My topic in this essay is not literacy itself, but certain political approaches to literacy: no one can achieve full literacy any longer, so no one can know in the fullest sense, from experience, what such literacy might be. My remarks are occasioned, broadly speaking, by endless allegations that we are in the midst of some unprecedented crisis in literacy. A typical sampling of alarum and indictment is provided by Ira Shor in his fine vivisection, Culture Wars: School and Society in the Conservative Restoration, 1969-1984:

Nationwide, the statistics on literacy grow more appalling each year. . . . Willy-nilly, the U.S. educational system is spawning a generation of semi-literates. (Newsweek [1975])

More and more high school graduates show up . . . with barely a speaking acquaintance with the English language and no writing facility at all. (College Board report [1977])

Anyone who teaches English today knows that most students can't write. Their writing skills have been in a steady, downward spiral since the mid-sixties. (Donna Woolfolk Cross [1979])

For the half-decade starting with the late 1960s, long-established academic standards were abolished wholesale in a spasm reminiscent of the Red Guards' destructive rampage through China's classical cultural institutions. (Burton Yale Pines [1982]). (59)

My first contention will be that there is no such crisis, that both the crisis and the means to resolve it have been manufactured in order to serve purposes of which teachers should not be servants.

As I have implied, literacy and illiteracy develop together, defining each other. Thus in a literate society the motives and materials for fabricating a crisis in literacy are always at hand. First, adults must teach children to read and write, even if the adults become ghosts in electronic teaching machines. Second, relations between old and young are not always amicable, particularly when the

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parties to an inanity differ in race, class, creed, or gender. Failure to teach and failure to learn then become weapons in a complex cultural struggle. It is always possible for teachers to mock work by less willing or less able students to prove how reading and writing in this generation have sunk so low that they are pulling down the very nation.

Thus discussion of this topic is not timely—it is timeless; for although Newspeak certified our crisis a mere decade ago (see Sheils), no fewer than five consecutive generations have been condemned for writing worse than their predecessors. By now our students should hardly put word processor to paper; it's a wonder they can write at all.

As one of the Sputnik generation, I recall complaints about our ineptitude, our "inability to express [our] selves, either orally or in writing," our "grave weakness" in "analysis and organization"—indeed, "in the basic principles of human thought." I am conflating various authorities from the business community and professoriat of the golden fifties. Harvey Daniels has bundled their gripes nicely in a valuable critique, Famous Last Words: The American Language Crisis Reconsidered. Daniels' experts make it clear that years before Black Power corrupted campuses and Vietnam Syndrome infected our general population, students were already regressing toward the premammalian (32).

Unfortunately things were not much better back in the really good old days, before the arrival, even, of all those lesser Europeans. Thus, George Eliot, president of Harvard no less, was moved to regret in 1871 that "Bad spelling, incorrectness as well as inelegance of expression in writing, ignorance of the simplest rules of punctuation, and almost entire want of familiarity with English literature, are far from rare among young men of eighteen otherwise well prepared for college" (qtd. in Daniels 51). (Young ladies, of course, were not prepared at all.)

One could multiply citations, but they rapidly iterate to tedium. I will only point out that student English had fallen into serious disrepair long before its shattering voyage into the New World. Thus, George Puttenham worried in 1586 about various "vices and deformities," such as affecting "new words and phrases" other than "custome hath allowed," which was, he declared, a "common fault of young scholers not halfe well studied" (qtd. in Daniels 38).

To conclude: literacy has been declining since it was invented; one of the first ancient Sumerian tablets deciphered by modern scholars immortalized a teacher fretting over the recent drop in students' writing (Daniels 33). There will always be a literacy crisis, if for no other reason than because the old never wholly like the young.

In the United States, perennial fear of linguistic doom has been aggravated periodically by foreign threats and fresh generations including too many upstarts or outlanders. Current anxiety signals the arrival of Afro-Americans on campus, Toyotas on our highways, and Russian missiles off Bar Harbor. To get so many miscreants back in their places poses a difficult problem. In order to solve it, numerous right-wing commissions, especially the U.S. National Commission on Excellence in Education, have declared the nation at risk, the schools inexcogent, and illiterates and literates alike endangered species. (See their report in
Nation at Risk). Under motley banners like “back to basics,” “functional literacy,” and “computer education,” reactionary jingoists are mobilizing schools for their own political ends.

