


--

Ironic Encounters: Ethics, Aesthetics, and the “Liberal Bias” of Composition Pedagogy

Jeff Pruchnic

So far as outsiders are concerned, we are satisfied to know their aims in toto. But in the case of people close to us, we judge them according to the methods with which they pursue those aims.

—Friedrich Nietzsche

In November of 2003, over 100 Pennsylvania State University students staged a public forum in front of Old Main, the campus’ primary administrative building. They gathered to protest biases they deemed apparent throughout the university system, allegations ranging from the mistreatment they received from instructors in the classroom to the way student functions were promoted on campus and in residential dorms. One by one, students ascended Old Main’s steps and gave passionate testimony to how they were ostracized on campus and had their views marginalized and dismissed in class discussion. While students related their personal stories, other protestors cheered them on, waving signs, voicing their solidarity, and affirming that their views would not go unheard any longer.

This event was entitled “Conservative Coming Out Day”; it was planned as an opportunity for students to express concerns over what they designated the “liberal bias” of university faculty and administrators and relate specific evidence of the unjust treatment conservative students suffered as a consequence. Similar events were executed the same year across many other university campuses, often in conjunction with broader conservative movements challenging the pedagogical practices of the
humanities, movements such as Students for Academic Freedom and the Young American's Foundation. Not surprisingly—since they are the only mandatory courses for all majors, and hence a convenient commonplace for appealing to the experiences of all students—students participating in Penn State's iteration of this protest focused largely on composition courses fulfilling general education requirements within the undergraduate curriculum. Several students' testimonies revolved around specific incidents of "liberal bias" in English classrooms such as an instructor who introduced herself to her class by stating "Just so you know, I hate Republicans" (qtd. in Smith). However, the majority of concerns were more general; in addition to worries that they would receive lower grades for producing arguments that conflicted with their instructors' beliefs or pedagogical agenda, students also feared being labeled as "bigots," "racists," or "homophobes" for stating their opinions.

However strange it may initially seem, I take it that "Conservative Coming out Day" embodies in multiple ways the actions encouraged by those of us who see the skills taught in composition studies classrooms as having broader applications in the polis. These students have investigated the ideological investments of those who have authority over them, assayed the power relationships between themselves and the individuals and institutions with which they must negotiate, and voiced their critique and concerns in a public forum. However—and this is what makes "Conservative Coming out Day" something closer to an ironic fulfillment of these pedagogical goals—the students are also at the same time critiquing the very pedagogical program that their actions might be seen to complement.

In many ways, "Conservative Coming Out Day" is of a piece with a broader irony at play in contemporary critical and cultural theory, the primary content provider for early progressive pedagogies in composition studies. On the one hand, the death of critical and cultural theory as an enterprise is being announced in the pages of venues ranging from theory-driven academic journals such as *Critical Inquiry* to popular media outlets such as the *New York Times* and *Slate*; for its part, the venerable disciplinary organ *The Chronicle of Higher Education* recently provided career advice on "Life after the Death of Theory" (Benton). On the other hand, when discourse about the current state of critical theory has not taken this memorial tone, it has increasingly adopted the register of the confessional. As I will detail below, many prominent theorists in the humanities find themselves identifying, and at times even apologizing for, how the traditional tools of critical theory in the humanities—the challenging of essentialism and foregrounding of difference, the revelation of ambiguities and paradoxes—that were previously configured as bulwarks against capitalist exploitation and systems of social control have apparently transformed into the very mechanisms by which these forces function.

Indeed, one of the most influential works of critical theory of the past few years, Hardt and Negri's *Empire*, is largely a dissection of *critical theory's eclipse*, or at least the failure of what we have come to know as the cornerstones of progressive political and ethical theory over the past few decades to effectively respond to economic and geopolitical changes that have taken place during the same period. Though strategies based on foregrounding difference or affirming fragmented social identities may have made sense as a wedge against universalizing or totalitarian systems of domination, contemporary flows of power are themselves increasingly premised on creating and creatively responding to such shifts and fragmentations; the value of such strategies wane, Hardt and Negri argue, when applied against a system in which national identities have taken a backseat to multinational corporations, and capitalism's reliance on consumer conformity has been replaced and outpaced by the ever-expanding territories of niche marketing. As they suggest, to the "new enemy" of global hypercapitalism, "every difference is an opportunity" for markets rather than a challenge to universalizing structures (152); the contemporary structure of social power is "not only resistant to the old weapons but actually thrives on them, and thus joins its would-be antagonists in applying them to the fullest. Long live difference! Down with essentialist binaries!" (138).

One might add that not only have such strategies been integrated into the baseline logic of contemporary capital, but that they are increasingly deployed by political agents with agendas far removed from the progressive goals such theories and tactics have been traditionally taken to complement or legitimate. Indeed, it was conservatives' poaching of discourses of marginalization and oppression—the positioning of straight,
white, Americans as the cultural and economic victims of everything from "reverse racism" and the "homosexual agenda" to the welfare system and immigration—that largely put the "new" in the "new right" that emerged in the culture wars of the 80s and 90s. Such a systematic appropriation, even today no further away than the nearest AM radio or cable news broadcast, effectively flipped the script of identity politics, leading to, as Cindy Patton writes, the "discursive convergence of left and right, or at least, their arrival on the same turf" (234). Its legacy in the new century is something of a reversal of 60s style class politics; as Thomas Frank gloomily reports, "mention 'elites' these days and nobody thinks of factory owners or gated-community dwellers. Instead, they assume that what you're mad as hell about is the liberal media, or the pro-criminal judiciary, or the tenured radicals, or the know-it-all bureaucrats" ("God") 9–10).

To give just one more example, Bruno Latour keys in on a particularly timely instance of conservative and corporate appropriation of progressive academic theory in "Why Has Critique Run out of Steam?" an essay that often reads as a pseudo-apologia for the discipline of science studies that he helped birth. Reacting to media accounts of Republican strategist Frank Luntz's appropriation of academic discourses of scientific uncertainty and political bias to discredit scientific evidence of global warming, Latour remarks on the sea-change evidenced by this appropriation as well as the failure of critically-minded humanities pedagogy to adjust: "And yet entire Ph.D. programs are still running to make sure that good American kids are learning the hard way that facts are made up, that there is no such thing as natural, unmediated, unbiased access to truth, that we are always prisoners of language, that we always speak from a particularly standpoint, and so on, while dangerous extremists are using the very same argument of social construction to destroy hard-won evidence that could save our lives" (227). Such developments speak to a certain exhaustion of traditional critical methods as a result of a related "co-option" of these techniques by the discourses and institutions that were often their target. In this sense, we might read an event such as "Conservative Coming Out Day" as a microcosm for thinking through these broader changes in critical theory and take up contemporary pedagogy as a particularly vital site for imagining the possibilities for its rethinking.

More specifically, however, I am also interested in how such an ironic situation was in many ways augured by what we might call an intrinsic "ironic core" in the historical integration of critical theory into composition studies pedagogy; if "Conservative Coming Out Day" and similar protests put some pedagogies in an ironic situation, my argument here will be that this not entirely accidental. Contemporary progressive pedagogies themselves might be seen as embodying an "ironic" ethos in the way that philosopher Isabelle Stengers defines irony as a "distinct political project": a category of political and ethical practices that rely on positioning their interventions in direct contradiction to "dominant" sentiments and that critique their subject matter by holding it to an increasingly higher standard of evaluation or interpretation (ideological investment, social or cultural construction, for example) than the one articulated in its own performance (66).

The value of Stengers’ turn to the language of aesthetics is that it allows us to make a distinction between the specific goals and values of a politics or political actor—"smaller government," or "increased social services," for example—and the formal system or repertoire of appeals and approaches used to forward that goal: the style of engagement, interpretation, and argumentation through which these goals or values will be articulated. More precisely such a distinction also illuminates that despite the "overturning" of Western metaphysics that drove the "linguistic turn" in critical theory, our critical methodologies have not progressed that far from the Socratic tradition, even as the goals and targets of these methods have changed.

