the humanities and social sciences) we would be workers first, students second. That analysis was wrong, but not crazy—we didn't know about the Mellon foundation's soon-to-be intervention that would reshape graduate education from the ground up.

Further, I was to find confirmation that there were universities for which unionization of graduate students made a huge amount of sense. When I was Associate Chair at Madison, one of my jobs was dealing with the graduate student TAs. They worked *a lot*, and they also didn't have guaranteed funding. Being able to work with a union that regularized expectations, and could intervene and help separate working-*for*-professor-X from working-*with*-professor-X was great.

So it's possible that we were basically on the right track. But when the University didn't recognize us, we went on strike. Why? We had a lot of reasons, but we discounted the most important one: we liked marching around yelling about other people being unfair. We had some problems, but we weren't sure what they were,¹ and we certainly couldn't solve them—so we did something else. The basic idea of a strike was objectively wrong. I was fortunate enough to have in my grad cohort someone who had left school for twenty years to actually organize labor at the Pipefitters Union (he worked in shipyards in the Bay Area). “We are workers too!” we cried, singing our union songs. He was with us on the picket lines, but he patiently explained that there were differences—and striking meant different things in different kinds of work regimes. We didn't want to hear it.

¹. Most of our problems were the uncertainty of our futures, and they had to do with our concerns as *students*, not workers. There was an available template for collective action in those terms, the student occupation, but that seems very collegiate.... I don't think we ever considered that, thank the Lord.

Why? I think the best understanding is found in Harel Shapira's *Waiting for José*. He finds that the volunteer border-patrolling Minutemen are there—sure, they believe this, and they care about that—but they are there to do defensive soldiering. That's what makes sense to them, it's the best way of being they've known in their lives (they're ex-soldiers) and it feels good. The *practices* of picketing were what pulled us in. It's what we'd wanted to do all our lives.

And while there might have been a few faculty here and there who actually supported the strike, I'm now sure that the vast majority just rolled their eyes, sighed, and hunkered down for it to be over (though many I'm sure supported the union more generally). You could be in an organizations class, with someone who was an expert on organizations, and had been at Berkeley for a long time and knew something about both labor and the University, and I doubt she'd waste her breath pointing out the situation that the union was in.

Okay, that's example one. Example two is when I was an assistant professor. I had finally gotten a job, after years (not too many, but still...) of watching the world heap honors upon the wicked and cast the righteous into the dungheap. I was therefore all charged up to start righting things (finally!). I was unable to tell the difference between (a) the faculty governance we were expected to do as members of an organization and (b) what I thought needed to be changed in the field as a whole—and sometimes, to be honest, I thought that I was part of a tribunal of good angels who were there to even the scales: those who had had been mistreated should be lifted up, and those who had enjoyed an unfortunate amount of good luck should be punished for this. So no sooner had I touched down than there I was, being sure that the people who knew more about the organization than I did were wrong.

And it wasn't just me—at least once, when it became clear that the seniors had a different idea from the juniors, we would huddle together and feed a fantasy fire of grievance. What the grievance was, I honestly cannot even remember. But we never just walked across the hall to *ask* someone what was going on. We preferred to make up a story in which we were, just like when we had been on that picket line, beleaguered heroes. What we didn't ever consider was that we were responsible for an organization—an organization that, just as with graduate school, many of were really passing through—and that there were people who would have to live with our decisions. We couldn't actually accomplish the righting-of-all-wrongs we wanted, but we *could* screw up a branch of an organization that was working under hard constraints. That we didn't really know what we were doing, that doesn't surprise me or really bother me. It's the incredible immaturity of our way of dealing with the situation—it wasn't what you'd expect of actual adults who claimed to be social scientists.

So why? I'm not sure. I think some of it is what everyone says—that academics don't need, or *assume* they don't need, anyone but themselves to get their work done. So they don't see the relation between the organization they're in, the paycheck they get, and their own decisions. And I think some of it is being more oriented to the field as a whole than to the organization. (That's why we're entrusted with hiring—because the assumption is that we're oriented to the field and so we'll be in a better position to do what the organization wants, namely, pick the people who are respected *outside*.)

But there's at least one additional simple factor: at least I personally had had plenty of experiences with the *practices* of opposing people who ran the school I was in. I knew how to

drive a principal crazy, without actually getting suspended. I knew how to make alliances with other dissidents to expose the wrongdoing of a college administration. But I'd never been responsible for an organization. And I bet I wasn't alone. The kinds of kids who did students government—they went into politics or business or whatever. That wasn't us. So the practices of opposition were a lot closer in a space of possibilities than the practices of organizational work. And this tendency not to think about organizational decisions in terms of responsibility is really part and parcels of the contemporary atmosphere of higher education.

I'm sure I'm not the first middle aged person to notice that contemporary student politics often involves the students thinking that they have the right to *morally correct* their elders on the basis of them being right (since <fill in the year here> is the Hegelian end of history, in which finally there is an understanding of...everything—and that's whatever they happen to believe). The thing that strikes me isn't that they think they're right; lots of people do. And it's not that they are idealistic and have strong ideas; if young people *stopped* being this way, we'd be in serious trouble (especially because, with mechanization, we no longer need their zeal and enthusiasm to *fight* wars, and we might still need it to *stop* wars). It's that these are people that, however nice they might be, in many cases have never really done anything for anyone else besides themselves in their lives. Not because they're privileged, just that most westerners don't do that sort of thing while they're growing up. No problem with that—it's great if they can just do that growing stuff. But the idea that the sorts of things that you *have* to do when you're responsible for others—like compromising and cooperating, or waiting, or listening—that those sorts of things expose you to critique, as opposed to giving you a position of wisdom that should be of interest to others...well, that climate, I think, reinforces the general, and unbearable, immaturity of academia, even for those well past their undergraduate years.