According to their conglomerated thinking, inevitable technical changes have undercut the overwhelming advantage in trade which America enjoyed after World War II. Basic industrial might has become depressing weakness. To restore health and good spirits to “our” economy, manufacturing plants must rust, so profit can rise with high technology. Workers must fulfill capital’s abiding dream of undifferentiated, abstract labor power by moving from job to job (and home to home) as readily as businessmen ship investments overseas. Wages must fall as cheaper services replace productive work, so higher salaries can be paid to the new computer geeks, rocket wizards, and apologists for it all whom school reform will produce.

It becomes us teachers, then, to remain aware of politics as we wrestle with our students’ problems in reading and writing, which are real enough and always will be. Let us not naively undertake regressive educational reforms. It would be disgraceful to allow careerist concerns or apolitical professionalism to align us with forces that foster ignorance and suffering.

Three times in my professional life I have seen the English profession seize a topical subject and run with it. For years, academic machinery spewed out speeches, papers, project proposals, books, and dissertations while sucking in grants, doctorates, trips, raises, and promotions. Twice, after the machine ran down, things were little better, possibly worse, than before.

First, dialectologists and creolists battled over black English. They did not know what it was or where it came from, but they knew what to do about it. Their numbing drills in bidualicism meshed nicely with liberal programs that helped fragment the black community, isolating its leadership from the underclass, which was plunged into deeper misery in the name of upward social mobility. Not everyone in the ghetto could or would talk like Whitey, since so many rarely talked with him or didn’t like what they heard; and those most able and willing to learn were often most eager to leave, with consequences, some for their own self-esteem, yet uncalculated.

When tinkering with the talk of black children ceased to be profitable, students of composition began fussing over everybody’s writing. Their researches had similar virtues: even the best left teaching in most classes untouched; it did nothing to disturb the larger class structure or political order, but it did fill individual resumés and professional journals.

Now compositionists are challenged by students of literacy claiming concern for reading as well as writing. Research on literacy is being done in “anthropology, linguistics, psychology and psychiatry, history, philosophy, literary theory, social and cultural history, and sociology,” as well as English (Robinson 18). It is these voluminous investigations that are creating a new illiteracy—illiteracy about literacy, illiteracy to a second power, meta-illiteracy! Dissertations are forthcoming.

But I have yet to prove my original contention, that the literacy crisis is a hoax. That such crises have been announced throughout recorded history does
cast doubt on present claims, but clearly thorough reading of evidence is in order. Typically, that has proven to be beyond current advocates of illiteracy. Their style of argumentation has been to select and distort according to their thesis. Their evidence is often anecdotal; some display racial and social biases which gentlemen and gentleladies ought better to conceal. After tall tales and deep prejudice come SAT scores.

From 1963 to 1981, the average combined score dropped ninety points. (See Schrag; Judy 25-33; Daniels 117-45; Shor 60-77, 109, 143-45). Yet while SAT scores for college-bound seniors were declining amidst mounting hysteria, achievement scores in the lower grades were rising without fanfare. Recently even SATs have turned upward.

Of course, Reagan’s cohorts claim their reforms raised the scores. The tide of mediocrity has been turned, they say, and a tide of excellence is sweeping in. According to Trends in Educational Achievement, a recent review of test scores by the Congressional Budget Office—unfortunately for the Reagans and Gonerils—the turnaround did not come in 1984, but in 1968. It moved into higher grades one grade per year, reaching high school in the 1970s, when peanuts were king.

While the reigns of Carter and Reagan were intended to reverse the evils of the sixties, it does not appear that hippies can be blamed much for declining academic performance, or that we had to get back to basics to reverse the trend. Perhaps the Movement encouraged high schools to weaken requirements in order to serve less advanced students, often victims of institutional racism or the class structure. Perhaps it also inspired more students to take the SAT and go to college. Certainly scores fell largely because rising numbers were being tested.