Even more specifically for my purposes here, I want to use such a distinction to think through the relationship between ethics and aesthetics in pedagogy along both historical and theoretical lines. The historical integration of critical theory into politically-minded composition studies pedagogy from the late-60s onward was in many ways a rejection of whatever remained of the discipline’s traditional attention to aesthetics of the Arnheimian humanistic type in favor of the role English studies education can and could play in two registers of "ethics": the impact of schooling on student subjectivities and a concomitant need to integrate training in political judgment, democratic citizenship, and social justice. As "politics" emerged as a crucial term in the vocabulary of English studies scholarship
and instruction, “ethics”—perhaps less explicitly but no less urgently—also became a vital concern of pedagogues who were now more self-consciously positioning their research and teaching as participating in the shaping of student subjectivity and the maintenance or challenging of social systems and popular sentiments. The traditional humanist conception of culture generally and of education in culture particularly—one that Arnold (in)famously took great pains in the opening pages of *Culture and Anarchy* to argue cannot promise to provide a privileged perspective on politics—was replaced by a conception of culture more in line with early days of the cultural studies movement, in which the political and economic vectors of aesthetic production and the institutional study of aesthetics were foregrounded (whether this take the form of, for instance, an Adornoesque lamentation over the degradation of popular aesthetics, or a celebration, from de Certeau onwards, of the creative and “resistant” uses individuals made of aesthetic products and commodities).

However, as the various shifts sketched above illustrate, it might be more accurate to say that politics and economics have themselves become increasingly “aesthetic” or have made increasing use of vectors and strategies traditionally associated with the domain of aesthetics. We might trace this movement (in economics) through the primacy of marketing, the growth of “the creative class” and symbolic-analytic labor, and the rapid increase of the service and customer care industries, as well as (in politics) the escalating use of emotional appeals, affective responses, and recourse to “values” in popular political discourse. What all of these changes in economic production and political rhetoric share is a leveraging of creative stylistic formalism and/or shared cultural and affective sentiments more traditionally associated with the study of aesthetics.

The ironic situations of both conservative student protests against English studies pedagogy and of contemporary critical theory generally lie at the apex of these two genealogies, and I take it that any attempt to critically rethink our possible responses to this moment will require reassessing the relationship between ethics and aesthetics. More precisely, as I’ll argue below, if the fundamental challenge of the early days of progressive pedagogy in composition studies was to account for the economics and politics of aesthetics, the challenge of today is to account for what we might call the “aesthetics” of contemporary economics and politics.

Following Stengers, we might say that the “ironic” response to “Conservative Coming out Day” would (re)produce the irony of the event by alleging, to use only the most obvious tactic, that the student protesters have misunderstood the concept of marginalization or co-opted the languages of oppression and recognition (particularly through their use of the “coming out” trope). I would like to imagine a different response here, both to that event in particular and through pedagogy more generally. Briefly, my argument will consider how contemporary pedagogical programs might change their “attitude” in the way Kenneth Burke understood the term—habituating lines of thought that not only “prepare us for some functions and against others, for or against the persons representing these functions” but also, and more importantly, “suggest how you shall be for or against” (4)—and suggest that this difference will feed forward in producing an ethical grounding for classroom practice.

**Progressive Pedagogy and “Liberal Bias”**

We might begin by parsing out two versions of the “liberal bias” claim made by participants in “Conservative Coming out Day.” The clearest, one, which we might call the “strong” version of this claim, refers to allegations that instructors favor left-leaning political perspectives and might allow this position to guide their evaluation of students’ work. This version is site-specific, relying on an instructor’s own remarks about their beliefs and perspectives—“Just so you know, I hate Republicans”—and suspicions over subsequent instances of “biased” grading of students’ writing; in short, these are the types of allegations attached to discrete actions by an instructor, and likely best handled by the oversight of individual academic departments and university review boards.

My concern is the weaker version of this claim, one emphasized by conservative students’ fears of being judged as “homophobes,” “bigots,” or “racists.” This claim speaks to a different kind of “liberal bias,” one attributable to the general itinerary of a pedagogical program rather than specific events occurring in the classroom. In this sense, the students are
not so much protesting the difference between their political position and that of their instructors, but a pedagogical imperative to critique ideologies and politics coded as “dominant” and/or retrogressive in the classroom, but that also happen to be the conservatives’ own. Consequently, this imperative puts the students in an unenviable position; they are configured as subjects to be judged in the classroom, and encouraged to take part in this judgment. Through this process, the seemingly paradoxical—at least outside of a Log Cabin Republicans meeting—action of “coming out as conservative” begins to make sense; from the viewpoint of conservative student protestors, “liberal bias” emerges as the prejudice of an authority that denounces the students’ values to such a degree that they can appropriate, however hyperbolically, the “coming out” trope as a declaration of their unwillingness to feel shame or guilt in their values and practices. It also helps explain such conservative student complaints as the increasingly common critique that their humanities classes provide “indoctrination” rather than “education.” Their perception of the first precludes the process of the latter: imperatives to critique dominant ideologies overtake the production of useful tools for conservative students to mobilize in forwarding their own agendas and arguments.

Political theorist Shelley Burtt is helpful in unpacking this iteration of “liberal bias,” particularly because of the notoriously diffuse interpretations of the term in both academic and popular registers. Assaying larger movements toward recovering “civic virtue” in contemporary politics, Burtt makes a distinction between the “republican” (small “r”) and “liberal” manifestations of this impulse. Both of these efforts are joined by a mutual interest in cultivating virtue not as an end in itself but as a way to advance “other worthy political ends” (such as liberty, equality, and democracy) through interactions in public fora. Similarly, particularly in its recent vintage, both strains of political thought have increasingly shared an emphasis on cultivating a “critical distance” in citizens, an informed and pragmatic balancing of their own beliefs and desires and those of others in the public. The two differ, however, in their actualization; they depart in their methods rather than their principles, or following Stengers, what we might call a departure in style rather than in their primary objective. Of course, this difference in style itself produces new “instrumental” objectives insofar as they forward the cultivation of different practices to produce the same goal. The republican strain focuses on the importance of teaching “deliberation,” effective strategies of communication and persuasion that individuals are to use “in the service of an expansive and directed dialogue with their fellow countrymen” (362). Pedagogical applications of such an ideal have traditionally held up training in basic communicative and critical competencies—instruction in effective speaking, writing, analysis, and argumentation—as the best way to create a citizenry capable of active participation in political and cultural life. For Burtt, the liberal type of civic virtue, on the other hand, conceives “good liberal citizens” as “primarily good judges,” such as in Stephen Macedo’s arguments that good citizens should “take up the attitude of the ideal judge” and “act in politics as interpreters of public moral principles” (qtd. in Burtt 362). Thus, as Macedo argues elsewhere, integrating liberal conceptions of civic virtue into pedagogy has traditionally taken place by introducing students to what John Rawls calls the “burdens of judgment” (306); instructors will attempt to teach students “the vital but elusive virtue of ‘reasonableness’” and the need to respect the legitimacy of different “reasonable” beliefs and views and expose the dangers of those that are “unreasonable” (307).

Both programs, of course, contain components of deliberation and judgment. The difference lies in a question of emphasis; the style of engagement Burtt deems republican favors the cultivation of pragmatic strategies for interacting with institutions and/or altering their affects through appeal to popular sentiment. The liberal style, on the other hand, places its emphasis on the action of judgment and specifically the need for citizens to critically assess and debunk social or institutional biases as a necessary first step, a “ground clearing” action needed to create an equitable rhetorical or political environment before deliberation can take place.

And I take it that it is this emphasis on bias in liberal perspectives on civic virtue that circulates most prominently in the contemporary theory and praxis of progressive pedagogy. To put it more precisely, the “liberal bias” so decried by conservative critics of English studies pedagogy might be interpreted not so much as a complaint against a particular ideational bias they presume to be attached to “leftist instructors” (though certainly this is a part of the complaint), as much as it is an allergy to the
emphasizes on bias itself (and its corollary categories of domination/marginalization, conformity/resistance, authenticity/appropriation) as an essential focus in the classroom. Indeed, as Janet Atwill writes in a survey of liberal and republican views on civic virtue from their prototypical forms in classical Greece to their function in the present day, the position of bias may be what makes liberalism and republicanism ultimately irreconcilable despite their increasing similarity in other areas. On the one hand, the republican perspective would suggest that the critique of "bias" is only an essential first step for effective political interaction if one holds the utopian belief that a neutral, destratified, or "bias-free" public might be created. On the other hand, the liberal perspective would take this latter conception to be, at best, unduly simplistic in its conception of bias and, at worst, itself an instance of the typology of bias that needs to be combated to foment civic virtue. More importantly given my focus here, as Atwill highlights, the liberal foregrounding of bias has typically been more assimilable to the ethical goals and disciplinary development of English studies. Although the republican privileging of deliberation over judgment suggests the teaching of pragmatic skills, it might also be taken, Atwill concludes, to sacrifice "theoretical (and perhaps ethical coherence) in the interest of constructing effective arts of political discourse" (88). As she goes on to argue, when done effectively, such a focus seems more in line with the practices of "professional political consulting" or the curriculum of "art and professional school" than the kind of research and teaching traditionally associated with humanities instruction. And indeed, the divergence between these values historically—as well as the conflict between the skills they might teach a student in the contemporary moment—lies very much at the heart of both the genealogy of progressive pedagogy in English studies and of contemporary conservative critiques of that development.

