Theories and Methodologies

Theory Camp versus Commie Camp

ANDY HINES

What can be learned about the trajectory of the cultural turn in Marxism in the United States by analyzing one form that marshaled its arrival—the summer camp? To answer this question, I focus on summer gatherings within and beyond the academy that competed to define Marxist culture and politics in the United States. Throughout the second half of the twentieth century, the summer camp and the conference were used by party communists and socialists and academic Marxists for the creation of a political culture and for professional training, while liberal and conservative groups used the same kinds of gatherings seeking to shore up US cultural identification. Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture, a conference that took place in Illinois in 1983, was situated at a crossroads between that of the theory camp and that of the party- or union-affiliated camp. The institutional form of this gathering is a watershed for American cultural studies because while its main project was to establish a professional discourse, albeit one that was politically interested (the goal of the theory camp), it persuaded many of its participants—some of whom colloquially and, perhaps, snidely referred to the event as "commie camp"—that it sought to build a political culture (the goal of the party- or union-affiliated camp).

The position of the 1983 conference between these two summer-learning models reveals a transposition of strategies adopted by some academic Marxists in their pursuit of cultural study and strategies in pursuit of the establishment of a political culture by the wider American left. These transpositions are familiar now because, as in the 1980s, the left—academic and otherwise—seeks to establish its priorities amid interlocking forms of backlash from capital and the state at large and, more immediately, from trustees, university

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administrations, and donors. While I gesture toward how efforts to build political discourse and political culture unfold in extra-academic spaces, my focus is on how these discussions still take place within—and are shaped by—professional organizations.

The structures and strategic goals of the 1983 Illinois conference emerge out of professionalizing theory camps (some *avant la lettre*) like those of the Kenyon School of English, the Indiana School of Letters, and the School of Criticism and Theory. The 1983 conference also took cues from the then recently established summer program of the Marxist Literary Group, which it temporarily subsumed. By contrast, camps that were affiliated with the Communist Party USA, the American Socialist Society, or the American labor movement carried an oblique connection to the strategic interest in teaching and the development of a Black feminist critical practice that coalesced in the journal *The Radical Teacher*, the organ for core members of the MLA Radical Caucus. The 1983 conference oscillated between and collapsed these tendencies; it serves as a useful case study because this conflation of the two models came to characterize political activity within literary studies as the Cold War waned and neoliberalism rose and amid the intensification of political repression in the present.

The various factions seeking to define the summer camp and the political culture of professional academics emerge out of a debate about the strategic course for political action in the late 1960s. Barbara Ehrenreich and John Ehrenreich identify a tension in the New Left between those who take a reformist approach to the professions and those who reject the professions outright. They refer to the former as "radicals in the professions" and to the latter as the "new communist movement" (15) that encouraged its members to "'proletarianize' themselves in outlook, life style, and even occupation" (17). Both strategies develop from professionals simultaneously acting on behalf of their own class interests and denying their coherence as a class in the first place. This contradiction bedeviled lawyers, physicians, and even accountants, but it proliferated especially among the professoriat, particularly as they operated as professional emblems of their specific disciplines (historians, sociologists, literary critics, and so on).

The Ehrenreichs list as an example of the "radicals in the profession" tendency the New University Conference (NUC). The NUC seemed to give the Ehrenreichs the very name for this tack, since the group formed as an "adult unit" of the Students for a Democratic Society at a 1967 conference at the University of Michigan called Radicals in the Professions (Schrecker 350). The NUC cohered around its anti–Vietnam War platform, but it gained much of its organizational force by serving as an umbrella organization for discipline-based radical caucuses. The MLA Radical Caucus carried close ties to the NUC at its inception. The Radical Caucus's poster protest at the 1968 convention of the MLA in New York City drew national attention after Louis Kampf was arrested along with two graduate students (Ohmann 28).[1] Among other effects, the dustup led to six to eight hundred people attending the conference business meeting, where Kampf was elected second vice president—and thus future president—of the MLA (Schrecker 345).