The Movement did not contribute to the decline in the grade schools, which had hit bottom by 1968. “The great slide began with the baby boom children born in the late 1940s and ended about fifteen years later, when the birth rate started to decline” (Schrag 314). Academic performance does correlate with family size and shape. Of course, SAT scores also correlate, perfectly, with a related factor, family income (Daniels 125). Perhaps Reagan’s redistribution of wealth to the affluent will raise SATs dramatically some years hence, especially if fewer of those who had income confiscated are then taking the tests.

So far high schoolers have not improved as much as grammar school kids; thinking has not improved as much as phonics and subtraction. Nor is it likely to, as we go back to basics. Retreat to the trivial, to rote learning and drill, will only retard intellectual development.

If back to basics is a scheme to keep the great unwashed away from soap, functional literacy is another dirty trick. A trendy idea, it has all the flaws of the therapeutic goal of adjustment. Well-adjusted citizens are vulnerable to state propaganda, anxious to be consumed in the corporate economy, divorced from their own deepest thoughts and emotions, indifferent to the fate of their fellows, and of God’s creation. They laugh at bumper stickers like “‘Nuke the Whales’” and tell jokes like “‘Know what GAY means?—Got AIDS yet?’” They are functionally literate.
What we need is a dysfunctional literacy, for literacy itself guarantees nothing. It is useful to remember that paradox as all around us loud voices proclaim literacy the solution to all problems from unemployment to national security.

If it is deluded to treat literacy as a panacea, it may be deceptive to discuss it at all, for there is no thing, literacy, only constellations of forms and degrees of literacy, shifting and turning as history rearranges the social formations in which they are embedded. Pieties about Literacy with a capital L ought to be scrutinized: Which literacy? Whose literacy? Literacy for what? How? Authors of the present crisis, those who have done most to produce it, insofar as it is genuine, and most to pronounce it, insofar as it is fraudulent, hope to shape a structure of literacies to serve their purposes—principally, higher corporate profits and, to insure them, more power to the Pentagon.

I will not hazard the scholasticism of my own taxonomy of literacies. However, any literacy does presuppose people with certain knowledge, passions, and skill. A scholar and an attorney, for example, have mastered specialized writing and reading; an enthusiastic working-class reader of *Guns & Ammo*, say, probably only reads in his field. Even if his writing were high caliber, he might not be able to get it read. Reaching an audience requires not skills, but technology, means of literary production and distribution. Otherwise, all voices are silenced by the din of vast machinery manufacturing products of approved literacies.

Nevertheless, schemes to educate young people in the latest technology of communication, the computer, are not intended to enlighten or empower them all in its use. Rather the plan is to produce a few experts in the service of established power who will refine and program the technology, often for surveillance, plunder, and massacre. Thus, the mendacity in the campaign for computer education is particularly crude.

Imagine what it would be like if the reformers actually wanted high school students to "understand the world of computers, electronics, and related technologies" (A *Nation at Risk* in Gross and Gross 40). In that world, "It is a prosaic truth that none of the weapons systems which today threaten murder on a genocidal scale, and whose design, manufacture, and sale condemn countless people, especially children, to poverty and starvation, could be developed without the earnest, even enthusiastic, cooperation of computer professionals" (Weizenbaum 19).

Fortunately for IBM and the ICBM, other highly literate graduates can be well paid to keep quiet about computers and the technology of death and to advertise miraculous applications of technology to medicine, agronomy, and so forth. When—miracle of miracles!—technological fixes don't work, the same literati will resume respectful silence. Compare the noisy celebrations at the birth of the Green Revolution in agriculture—a predictable fatality, since it assumed that farmers live in vacuums—to the absence of obituaries.

As for ordinary kids, they will get jobs at Jewel, dragging computerized Cheerios boxes across computerized check-out counters, while others get no job at all. On the margins of the high-tech society, unemployment, hunger, ignorance, and disease will ravage the poor, at home and abroad—except in places
like Nicaragua, honored for outstanding work in health and literacy by members of the United Nations, and invaded for the same reasons by proxies of the United States (see Collins; Hirshon; Melrose).