I choose James Berlin's work here as my point of departure for analyzing both of these genealogies for a number of reasons beyond the canonical status of his major writings and their continued impact on pedagogical theory. Although his work is most closely associated with writing instruction, Berlin actively attempted to use critical and cultural theory to integrate all of English studies' traditional topos (the "rhetorics, poetics, cultures" of his last book's title) into his pedagogical program. Secondly, Berlin's work also largely marks the introduction of a type of pedagogical criticism that's theoretical framework, positioning against previous pedagogies, and discrete program (the nuts-and-bolts "here's what you can do on Monday" component) all function largely through the same critical frame. Finally, Berlin's focus on the role of critique in composition studies instruction and the cultivation of "critical citizens" in the classroom, his fundamental iconoclastic gesture, could be viewed as the start of a certain hermeneutic cycle that I wish to track here.

Drawing on theorists such as Barthes, Derrida, Foucault, and Baudrillard, Berlin argues in a series of articles beginning with "Rhetoric and Ideology in the Writing Class" and continuing in Rhetorics, Poetics, and Cultures for a recognition of the social and ideological processes of language use and acquisition, a framework he deems social-epistemic rhetoric. In the classroom, this emphasis is translated into a predominant engagement with the "signifying practices" that constitute reading and writing. In Berlin's schema, rhetoric is situated within ideology, making any system of rhetoric open to consideration of "how its very discursive structure can be read as to favor one version of economic, social, and political arrangements over other versions" ("Rhetoric" 477). Working from this starting point, the pedagogical programs developed by Berlin and shared by numerous other pedagogues focus on the rigorous critique of not just formal systems of political discourse and persuasion, but also literary works and diverse media and genres such as cinema, advertisements, journalism, and television sitcoms. Berlin argues that the effort to "make students aware of the cultural codes—the various competing discourses—that attempt to influence who they are" will hopefully produce students "who can demystify the cultural codes they encounter" and "be motivated to begin the reshaping of subjectivities and society" ("Composition" 50). Consistently in his writings, Berlin argues that this process—one that Virginia Anderson notes often proceeds by anticipating the "proper" ways students should respond to this pedagogy: students "must come to see," "must realize," are "made aware," "begin to understand" (qtd. in Anderson 205)—is directed toward creating students who can "resist" the cultural codes imposed on them (Rhetorics 116). For Berlin, because social-epistemic rhetoric—the perspective he uses to both critique previous pedagogies and to provide the content of his own—makes no appeals to an illusory model of transcendent truth and regards all knowledge as
ideologically constructed, it “inevitably supports economic, social, political, and cultural democracy” (489).

It is this focus on the necessity of revealing the ideological investments of “dominant cultural codes,” and the concomitant creation of students who might resist these codes and thus take part in inspiring progressive political change, that largely forms what I have been calling the “liberal bias” of composition studies pedagogy. And although certainly much has changed in both the theoretical and pedagogical terrain in the two decades since Berlin’s final writings, this foregrounding of “bias” (and its associated categories of dominant/marginal, complicit/resistant, exploitive/liberatory) remains the coin of the realm for the majority of pedagogical scholarship on systems of social power. Indeed, we can trace this legacy in scholarship post-Berlin, even in the works of those that explicitly take an antagonistic stance toward Berlin’s initial gesture. In one of the earliest critiques of Berlin’s social-epistemic rhetoric, Michael Murphy argues that Berlin contradicts himself; the ideal of radical democracy that justifies Berlin’s turn to ideology critique is itself an ideology that remains uncritiqued in Berlin’s schema. For Murphy, the democratic ideal, which he sees as implicated in a “myth of progressivism” dominating educational theory, has not itself been thoroughly interrogated. Following Murphy’s lead, other scholars have suggested that Berlin’s schema omits or neglects critiquing students’ specific ideological investments (Harris) or the scholar’s own complicity with retrogressive ideological systems (West). Subsequent critiques/extensions of Berlin’s schema have attempted to subsume Berlin’s ideological frame inside of a Lacanian libidinal economy (Alcorn) or extend the grip of ideology to encompass not only structures of meaning, but pre-significant emotional conditioning (Beam; Lindquist; Worsham); concomitantly, they suggest, pedagogical theory and practice must shift to critique and interrogate the creation and maintenance of these affective structures alternately viewed as shaped by ideological forces or as being themselves a socially conditioning, interpellative force functioning in much the same ways as the more traditional category of ideology.

Though these responses vary in their objectives and theoretical frameworks, they all illustrate an extension of the frames of critique or valuation one might deploy in the classroom (no longer ideology “itself” but “deeper” psychological or affective investments), and/or a shift in what categories of subjects must be analyzed for their possible biases or investments (no longer generic “citizens” or “consumers” but the individual students themselves, or the instructor herself, and so on). In this sense, as much as these interventions take issue with particular frames or sites of earlier theories of progressive pedagogy, they remain faithful to its generic focus and goals. The same might be said of the most aggressive responses to Berlin’s work, even those that question the validity of any particular frame or site for critical work in the classroom. Victor Vitanza, for instance, charges that by attempting to expose contradictions in society and the curriculum so that students might resist them, theorists such as Berlin and Henry Giroux (and various other progressive theorists under his review) are “potentially being both dangerously utopian and blindly ideological” by remaining too naively enthralled to “rationality” as a crucial concept for political change (143); for Vitanza, they have not taken their critiques far enough to achieve a truly “postmodern” pedagogy. While sharing these writers’ position “against founding a pedagogy on capitalism,” Vitanza argues one must jettison any focus on rationality, representation, and argumentation and build more “subversive modes of resistance” by fostering “continuous ‘dissensus’” (165). Michelle Ballif follows Vitanza’s critique in identifying the reintroduction of an “insidious foundationalism” behind ostensibly antifoundational approaches to pedagogy (156), but subsequently critiques Vitanza for not going far enough and calls for a pedagogy of critical evaluation that relentlessly deterritorializes and never recodifies on any basis (179).

Though highly polemical, these last responses bring to mind an important question about the responsibilities of any pedagogy that attempts to contrast, or even supplant, one ideational frame (that of “dominant culture” or of students under review in general) with another (a critical perspective of any stripe); that is, any pedagogy that attempts ethico-political action through recourse to a central framework of valuation (or one might say, any pedagogy that has “a critical theory” behind it). At the end of the (school)day, if such an approach is taken as itself an ethical intervention, it must have some alibi to explain how such a leveraging is proper, some way to validate that it is resistance against—rather than simply another example of— unethical interpellation. Thus, any settling by a progressive scholar on a particular critical frame leaves them finding
their rationale in the unlikely source of the Hegelian “negation of a negation”: the forcing of a particular mode of epistemic or critical valuation as primary is justified only insofar as it is taken to be the corrective to an existing distortion previously forced on the subject. I take it that the problem with such a move is not so much that it may be seen to trade one totalization for another, and through a somewhat tortured logic—“two wrongs make a right!”—but that, as “Conservative Coming Out Day” and similar events suggest, they have been rather easily adapted and repurposed for less than “progressive” goals: “two wrongs can make a right-wing!” or, more precisely, a rejuvenated Rush Limbaugh–or Newt Gingrich-style American right-wing that stakes their claims to populism and resistance largely through the same operation as that of the progressive pedagogue (sometimes as simply as replacing such terms and concepts as “dominant culture” or “capitalist hegemony” with such categories as “mainstream media” or “cultural elites”).