As part of its anti–Vietnam War stance, the MLA Radical Caucus directly challenged the foundations of professional literary study. This challenge aligned the Radical Caucus's interests with those parts of the profession vulnerable to proletarianization because of their proximity to so-called feminized service work, particularly teaching. One anonymous Radical Caucus author in a 1969 call to action challenged the "Mother Language Association" for prioritizing the production of scholarly work above the work of the classroom: "We demand an end to the MLA's hypocrisy about its functions and purposes. We hope to initiate a frank, honest discussion of the crisis in literary culture and the teaching profession. Join us in opposing the policies of the MLA and its exploitation of teachers" ("Mother Language Association"). Though the NUC would dissolve by 1972, an emphasis on labor issues surrounding teaching, the establishment of childcare centers on campuses, strategies for full-time and part-time faculty unionization, and the development of a repertoire for the teaching of minority and feminist literatures

would continue to animate the MLA Radical Caucus in the pages of its journal, *Radical Teacher*, for the next several decades. This work was informed by Marxism but did not always directly cite it. For instance, Richard Ohmann's *English in America*, a germinal text in this mode, was criticized for not engaging Marx directly; Ohmann conceded that he wished to write more about works like *Labor and Monopoly Capital*, the book by the former metalworker and editor of the *Monthly Review* Harry Braverman (Yelin et al.).

This rhetorical strategy divided the Radical Caucus from other incipient groups within the profession that might have been sympathetic to the Caucus's aims but sought to address Marxist theorization more directly. The most well-known is the Marxist Literary Group (MLG), founded in 1969 by Fredric Jameson and his graduate students at the University of California, San Diego. Jameson wrote that the MLG was "organized less on the basis of some shared political program than on that of mutual professional concerns and of the problems of literary and cultural work" (35). Dan Latimer characterized this split as occurring "along the faultline of theory and praxis, with on the one hand the Jameson group constituted by a number of more patient, tenured members of high profile departments . . . and on the other the Radical Caucus remnant constituted by more imperiled inner city, community college activists" (117).[2] But the fault line is less the pat division of "theory and praxis" than a strategic ideological substitution of the latter by the former that eventually becomes the dominant figuration of political activity within the profession—the idea that a theory camp might be a political-culture camp, for example. This substitution is what allows Latimer to depict Jameson as a prophetic proletarian of the "new communist tendency"—"the very genius of perfectly faded denim, of tieless informality, and the bare forearm" (117)—when Jameson himself describes the project of the MLG as based in "mutual professional concerns" (35).

Despite emerging from the "radicals in the profession" tendency, the Radical Caucus and the *Radical Teacher* group would increasingly take on a workerist orientation toward unionism and toward conditions of faculty work and student learning, while the MLG wing would instead channel its radicalism by infusing the professional discourse of literary study and that of the wider humanities in the United States with Marxism's cultural turn.

From June to mid-July of 1983, the Unit for Criticism and Interpretive Theory at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, held a teaching institute and conference along with the annual meeting of the Institute for Culture and Society, the conference affiliated with the MLG. The list of participants remains stunning and suggests a moment of temporary convergence for what would become by the 1990s and early 2000s a splintered kaleidoscope of approaches. Though there are key US-based figures—like Jameson, Stanley Aronowitz, Cornel West, and Andrew Ross—many of the conference's participants hailed from the other side of the Atlantic, including Stuart Hall, Perry Anderson, John Berger, and Henri Lefebvre. In the end, approximately nine hundred people attended the conference (Nelson). But many more people encountered what happened in 1983 in the volume edited by Lawrence Grossberg and Cary Nelson and published in 1988, *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*. The book, which includes essays like Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak?" and Jameson's "Cognitive Mapping," had sold over thirty thousand copies within a few years of its publication (Nelson).