Some literate Americans will write huge lies about all this, and many others will believe them; of those who know better, too few will speak out, and they will be inaudible. For an example of a woman largely liberated from truth, consider the case of Jeane Kirkpatrick, former Reaganite Ambassador to the U.N. By her reckoning, in "Dictatorships and Double Standards," the essay that won her the job, traditional autocracies, such as those of Somoza, Marcos, Duvalier, "create no refugees" because they "do not disturb the habitual rhythms of work and leisure, habitual places of residence, habitual patterns of family and personal life." Her barbaric comments on refugees are demolished in Noam Chomsky’s Turning the Tide: U.S. Intervention in Central America and the Struggle for Peace (8, 20, 117), a study concerned with facts and human decency. (See also Gettleman.)

As anyone who lives in Chicago knows, there are no refugees, no boat people from Haiti here. Nor are the Puerto Ricans in Chicago refugees—they are sightseers who decided to stay; so were the 140,000 Philippinos who fled to Sabah in the mid-1970s. Furthermore, we are generous to the odd refugee or two who do enter the U.S.A. from our domains. In 1984, fully one per cent of Guatemalans and three per cent of El Salvadorans applying received asylum. Of course, we accepted over half the Bulgarians and Russians, whose sufferings, grim enough, in no way approach the misery, terror, and torture endured by people in these two client states of Uncle Sam. Orwell would have appreciated the double standards.

Meanwhile teachers will hold conferences on literacy-across-the-curriculum, although many students cannot find Nicaragua on a map, fewer know its history, and almost none understand the long American record of theft, repression, and murder there. No, we need literacy that reaches far beyond curricula designed by a profession already too subservient to Big Brother and the Holding Companies, and now making curtsies to Jerry Falwell and the Electric Christians. In spite of their literacy, or because of it, teachers are slow to face such discomfiting realities.

Here at Chicago’s City Colleges, faculty members from six campuses recently published their “Perspectives on teaching: Student Literacy.” It was the second article in the premiere issue of City, the system’s new journal. It was also a prime specimen of teachers’ illiteracy. Among a number of ambiguous, awkward, and ungrammatical sentences, I agreed most strongly with the thesis that “poor literacy skills are not just the problem of the students who lack these skills” (Dortch et al. 21); yet I most admired the style, the marvelous climax to the faulty, semi-standard parallels in:

We would want to know what students think of their CCC classes; how do they rate their own reading/writing skills; do they feel they are being prepared adequately for employment or to compete at the four-year institution level; and do they feel a need for an on-campus mental health facility? (24)

I imagine some of them do.
Some of my colleagues might feel it incollegial of me to note such petty slipups, which are not distracting enough to prevent communication. This defense of teachers will be more compelling, of course, when they allow it to students. Unfortunately, my colleagues' article matched breakdowns in "basics" with failure of intellect at the same time it recommended "Careful evaluation and placement, and courses in critical thinking" as "the key to solving the literacy problem" (20).

Although the English Department at Harold Washington, where I teach, has begun closing its composition classes with an exit exam that actually tests writing, its English Placement Test is a study in race and class prejudice, and in ignorance—or disregard—of linguistics, composition, and testing. It is also an exercise in minutiae. Of the test's fifty questions, twenty-two are devoted to punctuation, clearly the central feature of written English. (The test-makers may have considered that only questions labeled "PUNCTUATION" test punctuation, but I count problems in "SEN TENCE RECOGNITION" as deceptively advertised.) Most of the rest of the questions concern vital matters like non-standard verb forms, subject-verb agreement, and the spelling of environment. Only one section of the test, on largely Latinate and Frenchified vocabulary, might be defensible if Harold Washington students didn't have to pass a reading exam first in order to qualify for English placement.

The most offensive section of the English test, "GRAMMAR," does not examine a single significant aspect of our students' grammatical competence; it does mercilessly assess their social status—though this single-minded purpose occasionally lapses into sheer mindlessness.

To detect lower-middle-class linguistic insecurity, we have students find the mistake in:

2. Even though I know you will tell, let us try to keep this a secret between
   A       B       C
   you and I. (No error.)
   D       E

What is at issue is not the dazzling illogic, with which any rational revision of 2. would begin, but D, a stereotype of hyper-correct status anxiety. A good student, by implication, must be thoroughly and comfortably middle-class. No awkward strivers, no phonies, please. And never mind inanities; manners are all that matter.