However, the alternative suggested above—the amping up of critique qua critique, the unending search for higher grounds of valuation only to submit them to hermeneutic disruption—is equally disconcerting insofar as it suggest a pedagogical practice that takes place in a wholly negative vein. In such a schema, the work of the classroom becomes the infinite consideration of what the materials of composition studies—discourse, persuasion, aesthetic productions—cannot do (cannot make claims to truth, legitimacy, or meaning, and cannot guarantee an ethical frame or praxis) rather than what they can do, or how they might be leveraged for particular purposes. The would-be progressive pedagogue then, it would seem, is left faced with two rather problematic options with which to ground their critical practices: stuck between the Hegelian “hard rock” of negation and the “no-place” of endless critique.

Social Power Today

My intention here, of course, is not to suggest that the consistent introduction of higher principles of valuation into theories of progressive pedagogy has degenerated into a game of scholarly one-upsmaniship, or that the lack of consensus about what critical frame (ideology, affect, irrationality) should ground critique in the classroom discrdits that enterprise as a whole. Nor am I trying to suggest that these critiques and critical frameworks have not accomplished a large amount of productive work in and outside the classroom. Rather, I am interested here in how these critiques and/or extensions of early work on progressive pedagogy—as well as the appropriation of leftist discursive strategies by the right, and the large number of similarly “ironic encounters” facing contemporary critical and cultural theory—may be read as symptoms of broader changes in economics and politics that have made it increasingly difficult to deploy the terms and discourses of “bias,” “dominance,” and “resistance” that used to do so much heavy lifting in progressive pedagogy and the theoretically attuned humanities as a whole. And certainly the last few decades of economic and political history have given us an embarrassment of examples of the “wearing out” of these terms. The appropriation of discourses of bias and marginalization that emerged in the repositioning of “dominant” groups such as straight white males as the oppressed victims of political correctness, the welfare state, or multiculturalism—in many ways still the gold standard of a certain conservative populism—was itself largely an echo of corporations’ claims that they have been victimized, besieged by unfair foreign competition or inflexible environmental or economic policies. As Evan Watkins argues, at least from the 1980s onwards, corporate public relations strategies have been premised on a full-scale “reversal of a terminology of victimage” through which corporations learned that they “can best renew their power not by directly representing themselves as ‘good’ agents, but instead as victims of ‘bad’ agents elsewhere, conspiring against them,” whether those “bad agents” be the crafters of overly restrictive environmental policies, the filers of class-action lawsuits, or foreign competitors (101).

Tropes of difference and resistance have hardly fared better during the same time period; as Thomas Frank argues in “Why Johnny Can’t Dissent,” it is incredibly difficult to build strategies of resistance to capitalist exploitation when even multinational fast-food companies build their marketing campaigns on abstract qualities of resistance and difference (Arby’s: “Different is Good”; Burger King: “Sometimes You Gotta Break the Rules!”) (41). Similarly, the United States Presidential Primaries taking place as I was writing this piece have given us no end of
examples of the importance of “resistance” as a marketing tactic in conservative political appeals. Aside from Democratic candidates’ expected self-fashioning as “change agents” against the status quo under Bush’s eight-year reign, Republican presidential hopefuls seem to equally find the need to position themselves as “resistant” candidates bravely taking up minority positions, whether this takes place through promising to uphold or extend unpopular policies such as the maintenance of the Guantanamo Bay prison facility (Rudolph Giuliani, Mitt Romney), foregrounding one’s identity as a maverick “straight-talker” unafraid to split from the Republican majority (John McCain), or unapologetic calls to bring Christian values “back” to government in opposition to secular humanism (Mike Huckabee). Indeed, far from fostering some kind of baseline conformity or pushing the conformist need to join some dominant category of society, it seems these days that economic and political production and persuasion is pinioned overwhelmingly on at least some abstract concept of “difference.” One no longer attempts to “keep up with the Joneses” in their spending habits as much as they want to discriminate themselves, however superficially, from an abstract other; similarly, the chance of promoting or participating in some movement or action of “resistance” has emerged as the fundamental appeal for selling almost anything, whether it be cheeseburgers, cars, or politicians.

As whole, both these changes in economic and political production and the related appropriations or inversions of progressive or resistant tropes compel us to do some hard thinking about concepts of “bias” and “resistance,” particularly within the institutional setting of composition studies pedagogy. Perhaps this shift might best be taken up in reference to what was a touchstone for the early integration of these concepts, and of critical theory in general, into scholarship on progressive pedagogy: Foucault’s “disciplinary power.” Indeed, several decades after the publication and English translation of Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish* it’s worth reflecting back on the relatively enthusiastic reception to, and integration of, Foucault’s model of social power within progressive pedagogical scholarship. Although the response within English studies as a whole, as well as the humanities more generally, largely acknowledged the innovation and clarity of Foucault’s schema, it also voiced a multitude of concerns over whether Foucault’s depiction of power was too capillary or over-determined; as positioned by Foucault as a productive rather than primarily constraining force, and as circulating in networks of both discursive and material practices, Foucault’s thematization was read by many as offering little hope for subjective or collective resistance to power.

The integration of theories of disciplinary power into pedagogical scholarship, however, was a much smoother process. On the one hand this might seem strange: it wouldn’t seem exactly cheering for progressive scholars to see the site of both their research and practice—the school—being placed in the same category as the hospital or factory, let alone the military base or prison. However, on another hand and this is the one that dominated at least most appropriations of Foucault’s work into progressive pedagogy—this comparison could be taken as vastly empowering; if societal power was taken to be a relatively rigid system organized around confined institutional sites through which subjects were molded and monitored, pedagogues could lay claim to at least one of the primary “modes of production” (of dominant culture) and thus have the power to repurpose that environment. In line with the marketing slogan of a window manufacturer popular in my geographical region—“We can do that. We are the Factory!”—progressive pedagogues enthusiastically claimed control of at least one prominent site of disciplinary power, one that could make it possible for them to modify or amend cultural and political production; the school could be restructured to be unlike the prison and opposed to the factory: pedagogical structures could be made decentered and less authoritarian and focus could be shifted from the practices and skills that capitalism could appropriate and exploit to the skills that would allow one to resist appropriation and exploitation.

However, as Foucault himself identified, as disciplinary mechanisms expand they tend to themselves decentralize and diffuse, a process he coded as “swarming” [*L’estaimage*]: “While, on the one hand, the disciplinary establishments increase, their mechanisms have a certain tendency to become ‘de-institutionalized,’ to emerge from the closed fortress in which they once functioned and to circulate in a ‘free’ state; the massive compact disciplines are broken down into flexible methods of control, which may be transferred and adapted” (211). And indeed, the several decades since the publication of *Discipline and Punish* have
largely been a history of such “swarming.” Over the last quarter-century, the economic, medical, educational, and punitive institutional sites Foucault analyzed have been increasingly displaced or dispersed (one need only think here of the surges in such practices as telecommuting and outsourcing, the automation and “informatization” of factory work, the increase of continuing education, distance education and online curricula in the school, the rise of telemedicine and “health informatics,” the privatization of prisons and popularity of “house arrest”).

As Deleuze argues in some of his final works, at least by the early 1990s, what Foucault called “swarming” was less an exception to the rules of disciplinary power than the overwhelmingly common structure of contemporary societal power; much as discipline was thematized as taking over from an earlier form of power—the sovereign—the disciplinary model was now itself being crowded out by more flexible and diffused forms of power that “no longer operate by confining people but through continuous control and instant communication,” ushering in what Deleuze alternately codes as “control,” “communication” or “cybernetic” societies (“Control” 174). Though Deleuze does not parse them in this way, we might use the different descriptive terms he invokes to unpack the variety of changes augured in the emergence of this new formation of power.

“Communication” could foreground, on the one hand, the shift from the prominence on fairly stable institutional sites to mediaspheres, decentralized communicative networks of discourse and exposure. To give a prosaic example, one spends much less time these days “being watched” and much more time “watching”—less likely to be under the direct or implied surveillance of an authority figure or monitor and more time viewing television, video, web content (or otherwise imbricated in media networks). On the other hand, an emphasis on “communication” also highlights changes in economic production, notably a shift from the typology of “production” emphasized in disciplinary society’s paradigmatic example of the factory floor (and the manufacture and sale of material products) to the increasing devotition of energy and resources to “metaproduction,” the selling of services and other labor activities that emphasize the “soft skills” and creative capacities of laborers (customer service, public relations, marketing, demographic research). As several autonomist-influenced economic theorists have foregrounded, the fastest-growing and most productive categories of work are in the fields of immaterial (Lazzarato) and “affective” (Hardt) labor—activities drawing on the cognitive and affective capacities of laborers to produce value within markets, as other tasks are outsourced, automated (done by machine) or “informed” (accomplished through the skilled use of information technologies). This switch in styles of production goes hand in glove with those of consumption, where emergent markets are increasingly won through the buying and selling of subjective experiences and opportunities for communication (look no further than your Facebook account or latest Google web search, for instance) rather than the exchange of “material” goods and services.