The conference and institute hewed to familiar forms of summer education and development associated with English studies. In addition to sponsorship from the Unit for Criticism and Interpretive Theory, funding came from the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH), at the time led by William J. Bennett. The NEH grant provided $26,129 "to support a five-week institute for twenty-five faculty who would attend for the purpose of improving one or more of their courses. The institute will critically examine the modern Marxist claim to offer a 'unified theory for understanding texts and culture'" (Award record). What inoculates the political dimension of Marxist theory for the NEH during Ronald Reagan's presidency is the suggestion that the ultimate purpose of the institute is to

improve courses. It would be shocking during the waning days of the Cold War for a grant application to request federal support for a communist camp; a grant seeker always recasts a project to please grant officers, even when the subject matter is not so politically charged.

Earlier summer programs in literary studies, those that set the paradigm of the theory camp, focused on aligning college curricula with developments in criticism. For example, the Kenyon School of English, founded in 1948 with the support of a $40,000 grant from the Rockefeller Foundation claimed that "it is essential that universities and colleges give greater attention to original work in the usual literary forms and in criticism as elements in training" (*Rockefeller Foundation Annual Report* 250). The Kenyon School hoped to establish critical practice as a professional imperative in literary studies, in opposition to previous professional modes. Kenyon's success grew out of a coalition of faculty founders from distinct critical schools for the purpose of instituting criticism as professional orthodoxy: John Crowe Ransom, the conservative, Southern New Critic; Lionel Trilling, the Jewish, liberal New York intellectual; and F. O. Matthiessen, the socialist, queer radical. Cold War anticommunism gave reason for these figures representing a heterogeneous set of political schools to form a coalition around their investment in criticism. Matthiessen and Trilling may have wished to affiliate with Ransom because of the New Criticism's history of explicit anticommunism, while Ransom could legitimize a revanchist critical project.

The cultural turn in Marxism that the 1983 Illinois conference captured similarly brought together a set of theorists and critics from a heterogeneous set of theoretical schools: post-Marxism, postcolonial studies, British cultural studies, the *Social Text* collective, and others. Yet, seemingly like those at Kenyon, these groups could be united under the banner of cultural studies to become what Ransom in 1952 called a "community of letters," perhaps a reference to the new name for the Kenyon School of English, which had by then moved to Indiana University: the School of Letters (116). Such communities, like the agrarian ones Ransom proposed throughout the 1930s, set out to protect, in Stephen Schryer's phrasing, the "common morality from the effects of industrialization" (50). The university in this framing became a distinctive site of political struggle, on the one hand, but, on the other, was isolated from other political developments by its figuration of the professoriat as separate from the rest of society. As Nick Mitchell has argued, the separation of the professional community of knowledge producers from their wider contexts has been central in defining the intellectual, especially the intellectual who self-defines as radical.

Theory camp could tolerate approaches informed by heterogeneous political commitments if the overall purpose of the program was to supply a guiding orthodoxy for the discipline of literary studies. When the Indiana School of Letters closed in 1972, its longtime director Newton P. Stallknecht recalled, "[T]he friends of the School began to hear the ominous compliment that its courses over the years had been so successful and its graduates so influential that there was no longer any need for its continued existence since its educational policies were now widespread and criticism well established as a proper subject of graduate instruction" (32).[3] In other words, the summer program could eventually exhaust its relevance not because it had changed the university's fundamental structure but because its practices had been fully integrated into one or more of the university's disciplines.

Stallknecht notes two memorable "incidents" that occurred when the School of Letters paused its project of encompassing disparate ideological positions to focus on disciplinary formation, highlighting how Cold War anticommunism creates significant disorientation within the insulated discursive sphere the scholarly camps had set out to create. The first occurred in 1954, when William Empson departed from his prepared talk on Shakespeare to "sternly . . . rebuke his audience and the American public in general for their stupidity in underrating the achievements of the China of Mao Tse-tung" (Stallknecht 32). A student reporter was present, and Stallknecht and others were concerned that both Empson and the enterprise of the school would be placed in significant danger should

Empson's remarks be put in the newspaper. (They were not.) The other incident reflects a more structural capitulation to anticommunism. Stallknecht recounts that he reluctantly enforced a requirement that School of Letters registrants swear the State of Indiana's loyalty oath. That these two incidents stand out over an approximately twenty-year run of programming underscores how the critical consensus of the period—even when that consensus consisted in an embrace of the heterogeneous—relied on the political orthodoxy of anticommunism. The ostensible pluralism allowed defenses of anticommunism to appear as efforts to preserve ideological diversity in the methodologies that define the profession rather than as critiques of left political modes.