To catch real working-class louts, we use such traps, among others, as:

5. He was upset because no one seen him make the basket during the first half of
   A       B       C       D
   the game. (No error.)
   E

6. John is so tired that he can't hardly walk, even if he were paid to do so. (No
   A       B       C       D
   error.)
   E

The hope, obviously, is to trick the unwary with seen or can't hardly, two shibboleths.
But why? Does seen say “see + past” any worse than saw? Does one sound better, ring off the tongue more roundly? How about a student who answers 6. with D, correcting the sequence of tenses? Is anything really wrong with can’t hardly? You can hardly say you can’t understand it; everyone knows what it means. Then there’s no point, other than enforcing our society’s system of inviduous distinctions, which is what these and similar problems on similar tests are doing. Their obsessive concern to stigmatize non-standard English and its speakers will work an especial hardship on black students, whose dialects are so often rooted in the rural South.

Happily, as I have said, some problems on our placement test do improve from unthinking malice to pure thoughtlessness:

8. As she entered the bus the woman said, “There’s no seats in the back; let’s A B C D stand here by the door.” (No error.)

E

B, not E, is the correct response to 8, although, in a direct quotation of informal conversation, B is quite acceptable, even among the prissy. Some students, of course, will get the right answer—that is, a wrong one—because they have been so beset and bothered about agreement that they will not notice the quotation marks, the context, or their implications. Having developed the proper paranoid reflexes, they will respond without observing or thinking, thus answering the question much as it was asked.

The second section of our test, “VOCABULARY,” is concerned with syn-

on, as its instructions make clear: “In the following items, blacken the one space indicating the best synonym for the word on the left . . .” While the in-

structions for “PUNCTUATION” contain a mistake in punctuation, they are still instructive. The directions for problems in “SENTENCE RECOGNI-

TION” are hopelessly ambiguous (and missing a period), although the problems demand a particular interpretation. Said directions and one problem will have to bear me out:

Most of the following items contain one or more complete sentences; a few are in-

complete (sentence fragments). Regard any expression that could be followed by a semicolon or a period as a complete sentence. Blacken the one space indicating the number of complete sentences, using the following key:

A. One sentence
B. Two sentences
C. Three sentences
D. Four sentences
E. No sentence: the sentence is incomplete

36. As the child turns the colorful pages and witnesses the heroic exploits of Super-

man his daring his modesty his magnificent powers.

Imagine 36 in response to the query, “When is the child happy?” Then 36 “could be followed by . . . a period,” indeed, would be, as it is when it is used for a silly problem on a sillier test. Thus, A is a reasonable response here. Alas! I have lost all sense of modesty and have employed the powers of imagination

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(and logic) in exploits far too colorful and daring—I dare not say heroic—for any placement test, which will assuredly insist on the mundane answer, E.

Of course, imagination is a subversive faculty, not to be encouraged, but subverted by comic books, TV, schools, and so forth. Our task is not to stimulate imagination, but to develop the reality principle, to enforce the status quo and equip the super ego with all its nigging conventions, down to and including, if possible, those of orthodox punctuation. We are not to build stronger minds, at least not among the masses, let alone super ones.

None of the words in our test’s final section, “SPELLING,” are unintentionally misspelled, as far as I can tell.

If some of my criticisms of the test seem like nit-picking beside any point, that, of course, is my point: little progress will be made by placing students more accurately according to these or similar criteria. Nor is Harold Washington, at 30 East Lake Street in the heart of Chicago’s central business district, a cultural backwater. Its “standards,” which a conservative faction in our department hopes annually to “raise,” are in keeping with national norms, as skeptics can determine from such discriminating instruments as the College Board’s Test of Standard Written English (TSWE).

After defining its standard as (egad!) the language of college textbooks, TSWE poses fifty problems, many foolish, in two sets of twenty-five. Among the first twenty-five, all of the conventional find-the-error variety, at least seven are designed to distinguish on the basis of trivial dialect differences between the upper middle class and working people. After all, college and its textbooks are not for everyone. To be blunt: such testing is a symptom and cause of illiteracy, not part of a cure.

Therefore, one weapon in the corporate campaign for educational reform will infallibly be batteries of standardized admission and placement tests mounted in schools across the land and trained on upwardly-aspirant members of the downward orders. To keep the humble at their stations, these exams, especially in English, will regularly include sufficient discriminatory devices to guarantee advantage to those who have it.