Deleuze’s use of the term “cybernetic” could be taken to emphasize not only the general flexibility of social power in the contemporary moment—its functioning through processes of feedback rather than equilibrium—but also the commodification of “information itself” in economics and politics, the value that diverse categories of information (intellectual property, stock predictions, consumer preference data) carries and its concomitant status as an entity to be bought, sold, and protected. To make another contrast with disciplinary society, if you’re being monitored today, you’re probably not the victim of panoptic surveillance and a potential candidate for punishment, but rather the target of demographic research and the potential customer of a niche marketing campaign.

The same might be said of changes in the investigative and persuasive vectors of democratic politics. As Republican campaign consultant Dan Schnur has recently argued, academics get it wrong when they configure political campaigns as ideological struggles over broad swaths of the electorate. Rather, any contemporary election advisor worth his or her salary builds a multiplicity of campaign strategies and targeted appeals in reference to ever smaller, and more highly researched, components of the voting public. In other words, campaign strategists no longer work to “divide and conquer” as much they do to divide, divide, and divide, cutting the electorate into niche categories of not only the famous “soccer moms” and “Nascar dads” that received much media attention over the past decade, but multiplying categories of subjective qualities built around what political advisor Ken Strasma calls “Demographic DNA:” Prius drivers
vs. SUV drivers, Mac vs. PC owners, etc. (qtd. in Lizza 83). Though elections may have previously been won and lost by crafting a standard message that will appeal to the largest possible slice of the populace, they are now hedged on a series of smaller, microtargeted appeals designed to sway ever more specific and smaller categories of voters.

Taken together, these vectors suggest a modality of power more appropriately aligned with the terminology of “control” as opposed to “discipline.” Whereas “discipline” variously connotes self-fashioning in relation to a desired state (such as the “discipline” required of a successful soldier or athlete) and/or the use of punishment as motivation for an individual to assume “correct” behaviors, by contrast the more amorphous term “control” foregrounds the general instrumental goal of manipulation or influence rather than a particular style or system for achieving that goal.

As Manuel Castells writes, “the power of flows overwhelms the flows of power” (402); or perhaps more precisely, we might say that power itself, in both the social and economic realm, operates not through the restriction and maintenance of particular channels of influence or possibility, but rather works increasingly through the creation of, and flexible response to, “flows” of whatever type: the opportunities for greater micro-targeting of subjects and markets that are presented by the decentralization of social and financial networks.

Such a “freeing” of mechanisms of social power, however, has not in any decisive way translated into what we could call an increase in subjective “freedom” in a traditional sense; if anything, social power is both more capillary than ever by virtue of its efficient flexible response to new and emergent modes of subjectivity rather than the costly maintenance of particular categories of identity. Indeed, one would have to revise Adorno’s famous description of twentieth-century consumer capitalism as the system in which “something is provided for all so that none may escape” (123); today, it might be more correct to say that “everyone must provide something so that none may escape”: consumer capitalism and social power succeed not by providing “enough” options to suggest freedom of choice, but by their flexible response to almost any kind of subject or desire as it is created; and, for better or worse, declaring some kind of identity or desire is increasingly the cost of having any kind of participation in contemporary economies and politics, however quotidian

(If you have to allow my local grocery store to track my purchasing practices and demographic data in order to take advantage of the “great deals” offered by their membership card) or monumental (one must have some kind of ideational and demographic position in order to be heard, or at least to “count,” in the public political arena). Indeed, one might even go one step further and state “everyone must be something so that none may escape”; because everyone must have some kind, any kind, of subjectivity whatsoever, that subjectivity will be targeted and some economic or political value will be extracted from it.

Such a shift in the operation of power—from the maintenance of particular subjectivities “desirable” to capitalist functioning to the flexible response to subjectivities or desires of any kind—seems to offer very little strategic room to move “against” such a system. More specifically, in regard to the genealogies I’ve been sketching above, it calls into question the very viability of our traditional conceptions of “domination” and “resistance” as useful tools for diagnosing power in control societies, particularly in one of the former sites of struggle in disciplinary society, the classroom. All of which asks some challenging questions of the progressive pedagogue: to appropriate a line from bell hooks, how can one “teach to transgress” when the system itself runs on transgression? How can one transmit skills to students that would allow them to resist “dominant culture” and capitalist exploitation when these processes themselves function through extracting value from notions and practices of difference and resistance? Indeed, we might say that the pragmatic challenge facing the would-be progressive pedagogue today is no longer, as Richard Miller once suggested, realizing that the “arts of complicity” and “arts of resistance” can be balanced in the classroom—that the skills students might use to succeed within dominant social and economic systems and the skills they might use to resist or dismantle that system are not “mutually exclusive” (25). Rather, in light of the collapsing of such categories in a regime of “control,” we might have to come to terms with the fact that they are now mutually inclusive: strategies of difference and resistance, long the bread and butter of the progressive classroom, have reached a null parity with those of domination; they are now themselves the very mechanisms through which whatever we might call “domination” takes place.
Aesthetic Ethics

None of this would appear to be “good news” for progressive pedagogy, an undertaking that has largely staked its claim to fomenting critical consciousness through the use of concepts and theories of difference and resistance; the use of such strategies, it would seem, has become moribund in the face of their co-option and absorption by hypercapitalism and populist conservatism. However, in a more affirmative reading, and this is the one I am interested in exploring in what follows, one could argue that the pedagogical use of these techniques and practices is more valuable now than ever, and that composition studies scholars are in a particularly advantageous position to exploit these practices. However ironic it might initially seem, progressive pedagogy has in a certain sense, “won”: the privileging of concepts of “resistance” and “difference” that pedagogues attempted to interject into dominant culture and discourse have become both common and increasingly valuable; in many ways, given the genealogies sketched above, they have themselves become the dominant discourse of political and economic life.

The fact that this change in dominant structures of persuasion and social power has not necessarily resulted in a more equitable or just society, I take it, is not so much a reason to discard our investments in the traditional concepts prized in progressive pedagogy as it is a call to rethink the ethical and political imperative behind the teaching of these practices and its relationship to their “instrumental” or performative value in contemporary culture and economics. Which is to say, when “difference” and “resistance” have become pervasive qualities driving culture, what I have been calling the “liberal bias” of progressive pedagogy has lost much of its value as an ethical core for composition studies instruction, and it has become increasingly difficult to position “resistance” as any kind of necessarily salutory goal.

One would have to, on the one hand, rethink the thematics of resistance as whole in order to attend to its current identity not as a scarce social quality that can be used as a wedge against dominant culture, but as networks of practices that would have to be leveraged or linked in some way in the service of particular goals. On the other hand, one would equally have to redefine what we mean by “critical consciousness” as a goal of

the progressive classroom and generally as an object of instruction in critical and cultural theory in composition studies. I take it that few progressive pedagogues maintain an unqualified commitment to the idea that the attainment of “critical consciousness” is inherently liberatory for student subjectivity or that it necessarily leads, in a lockstep fashion, to more progressive political or ethical behavior by students (indeed, the last two decades of scholarship on this topic, including the response to Berlin’s work outlined above, have foregrounded either explicitly or implicitly an increasing rejection of earlier, more optimistic, work in support of this point). However, my wager here is that we would have to go one step further and forward critical consciousness not as the purchase on the distinction between a student’s “authentic” or correct subjectivity and the ideal vectors installed in subjects as part of their interpellation into societal structures (and “dominant” ecologies of communication and persuasion), but rather as the distinction between students’ belief structures or ethical frameworks and what the types of persuasion and communication they may have to forward their agendas.

Simply put, if there is a lesson for the “left” to learn from right-wing appropriations of discourses of difference, marginalization, and resistance, it would seem to be that there are no ethically “pure” critical frames or persuasive strategies that would, of necessity, coincide with particular values (equality, social justice, and the like), and, similarly, that some of the most pervasive and successful rhetorical strategies of the last few decades have been those that have made strategic use of discourses that would appear to be anathema to the ideal values of their users. For better or worse, this would appear to be the new playing field of contemporary political persuasion, and those with progressive aims may have to be at least as good as conservatives in manipulating such strategies to effectively participate in the current terrain.

