SYMPOSIUM

Perestroika's Last Stand

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In 10 years, Perestroika has gone from a "raucous" forum discussing a wide range of issues to a largely moribund list that posts occasional jobs and attacks those who dare to bring up controversial topics.

A good example of the decline of the list was illustrated by one participant's recent attempt to raise the issue of Glenn Beck's slander of Frances Fox Piven and the late Richard Cloward. The poster was attacked by some group members for "politicizing" Perestroika. These members claimed that the list was a no-politics zone for debating methodological issues. Since Glenn Beck did not hold a tenured position in the discipline, others felt that his ideas were not rational enough to warrant a response. Some on the list (perhaps with scant knowledge of left-wing media) proposed approaching Rachel Maddow, and while a few media outlets did take up this case, it never reached the main talkies. In the end, however, Perestroikans failed to stand up for the integrity of the free and wide-ranging discourse they claim to champion.

Contrast Perestroika's weakened present state with the lively and challenging character of Mr. Perestroika's original missive and the debate that ensued (Perestroika 2005). The original Perestroikan concerns, in my view, were never about methods in the narrow sense, but about how these methodological questions raised issues about our identity as a discipline. The point of criticizing the dominance of rational choice and other quantitative models is to acknowledge their failure to help us make sense of the real world we inhabit. Methodological failures are intimately tied to practical failures. In and of themselves, quantitative models shorn of interpretive frameworks tell us little about what we ought to do or how to employ political understanding in a productive way. In practice, these methods have been largely misleading (see, e.g., Green and Shapiro 1996). What is the point of knowledge of politics for the public world? This was a question that discussions of Bent Flyvbjerg's conception of a phronetic social science were meant to raise (Flyvbjerg 2001; Caterino and Schram 2006).

These shortcomings are, however, linked to larger social and political forces shaping the way knowledge is organized and used.[1] Perestroika had a chance to become a grassroots movement for reform in the discipline. Members gave talks at local departments and raised awareness of alternatives to a one-dimensional, one-size-fits-all version of political science. Discussion on the listserv included graduate students and sometimes adjuncts and teachers from smaller, less prestigious schools. The identity of the discipline plays out on these campuses just as much as at Harvard, Yale, or Chicago. Too often, however, as graduate students who sometimes spoke anonymously (out of fear of reprisals) and other critics raised issues, attempts to censor them took place. In its earlier phases, however, these attempts were parried. Later resistance was less successful.

So what happened? Basically, the Perestroika leadership made some fateful decisions that removed the power of initiative and quashed grassroots potential. The decision to run candidates for APSA office stands as the most important of these decisions. While well-meaning, this action had an unintended effect. Candidates for these offices need to possess a certain amount of distinction—by professional standards, if not in reality. Thus, Perestroika began to move from a more insurgent focus to an elite-driven one. While this shift may be seen by some as a normal outcome, it was unfortunate in this case, because Perestroika neither formally endorsed any candidate nor had a particular platform on which anyone agreed. It is hard to identify any elite-driven reform that has a connection to the initiatives of the group. I cannot think of many positive outcomes that have resulted from this plan, which clearly sapped the power of initiatives from below. It seems to me that Perestroikans should have known better.

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The Perestroika movement has always been characterized by two strains. A more progressive strain wants to examine notions of disciplinary power and authority. A second, more conservative strain that is more academic then ideological has

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resisted criticism of power and privilege in academic life. By the later part of the decade, however, the more conservative impulse came to predominate, possibly because conservatives were uncomfortable with having their academic privilege called into question. Without this element of challenge, Perestroika seemed more interested in protecting the interests of the well-off in academia from the threats of the less powerful, rather than vice versa.

Tenured academics, even those of a critical bent, like to think of academia as the secular equivalent of a sacred space of knowledge, and to view critics as heretics. That world and its comfortable status quo are rapidly changing. Gaye Tuchman's analysis of academia in Wannabe U is one of the most literate in a series of works detailing the transformation of the university into a business enterprise in which the extraction of monetary value trumps learning (Tuchman 2009; Washburn 2006; Newfield 2008; Slaughter and Rhodes 2009). As in other professions, academic faculty no longer control their profession, but instead are regulated by the imperatives of the market and management. There is a large reserve army of contingent faculty with virtually no rights at all (Bousquet 2008). If these trends continue, this could well be the last generation of academia in America in which tenured faculty are a significant group.

This trend is by no means irrelevant to the concerns of Perestroika. Recently, Martha Nussbaum noted that the "radical changes" in "what democratic societies teach the young" threaten to produce a generation of "useful machines," not "citizens who can think for themselves, criticize tradition and understand the significance of another person's sufferings and achievements" (Nussbaum 2010). The latter was sadly lacking at times in the Perestroika group. The linkage of interpretative theory and phronetic social science is closely tied to the tradition of the humanities, whose decline Nussbaum laments. Yet this tradition is just what is likely to be thrown by the wayside everywhere—except for the elite schools—in the new managerial university. ■

NOTE

1. For one account of the rise of rational choice, see Amadae (2003).

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