The "desire not to yield to a single ideological position, no matter how dominant it appeared" similarly informed Murray Krieger and Hazard Adams's founding of the School of Criticism and Theory (SCT) at the University of California, Irvine, in 1976. Krieger recalls that the Kenyon School was "a model . . . and in some ways a warning" for the SCT (883). Krieger knew the Kenyon School well: he was a faculty member at Kenyon College when the summer school opened and then was a participant in the program's second summer. If there was a distinction between SCT and the School of Letters, it was that SCT aimed "to emphasize the high degree of theoretical divergence" rather than the "broad theoretical consensus" of the mid-century (885). SCT's attempt to bring together divergent approaches nevertheless operated within the project of locating a disciplinary home for theory's explosion in English and literature departments.

The focus on the transformation of professional concerns even extended to theory camps associated with Marxism. Held one year after the first SCT meeting, the initial summer meeting of the MLG in St. Cloud, Minnesota, remained separated from seemingly related local struggles in the topics addressed in its rigorous schedule of sessions and in the purpose it articulated. In an extended critique of the MLG's first meeting, Patrick Story writes of a fellow attendee who gave him a ride from the airport that "his conversation on the drive up was my closest contact with the struggles of working people for the duration of the Institute in Marxist theory" (131).[4] Nelson makes a similar observation about the 1983 Illinois program, suggesting that the only significant act of protest that occurred during the conference was the janitorial staff's refusal to clean the bathrooms. The clear divide between the professional concerns of the Marxist theorists and a political program tied to a racialized and gendered class of working people became something of a theme of these summer meetings. Indeed, the discussion eventually spilled over to concerns about the forms of professional discourse within the conference itself. In 1990, at a sequel to the 1983 Illinois conference, bell hooks joined several audience members in challenging the format of that conference, stating that she felt "as terror" the limited space for the development of dialogue beyond the podium (Hall 98). This disconnect further distinguishes the context of the Marxist cultural turn in the United States from, for instance, its development in Britain. Hall, in 1990 in Illinois, admitted to being "completely dumbfounded" by the "rapid professionalization and institutionalization" of US cultural studies (84). The political strategy of the theory camp model relies on not imagining, as Jameson put it, "that we are able to use the university without a keen sense of the way in which, in return, it uses us" (39).

Judgment of the theory camp method is often withheld because of the assumption that there were limited options for socialist and communist theorizing and organizing during the 1970s and 1980s. But that critical hesitation indexes how deeply submerged the ongoing practice of the political-culture camp had become. In fact, it continued to develop, albeit with a different purpose, strategy, and relationship to academia from that of the theory camp. A survey of both together reveals the dialectical relationship that existed between them and how the theory camp displaced and partially absorbed the political-culture camp, a substitution that members of the profession still struggle individually and collectively to understand and respond to with political activity amid significant external threats.

There is a long history of summer camps of various kinds organized by socialist, communist, trade-unionist, and other left-informed groups in the United States. These include Camp Tamiment in

Bushkill, Pennsylvania, founded in 1921, which was affiliated with the Rand School of Social Science; Camp Unity in Wingdale, New York, a communist-affiliated resort that opened in 1927; Kinderland, a camp affiliated until 1954 with the International Workers Order, founded in 1923 in Trolland, Massachusetts; and Arrowhead Lodge, part of the Jefferson School of Social Science of the Communist Party USA from 1946 to 1948. Tamiment and Unity closed in the 1950s (after the Kenyon School of English had moved to Indiana), largely because of intensified scrutiny under McCarthyism and the withdrawal of its nonprofit tax status. Camps that were not directly affiliated with socialist or communist organizations, such as the Highlander Folk School, founded in Tennessee in 1932, faced similar challenges.