Pedagogically, one would have to make the ethical imperative of the classroom a training of students in rhetorical and aesthetic flexibility—including the use of what might be taken as exploitive and manipulative techniques—rather than a base recognition of operations of manipulation or exploitation and an attempt to prepare students to resist these vectors. In other words, one would have to sever, in a certain sense, our tendency to connect aesthetic and rhetorical strategies to particular ethical or
answers the opportunities the world opens up before him in the guise of fortuna. Its meaning is best rendered as “virtuosity,” that is, an excellence we attribute to the performing arts (as distinguished from the creative arts of making), where an accomplishment lies in the performance itself and not in an end product which outlasts the activity that brought it into existence and becomes independent of it. The virtuosic-ship of Machiavelli’s virile somehow reminds us of the fact, although Machiavelli hardly knew it, that the Greeks always used such metaphors as flute-playing, dancing, healing, and seafaring to distinguish political from other activities, that is, that they drew their analogies from those arts in which virtuosity of performance is decisive. (153)

As Arendt goes on to gloss, virtuosity illustrated that aesthetics has always had a “strong affinity with politics,” and this relation seems to be even stronger in the twentieth-century in which political discourse has taken increasingly performative and spectacular shapes.

Moreover, Machiavelli’s engagement with virtuosity was of a piece with a larger epistemological and ethical schema within his work. As Arendt explains, her somewhat counterintuitive embrace of Machiavelli as an ethicist was in part inspired by his position as one of the first political theorists to mark the “exhaustion” of Platonic philosophy, and in particular its reliance on the revelation of “truth” and the possibility of mutual understanding or ideational consensus among individuals, as a viable political model (Promise 38). Machiavelli did, of course, make epistemological distinctions in his work, writing famously, for instance, in The Prince, of the need to “set aside fantasies . . . and consider what happens in fact” (55). However, his intervention in this regard was by no means an attempt to discount popular opinion or seek a “higher ground” of epistemological or ethical valuation, but, conversely, to focus on ways of working with or through existing dominant ideational structures and deploying them for strategic purposes. Ethically, this led Machiavelli to a deep suspicion of the value of any claim to ethical rightness that did not cash out as a strategic gain for the individual claiming such values; that is, the appearance or suggestion of ethical “correctness” or fortitude on behalf of an individual could certainly be leveraged for political purposes (to enhance the ethos of the individual or suggest their affinity with an audience that claims similar ethical concerns), but in and of itself it seemed

ideational frame (or, one might say, the “public” performance of a discourse from the “private” values of an individual producing that discourse).

Although precisely how one might put such objectives into practice—and, more generally, how we can productively respond to the “ironic encounters” between the traditional tropes of critical theory and dominant modes of economic and political production that I have been outlining in this essay—is likely a question we will have to do some hard thinking about in the years to come, I want to suggest a possible theoretical and historical exemplar here through the works of Hannah Arendt. Of course, Arendt might seem like an unlikely ally insofar as I have had some bad words in this essay for some of the concepts for which her work is best known; indeed, two of Arendt’s greatest legacies are works focused on the public sphere of equitable communicative action (The Human Condition) and the necessity of critical judgment in political action (The Life of the Mind), both of which have been associated above with the “liberal bias” of progressive composition studies pedagogy that I have been critiquing. However, I am interested here in a vector of Arendt’s work that gets considerably less critical ink: her longstanding engagement with the ancient Greek categories of areté and virtus and the more modern corollary of “virtuosity”—the performative and non-teleological vectors of aesthetic and rhetorical action.

Although virtuosity had been conceptually developed before Arendt by such figures as the original Sophists, Aristotle, and Marx, to variously thematize the valuation of aesthetic and rhetorical performance as well as the relatively novel position of aesthetic work in relation to broader economic structures of labor practices, Arendt focused her study of virtuosity most consistently on the writings of Machiavelli, in which the linking of ethic and aesthetics within the category of virtuosity, as well as its relations to political action, was strongest. For Arendt, the value of Machiavelli’s appropriation of virtuosity was, at least initially, its precise attention to the similarity between politics and aesthetics as domains in which the actions are best evaluated in their immediate performance. As she writes in the late essay “What is Freedom?”:

Freedom as inherent in action is perhaps best illustrated by Machiavelli’s concept of virtus, the excellence with which man
to hold little political value and might even be a debilitating force on individuals. As Machiavelli argues, “goodness is not enough” (Discourses 30); the creation and maintenance of a positive ethical subjectivity holds little potential for political impact as it is often used as an excuse for staying above a political scene populated by “less ethical” individuals. Furthermore, as Machiavelli emphasizes, this self-evaluation can easily be a mask for resentment or envy of others who have had more political success.

Arendt would again assay this broader social and pedagogical import of virtuosity as a political and ethical concept in her late study of Kantian ethics. Kant would once again seem an odd selection, given the usual association of Kant with transcendental reason and normative systems of judgment. However, in her focus on The Critique of Judgment, Arendt keyoned in on what Tobin Siebers has argued is a much neglected aspect of Kantian aesthetics: its privileging of aesthetic modes of persuasion precisely because they require the mobilizations of an audience’s predispositions, rather than requiring an “objective” or antagonistic respondent (33). For Arendt, this blending of aesthetic, epistemological, and ethical vectors suggested the necessity of disavowing particular critical or ideological frameworks for evaluating rhetorical or aesthetic discourses in favor of analyzing the pragmatic and performative effects of these discourses on an audience; one must, Arendt writes, be concerned “with the individual event, the particular act,” and “take the particular event in its own terms, without relating it to any larger process” (Lectures 56; emphasis added). Although Arendt codes this perspective as “impartial,” she articulates neither our traditional notion of objectivity nor the creation of a “higher” plane of judgment that has long been the goal of progressive pedagogy with composition studies: “You see that impartiality is obtained by taking the viewpoints of other into account; impartiality is not the result of some higher standpoint that would then actually settle the dispute by being altogether above the melee” (Lectures 42). Thought perhaps more explicit in her work on Kant, Arendt’s interest in prioritizing commonplace sentiments was equally inspired by her longstanding interest in early Greek culture. As Franco Volpe emphasizes, one of the most prominent debts Arendt owed to Aristotelianism was her privileging of the strategic value of doxa, or commonplace views, over the more rarified pursuit of the “truth” that might lay behind them. Aristotle’s analysis of “the differentia-

tion of the epistemological degrees of universality and precision,” Volpe writes, led him to recognize the impossibility of maintaining a “total and radical opposition between doxa and episteme” (15). Although one can see how foregoing such a distinction might hypostatize on a critique of the impossibility of pure epistemology itself, for neo-Aristotelians like Arendt, it was more commonly taken to stress the necessity of manipulating doxa in crafting effective discourse. In this sense, then, rather than forwarding some utopian conception of the possibilities for public debate or intersubjective communication, the “pluralism” Arendt advocates here is mobilized in the service of persuasion—the pragmatic potential for this “impartiality” to increase an individual’s chance of influencing an audience’s actions. Such a perspective—the approach to a rhetorical or aesthetic discourse in its singularity and “in its own terms”—is necessary, Arendt argues, not only to ethically respond to an antagonist, but to maintain both the capacity to be affected by discourse and to affect others through discourse in turn.

I take it that we may need to recuperate virtuosity as a critical and pedagogical tool in order to respond to the “ironic encounters” of critical theory and public politics of the present moment; though we may not have been able to reinvent the “public sphere” of equitable discursive interaction that Arendt writes of positively in The Human Condition, we are awash with what she termed “publicity”: the performative and non-teleological vectors of economic and political production have increasingly become the norm rather than the exception over the past few decades. Reimagining virtuosity for contemporary pedagogical purposes would likely have to take place through something like an inversion of the relationship between ethics and aesthetics that formed the jumping-off point for progressive pedagogy within composition studies.