Testing programs to regulate admissions, placement, and graduation at various levels of schooling are being installed or perfected from Georgia to California. Naturally their class-bound character and purposes are elided from professional and administrative descriptions, where canons of propitiuous discourse forbid other than euphemistic reference to unseemly topics such as class or power. (It is expected, always, that only standard doctrine will be expressed in Standard English.)

Unless placement rests on legitimate intellectual standards, it means unnecessary semesters of discouraging hassle, burdensome expense, and trivial work for people already over-burdened and poor. This may be good training for what life has in store, but it is not education. One result will be even more numerous dropouts among the disadvantaged. Many will drop into the reserve army of the unemployed, demoralized, addicted, and incarcerated, where they will hold wages down, absorb white working-class hostility, and, unless imprisoned, be
encouraged to perform other patriotic services by "volunteering" for the army or national guard. For often, in fact, placement, remediation, and evaluation are all biased or trivialized, over-determining failure, especially by the under-privileged.

Thus a recent, massive investigation of tracking in secondary schools concluded that "a powerful and oppressive force" "works to ensure school failure and maintain social inequity," but, not surprisingly, that more research is necessary. For one thing, "the blame for the inequities perpetrated on different racial and socioeconomic groups in schools should not be placed too quickly. It is clearly a subject for further inquiry." Scholars have not yet decided whether "deliberate efforts on the part of school people" "limit the educational experiences of some students" or whether such "inequities stem from the cultural context and systemic properties of schools rather than from the intentions of the adults within them" (Oakes 212-13). Of course, to pose the question as a dilemma excludes the obvious answer: All of the above. Still, research must go forward, even if the schools mark time or retreat.

Since my colleagues writing for City put blind faith in placement tests, they cannot detect the retrograde curriculum hiding in their pedagogy:

The instructor has specific information and/or skills to teach the students. To get this material across, he 1) lectures and expects the students to take legible notes on what is said, 2) assigns reading from a college-level textbook, 3) distributes written materials which students are expected to read, understand, and retain, and 4) uses AV materials to reinforce concepts. (21-22)

Students bring nothing to contribute to their own education, just as the instructor has no attitudes or habits to inculcate, by instruction or example, so he or she need not permit dialogue, discussion, or cooperative work, all essentials for citizens in a democracy, whom we are supposed to be educating. For this teacher is teaching the passivity, deference, and competitive individualism becoming to our society's underlings. How critical thinking might develop, given such pedagogy, my colleagues do not explain.

Rather than allowing all students to enroll in college-level classes with tutors and writing laboratories, as some schools did in the illegal aftermath of the sixties, my colleagues' formal curriculum commences, according to law, with two semesters of remedial English and reading courses, along with additional developmental work in math and social sciences. The Illinois Public Junior College Act requires that colleges "distribute the students among their programs according to their abilities" and that students in transfer programs possess "competence" similar to that of students at state universities. Thus the Act deftly parries the thrust of community colleges towards democracy in higher education, and my colleagues cite the law with evident approval (Dortch et al. 20).

However, we cannot overcome educational inequities either by remedial courses that retard students further or by a uniform curriculum that the disadvantaged fail, so that schools achieve the same inequitable result by different means, simply reproducing the class structure, occupational hierarchy, and corresponding structure of literacies. Yet professionalism does induce a narrow, technical view of educational difficulties, even ones rooted wide and deep in the
society’s distribution of wealth and power. Since political problems are not solvable by salable expertise (a political problem itself), “professionalism” turns teachers, however kindly, into overseers.

Teachers who hope to improve their schools must work to transform the social order that makes schools what they are. If citizenship seems too frightening, teaching, especially in a tenured position on a unionized faculty, should not. Occasionally, an entire department or school may be enlightened enough to encourage real learning. To organize a district or municipality will require allies—from below, not above. We teachers must learn to practice Gramsci’s maxim: “Pessimism of intellect; optimism of will” (qtd. in Williams 203). War, depression, or ecological disaster may remobilize ordinary people to struggle for sanity before some final catastrophe demobilizes everybody. If the real crisis unfolds slowly, we have time to create the consciousness, comradery, and space for better schools in a better way of life.