Popular anxiety around many communist and socialist camps stemmed from their social practices, mainly that they were racially integrated well before most other US social spaces were. Instead of developing modes of critical practice and inquiry, these camps were devoted to creating forms of communist social life. Camp organizers connected adults, children, and families with prominent left intellectual and cultural figures, highlighting a simultaneous focus on education, entertainment, and culture. They articulated the labor movement, left political parties, and radical second-generation-immigrant families that had begun to share in the social wealth of the American middle class. The union organizer Henry Foner, for instance, played in a band at Arrowhead at night, while his brothers, Philip and Jack Foner, faculty members at the Jefferson School, gave lectures during the day (Foner). The intellectual activity here was of a piece with a project of leisure; a *Daily Worker* article announcing Camp Jefferson at Arrowhead Lodge emphasizes that "swimming, tennis, boating, and golf will be part of the fun" ("New Jefferson School Summer Camp"). Paul Robeson also paid the occasional visit there. Camp Unity had similar star power, with Lorraine Hansberry, Alice Childress, W. E. B. Du Bois, and Shirley Graham Du Bois among its guests (Colbert 53). But they were not perfect places. Hansberry, for instance, complained of disorganization at Camp Unity and the potential unwarranted firing of camp staff (Perry 52). Not without their own contradictions, these summer programs were not oriented toward the production of academic disciplines or even modes of socialist analysis. They were, as Paul C. Mishler explains, "efforts to develop a political culture in which the Marxist analysis of politics and economics was elaborated into a way of life" (2). They suggested an earlier form of a cultural turn in Marxism, seeking to build the infrastructure of a Marxist culture—a space of politics, leisure, education, and party formation shared by trade unionists in the working class and radicals in the professions.

The 1983 conference Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture was, by this definition, not a political-culture camp. The political-culture camp should not be privileged as the ur-form of leftist summer learning, nor should the theory camp be privileged as an ideal. My aim is to remember these forms—even as iterations of them persist—within the context of the development of Marxist political analysis and cultural production that aspired to escape the confines of disciplinarity in the academy and, at some level, to maintain, reform, or transform the political economy of the United States. At the same time, this history encourages us to recall how the will to professionalism can collapse forms of intellectual, social, and political development, including forms beyond those endorsed within the university and others so familiar that they go unnoticed. Revisiting the 1983 conference now invites us to consider how a new generation trained in literary studies pursuing radical strategy might reconfigure the theory camp to recover a political-culture camp tradition that has been conspicuously absent.

Notes

1. The offending posters included a William Blake quotation—"The Tygers of Wrath are Wiser than the Horses of Instruction"—and a picture of Eldridge Cleaver with the caption "I Found My Job through the MLA" (Schrecker 344; see also Edwards).

2. Latimer overstates the division. Prominent Radical Caucus members worked at institutions that were neither in the "inner city" nor community colleges—Ohmann at Wesleyan University and Paul Lauter at Trinity College, for instance. Homer questions Latimer's characterization (28–29), and in my own research

I have found only one person with documented overlap between the Radical Caucus, the NUC, and the MLG: John Beverley, who was Jameson's graduate student at UC San Diego and who gave a talk at an NUC-affiliated session at the MLA convention in 1969.

3. Homer suggests that something similar would occur with the MLG: "At its height in the 1970s the Marxist Literary Group was the largest affiliated organization of the MLA. This presence was reduced towards the end of the decade and in the early 1980s as much due to the success of the work of Jameson and the MLG as to any lessening of interest in Marxist cultural discourse. As Marxism increasingly gained a foothold in the academy, so the necessity declined for a specific arena within which Marxist cultural theorists could meet. Marxism was established as a core component, or at least an option, on many course curriculums" (30).

4. Boone proposes in his New Narrative description of the MLG conference, *Century of Clouds*, that the political dimensions of the meeting might best be found beyond the lectures and discussions themselves, in how the building of relationships and community—and even the parameters for engagement in a volleyball game—may constitute the emergence of a left, communist politics. Nevertheless, Boone's project is in part to modulate these types of political activities into the "production of affect in the reader" (87).

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