As mentioned in the introduction to this essay, the birth of progressive pedagogy in composition studies was in many ways configured as a rejection of, or correction to, the Arnoldian, elitist conception of the Western aesthetic tradition and cultural education (and indeed, it was a not uncommon practice in the 80s and 90s for progressive pedagogy scholars to dig up Arnold’s corpus to kick it around one more time). However, as much as these pedagogical theories rested on disavowing the Arnoldian contention that training in the humanities does not prepare one for
participation in public politics, they maintained, if not amplified, the privileged position of training in aesthetics and interpretation of culture as a way to resist more “base” or commercial social discourses. As John McGowan argues, the integration of cultural studies and critical theory into English studies “marks our Victorianism” (141); these developments continue the Victorian notion that education in culture can be a “ firmer bulwark against commercialism,” and a more productive force of subjectivity, than, for instance, students’ pre-existing commitments to such communities as family or religion (124). Indeed, the primary difference introduced in progressive pedagogical critiques of Victorian aesthetic training might be best taken not as a turn away from the privileging of aesthetics, but as a renewed focus on the importance of ethics in two keys: the claims aesthetic and rhetorical productions make on student subjectivity and the concomitant consideration of pedagogues’ responsibilities to impart training in ethical thinking and behavior. In this shift, the Arnoldian investment in integrating students into the cultural “common” (or the “dominant” masquerading as the “the common”), was replaced by a new emphasis on how one can read and write in a “resistant” or singular fashion. Progressive pedagogy became oriented around what we might call an “ethical aesthetics”—a precise attention to the ethical interpretation of aesthetics and the relation between ethical or social values and particular forms or styles of aesthetic and rhetorical production. However, given the situation of social control and political and economic structures that I have been outlining throughout this essay, we may be in need of something more like “an aesthetic ethics”: an ethical investment in the training of strategic flexibility in the use of rhetorical and aesthetic forms (rather than the correct “critical” judgment of these vectors) and a concentration on teaching students how to leverage the “common”—the existing field of communicative and persuasive forces even when these strategies might make use of tactics of exploitation or appropriation that seem out of sync with the ethical values of the individual deploying them. I end here with a few schematic suggestions for how one might go about integrating such objectives into composition studies pedagogy.

Move from a Discourse of (Student) Need to One of (Student) Want

Around a decade ago, Sharon Crowley argued that the composition studies curriculum, particularly general education and “required” courses, was historically cathexed to what she coded “a discourse of student need”; the stipulation of what skills or experience students “need” that might be fulfilled by curriculum. Crowley periodizes, for instance, the genealogy of the first-year composition course from its positioning as a “site wherein students could be exposed to liberal culture” in the 1920s and 1930s, to a “venue for the inculcation of citizenship and the distillation of democratic values” in the post–World War II 1940s, to its mere current iteration, as a concomitant to the rise of progressive pedagogical scholarship, wherein classroom instruction is geared toward making “students aware of social inequalities” (250). For Crowley, the discourse of student need was problematic, for one, because definitions of these needs became increasingly controversial as they became more specific (for instance, few would disagree that an introductory composition course should fulfill a “need” for better writing skills, but less instrumental objectives, particularly those based on particular conceptions of student subjectivity or interiority and the “needs” associated with these subjectivities, might make too large of a claim to “speak for” the student). Secondly, Crowley argues, the general focus on “needs” and their possible fulfillment by required courses reinforced the traditional conception of courses as service-oriented or remedial endeavors rather than as legitimate intellectual endeavors in their own right. As a result, Crowley suggests, this discourse creates a fractured relationship between such courses and “the public”; these courses are meant in some way to serve “the public good,” but are undermined in regards to what skills they might teach students for interacting in public politics.

In yet another occurrence of the ironic encounters between progressive political theory and conservative appropriations of the same, conservative critiques of composition studies pedagogy have similarly come to focus on a discourse of student needs, in both their reactive (“students need to be protected from the indoctrination objectives of their liberal instructors”) and affirmative (“students need a greater introduction to the ‘Great Books’ or ‘traditional’ Western cultural values”) registers. My suggestion here is that some productive ground clearing, both in our responses to conservative critiques of progressive pedagogy and generally in our consideration of the foci of composition studies pedagogy, might be
Achieved by switching focus from such a discourse of "needs" to one of "wants." More precisely, I am arguing not that we should presume students’ desires, nor that we necessarily need them to disclose extensive information about their goals and agendas, but simply that we attempt to illustrate for students the ways that the skills taught in the composition course are useful for them in obtaining concrete goals (both personal and political). Concentrating on what students "want" would shift our attention away from identifying precisely what categories of subjectivity are held by students (exploited, mystified, reactionary) or groups of individuals being studied by these students, and how their desires might be linked to these categories, and instead turn our focus on these desires themselves and how they might be linked to classroom praxis. Most pragmatically, students of whatever political stripe are more likely to be interested in how their academic work can sharpen the skills needed to impact public politics rather than a detailed concentration on how their particular political inclination may or may not have been formed by their previous subjective experiences and identity formation.

Perhaps more importantly though, focusing on the "wants" rather than supposed "needs" of social or political factions engaged in the classroom might help us move beyond the identity politics that has been both a core of progressive pedagogy and, more recently, a tool appropriated by populist conservative movements. As Wendy Brown argues in "Wounded Attachments," the focus on the identities of disenfranchised groups and their concomitant "needs" (for restitution, amelioration, and so on) has fostered a "politics of recrimination" where one must reaffirm one's status as a victim of outside forces in order to make a claim for any kind of redress (406). A shift, Brown suggests, from discourses of "being" (the claim of a particular subjectivity) to discourses of "wanting to be" (desired objectives) could go a long way toward making ontological claims more expressively political. More immediately, and in reference to the classroom, it might also help us configure whatever groups are under our review (conservative voters, disenfranchised minorities, contemporary consumers) not as groups of individuals whose shared subjectivities we must investigate in order to diagnose their subjective or unconscious investments, but rather as parties holding (at least for them) legitimate claims that require some kind of response from us.

Conceive Ethics as a "Value" in Pragmatic and Performative Contexts

In a similar vein, we may have rethink the general ethical obligations of the educator to address training in the kinds of rhetorical flexibility in tune with the ironies of contemporary politics, rather than the construction of a subjectivity that might resist or remain free from "unethical" discourses or appeals. We might find a canon for this objective by modifying the so-called Socratic paradox, "virtue (aretē) is knowledge." The paradox was traditionally interpreted to suggest that enlightenment or the ability to form the "correct" opinion will produce ethical behavior, and/or that the highest capacity available to an individual is to obtain enlightenment about the ways knowledges are formed. These are also, in many ways, the objectives of many pedagogical programs structured around progressive goals. However, as many have discussed, the translation of aretē shifts depending on its context, connecting not only moral excellence, but excellence in general, the ability to act appropriately according to one's role, or "to make oneself useful to the community." We might seize on this conflation between virtue as an ethical principle and virtue as a free-ranging excellence and configure, in pace with Machiavelli, that virtuosity can be a kind of virtue, and aesthetic flexibility an ethics. Pedagogy keyed to an "aestheticized" rhetoric—training in persuasion focusing on building the capacities to affect others and to make use of common sentiments—as it so often was for Aristotle, Machiavelli, and Arendt, can become a privileged tool for inculcating the skills necessary to participate in a system of social power that requires unusual amounts of intellectual and ethical elasticity. In this sense, pedagogical ethics would emerge not in the capacity to discern or pass judgment, but by on both the part of the pupil and the pedagogue, the ability to be flexibly responsive in rhetorical performance and to work within the established conceptions of interlocutors and antagonists.

Conceive the deployment of a position or perspective as an inhabitation and performance

We might also draw on the practices of the Greek sophists, some of the first educators in the Western tradition to both thematize virtuosity as a category as well as concentrate on the relation of pedagogical activity to the civic and ethical commitments of students. In particular, we could draw
vectors from their consistent concentration on developing capacities to model and perform the opposing sides of an issue (antilogy), the technique of *dissoi logos* that was historically used to foreground the performative aspects of persuasive discourse as well as the ways identical evidence and contexts could be mobilized by orators and writers holding disparate objectives.\(^6\)

I take it that such a practice may be valuable now for precisely the same reasons it has been viewed as ethically suspect in contemporary pedagogical criticism. Over a half-century ago, Richard Murphy argued in his “The Ethics of Debating Both Sides” that it was unethical to require or encourage students to engage in *dissoi logos* because it compelled student to argue, even if merely as an intellectual exercise, for positions they did not sincerely hold and thus undermined the connection between public performance and private commitment in general and the cultivation of students’ personal positions in particular. In the decades hence, these practices, then and now an old saw of debating or forensics societies, would become increasingly out of step as pedagogical theory in rhetoric and writing increased its concentration on both the personal experiences of students and the politics of composition studies as a whole.