But we will have to become more literate, along with our students, in new directions. What may we expect, for instance, from the popular upheaval for which we must hope? Strangely enough, information is scarce (and one-sided) in the information society. What do we know, what can we learn, to cite some relevant cases, from events in Poland, 1980; Portugal, 1974; Chile, 1970; Czechoslovakia and France, 1968; Hungary, 1956; Spain, 1936; Italy, 1920; Germany, 1919; or Russia, 1917 and 1905? I learned, though I was never taught, of a visionary socialist tradition, profoundly democratic, attainable, the antithesis of Leninist precept and practice, let alone of the caricatures with which we are regularly entertained.

The Council Communist tradition, at the confluence of anarchism and radical Marxism, extends democracy beyond bourgeois politics into economic and social life, expanding the electoral and parliamentary forms of capitalist democracies into a commonwealth of genuine, popular participation, in which workplaces are under the workers’ control and in which democracy works up from the local community instead of down from distant centers of bureaucratic power.

Typically Workers’ Councils are not the creation of conspiratorial intellectuals riding to power on the back of a working class, but a creative response by working people themselves to social crisis too acute to bear. Instead of loose talk about what the people want—the people are usually silent or trained to speak in accents other than their own—instead of other people’s words, Workers’ Councils show us, in deeds, a popular vision of a better world. (For relevant works see Brinton, Russell, Williams, Bulloten, Fišera, Pateman, Mailer, Root & Branch.)

Such a vision, not nightmares of more likely futures, should inspire our teaching. But it requires a cooperative, dialogic pedagogy that allows students’ voices to be heard, not just unending teacher talk. It requires curricula not afraid of the forbidden—of the un- or half-told stories of women, minorities, working people, others unlike ourselves; not afraid to name the follies of the learned or the incompetence of the mighty to solve the problems that they cause. For it recognizes that our crisis is first in our society and government, only second in literacy, just as it redefines the fundamentals of literacy themselves.
These are not the conventions of orthodox spelling or punctuation. Such things are useful, to be sure, and their significance increases as machines displace people. Still spelling should not be made a fetish. Not even the rules of usage are truly basic, though they are encouraged by and do encourage some of our baser values.

To have a chance to learn more about one’s self and world—or wider worlds beyond, gone or only dreamed, and to speak more widely of these things, those are two true gifts of the printed word. To waste the chance or take another should be one’s own choice; but it is wrong to hide or steal these gifts, especially from children, as is so often done today under some false or petty pretense.

To proceed from thought and print to action, to use literacy as well as enjoy it, is also fundamental, no less for teachers than for citizens. Our job in teaching students to read and write is not an easy one. It is not to stamp out their natural idiom, often inadequate; nor to supplement it with the language favored by business and the state, which is surely corrupt. It is not to oppress them with an alien literary tongue, nor to deny its advantages. Somehow we must teach our students and learn from them to practice and appreciate honest craftsonship in words, to ignore blind linguistic prejudice the same as amoral relativism, and to enrich what is best in the traditional uses of our written language with whatever is valuable in the English of those we have rejected.

None of this is contemplated by our present reformers. Instead commission after panel calls for a two-tiered educational system producing at the top a minority of over-paid engineers and managers to design the technology and provide the supervision for a majority of docile data processors and underpaid burger burners on the bottom. These two types of lesser hominids are needed to operate the new post-industrial economy being planned for us by our corporate magnates in order to maintain their predominance in the global pecking order.

Therefore, it is not to be supposed that history or philosophy, imagination or hope, or any other discipline or faculty of the human heart or mind, could suggest desirable or realistic alternatives to these particular technical and social arrangements. They are optimal and in any case inevitable: the suspiciously large number of elite task forces proclaiming their superiority merely reflects the incapacity of the benighted masses to perceive the obvious.

Nevertheless I urge that we not allow ourselves to become dupes in any more schemes of our betters. We do need to raise our standards, as they so often suggest, but by using our values, not theirs. Ours should be educational and democratic, not obscurantist and repressive. With the conduct and content of our classes, we could teach students something about the practice and meaning of democracy, of sister- and brotherhood, and of legitimate, rational authority. It would be a small contribution, easily overwhelmed, but we should make it: it might help.

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