Indeed, Yaming Liu has assayed the consistent and longstanding reluctance toward such a flexibility in both pedagogical scholarship and populist political media in reference to what he calls the “control of rhetorical resources”: categories of persuasive techniques that are declared ethically allowable or off-limits based on their relation to users’ core beliefs. Liu focuses on Dick Morris—a political consultant perhaps best known for having sold his services variously over the years to Republican and Democratic candidates alike—as a particularly salient example of rhetorical flexibility and our common concerns about the ethics of this capacity. Public uneasiness over Morris’ flexibility, Liu argues, is mirrored in contemporary rhetorical and pedagogical criticism in which rhetors are similarly “warned against thinking and ‘working both sides of the aisles’” despite the fact that the contemporary political landscape seems to demand such a canny and shifting mobilization of rhetorical resources and oppositional viewpoints (324). Overcoming such an allergy to rhetorical flexibility would again require us to rethink the ethical potential of pedagogy to consider that ethics resides in action, in the effects produced, rather than the adoption of a particular subject position or a well-worn consistency to an established viewpoint. For one, assigning students to argue against what may be their own viewpoints works to emphasize how training in rhetoric and writing may be, more than anything else, a building of facilities and capacities. Moreover, having students adopt and inhabit an oppositional (or at least appositional) viewpoint is perhaps the most intense engagement with differing views that can be created in a classroom. Although exposing students to perspectives that are different from their own, or putting students with opposing viewpoints or investments in conversation with each other, have long been tools of the progressive classroom, having students actively inhabit such a contrasting perspective is perhaps our most salutary option for de-cathecting any overly rigid ideations or associations students may have formed.

Such strategies do come, however, with their own risks. Many colleagues and friends to whom I shared earlier versions of this essay worried that the strategies suggested here might not so much create a classroom fostering a (small “r”) republicanism of the Livian or Machiavellian variety as much as they might encourage the adoption of (capital “R”) Republican values: that it is a pedagogical environment in which (at best) “students come in as Republicans and leave as Republicans” or (at worst) “turns students into Republicans.” I am sympathetic to such worries; on the one hand, I do hope that instruction in composition studies influences the political thinking of students and, on the other hand, it is true that many of the strategies suggested here might be taken as more closely aligned with conservative, rather than leftist, political styles (even as they are inspired by right-wing appropriations of leftist discourses). However, I also take it that this concentration on the partisan political investments of students (and the implied focus on judging success of a class or of students in this regard), is precisely the kind of encroachment targeted by conservative student critiques of composition studies pedagogy, and, as the above responses suggest, there may be some legitimacy to at least this vector of their conservatism claims. Perhaps more importantly, such responses also configure the ethical and political potential of students in relation to fairly rigid identities or subjective investments, and it has been my argument in this essay that this is exactly the kind of thinking that we may have to move beyond in composition studies if we expect both instructors and students
to effectively impact the contemporary political and economic landscapes.

In other words, considering the value of such practices as those outlined above, is, I would argue, not so much important as a prophylactic against the kinds of conservative critiques mentioned at the start of this essay, but rather as a way to effectively respond to the changes in contemporary social power of which such ironic encounters are merely a symptom. For over a half-century composition studies has done remarkable work in keeping considerations of politics and social power a vital part of the theorizing and praxis of writing instruction. Such attention has inspired immensely productive analyses of the systems through which power and persuasion circulate, particularly in institutional cultures, and the often deleterious effects of their present arrangement. However, as Susan Miller once noted of the long shadow cast by Berlin’s legacy, we have done less well in creating students who can participate, rather than critique, these formations. Acknowledging the debt owed Berlin for drawing educators’ attention toward addressing in the English classroom questions of politics and power, Miller questions whether such attention has too often favored fostering “awareness of generic power” and “interpretation” of social forces, rather than the training of students in the “guerrilla stylistics” that would be necessary to participate within, or through, these forces (500). Today, more than ever, we risk too much by not attending to the need for such “stylistics.” If social power still (or always) functioned through relatively stable, if not explicitly apparent, systems of identity and authority, then awareness of such systems and its exclusions and manipulations, would be effective strategies for resistance and ameliorative action. However, if, as suggested in this essay, contemporary social power is increasingly premised on broad inclusion, and the flexible appropriation of traditionally “resistant” categories of marginality and difference, then we may indeed have to teach students not only how to account for, but how to participate in, such terrain if we hope to continue composition studies’ long history of critical work on politics and power.

Wayne State University
Detroit, Michigan

Notes

1. For more on the alternately celebratory and mournful descriptions of the death of theory, see the opening of Nealon’s “Post Deconstructive?” (68–69).

2. A reader might argue that I am attributing a degree of complexity to protests such as “Conservative Coming Out Day” that is not explicit in its agenda; and indeed, this is perhaps a generous reading of their platform. However, I am more interested in the possibilities of using this reading as a thought experiment for evaluating contemporary pedagogy than in demarcating the explicit position behind this movement.

3. Indeed, though conservative white male complaints about their “disenfranchisement” in discourses of identity politics have traditionally received the most attention in popular media, as George Yudice argues in “What’s a Straight White Man to Do?” many white males with progressive political meanings have also voiced the awkwardness of their participation in such movements. As Yudice writes, the theatics of identity politics left many such individuals believing that “difference,” when it “functions as the grounds for politics of recognition, is only for the oppressed” and thus “because straight white men are perceived by progressives within identity politics and multiculturalism as the center of dominant culture” they have difficulty participating in progressive political movements (280).

4. This is not to suggest, of course, that progressive pedagogy has not taken several competing routes post-Berlin, nor that there is a hard party-line within scholarship on this issue. Indeed, many scholarly responses to the kinds of conflicts under review in this essay have explicitly suggested the need to rethink techniques of “contradiction and confrontation” that suffused early work in critical pedagogy. For instance, Stephen Fishman and Lucille Parkinson McCarthy have suggested that we might draw on Dewey’s theories for fostering the “cooperative and community-building skills” necessary for the kind of political change usually sought by progressive pedagogues (342). Rejecting lockstep approaches to collaborative critique, Fishman and McCarthy instead point to the salutary effects of putting students with differing viewpoints into conversation with one another, encounters through which their positions are often carefully rethought (and the more radical ones softened). To give just one more example, Rosa Eberly has argued for the potential of treating the composition course as a “proto-public space” that teaches students flexible skills in deliberation and argumentation. My focus in this essay, however, is on progressive pedagogues’ longstanding interest in theories of social power and the difficulty, in the contemporary moment, of keeping that focus during a time where determining might count as “resistance” to such power very difficult. For this reason, I focus below on work post-Berlin that insists on the importance of social power as a necessary subject for contemporary pedagogues.
5. See Finkelberg and Hawhee for enlightening discussions of the shifting meanings and uses of arête in Greek society.

6. See Walzer for an overview of the historical and theoretical particulars of this process. Of course, the sophists have already been claimed many times over as content providers for the type of progressive pedagogies I have been questioning throughout this essay; numerous pedagogues have configured the sophists as the preeminent "progressive radicals" of their time who dared to overturn dominant sentiments and/or levy critique against all claims to transhistorical truth. Alan W. France and Karen Fitts, for instance, take the sophists as inspiration for their own practices of revealing their political dispositions to students and of engaging antagonistically with students that hold opposing views. Such a technique is often promoted in the interest of both full disclosure and pedagogical consistency—if a pedagogical program holds that no individual's values and political beliefs can be divorced from their subject position, then it only makes sense for educators to reveal as many relevant aspects of their identity as possible to their students. This rationale is often joined by an emphasis on the productive work it can produce in class because it forces students to respond to their instructors' advocacy. As France and Fitts write, "in order to be ethical, instructors should articulate their political commitments," and an instructor's active advocacy of these imperatives compels students to develop potent strategies for resisting them: "In the struggle to advance our own political agenda against our students' resistance, we have found a way to create a space, an occasion, and method for cultivating public discourse" (61). Fitts and France's detailing of the myriad ways students "resist" their advocacy presents a strong case against what they refer to as conservative fears that oppositional pedagogy will produce students who readily parrot their instructors' politics. However, we might hesitate over whether it adequately responds to another criticism—often voiced by conservative critics of composition studies pedagogy—that students are increasingly called upon to either accept their instructor's static political advocacy or continually defend or justify their own dissenting view. Indeed, contra the sophists' emphasis on training their pupils to defend various sides of a position and in reference to divergent audiences, students in Fitts and France's classes are increasingly goaded to respond to one: their instructors.


