Liberalism in Rhetoric and Composition: An Ideological History and (Re)Definition

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Within the rhetoric and composition literature, liberal and liberalism often denote unsophisticated theory and insufficiently progressive practice. I argue that such a view distorts the liberal tradition. Liberalism is, in fact, a potent reform project deeply connected to university writing instruction. During our field's social turn of the 1980s, liberalism's progressive potential was obscured. This was to the field's detriment; liberal goals, values, and ontological ideas can add meaning to our work and inform classroom practice. To illustrate my claim, I examine liberalism's relationship to the rising anti-racism movement. A commitment to liberal ideals, I argue, can help ensure the effective application of anti-racist principles.[1]

With rising extremism and political division, democracy is under threat both in the United States and abroad (see "Democracy Index 2023"). Not coincidentally, the relationship between writing pedagogy and social reform is of increasing interest within rhetoric and composition. Comp, we might say, is once again (very) political. As such, it's a good time to reexamine the political connects and disconnects that define our field. Political accountings, mappings of our various ideological commitments and the tenants thereof can help writing teachers know where we stand in relation to each other and larger social forces. They are thus essential.

The following both engages in political mapping and argues that certain terrain has been inaccurately described by previous cartographers. My base premise is that when we talk politics and writing pedagogy, we encounter two broad lines of force, two ways of connecting work in the writing classroom to larger issues of social improvement. The first and more visible is informed by far-left political and social theory; Karl Marx, Louis Althusser, and Antonio Gramsci are present, if not cited. While specific manifestations vary, to think in this line is generally to equate politically progressive writing pedagogy with resistance to a hegemonic other, typically conceived as a structural force maintained by certain ways of writing and speaking. On my political map, I label this the leftist position. John Trimbur aptly summarizes its mandate when he writes that composition's left, to which he belongs, is "oppositional," its primary task "to resist [the] normalizing pressures of the status quo" ("Composition's Left" 39). The second line of force, or way of connecting work and world, has been little theorized. It presents the relationship between moral agent and social

landscape in more dynamic terms. The structural other doesn't loom as large and opposition is an incidental concern. Within this paradigm, the focus is on the individual, and to help others develop as individuals—as qualitatively unique beings—is both an end in itself and a political act. The genealogy of this line is diffuse, but American pragmatists such as John Dewey may be cited. On my map, I label this the liberal position.

Of course, like all binaries, the above distinction is reductive. No text or teacher falls squarely in one line and wholly rejects the concerns of the other. Likewise, it is always possible to use leftist theory to achieve liberal goals and vice versa. That said, distinguishing between left and liberal helps us see both vectors more clearly. In the following pages, in particular, I wish to examine the belief system underlying the latter.

Liberalism, simply put, is a long-standing political program committed to the development of individual human potential. It merits attention in writing studies for two reasons. First, fundamental characteristics of liberal thought, such as a focus on individual development and insistence on the possibility of mutually beneficial exchange, make it uniquely compatible with the work of the writing classroom. Second, though rarely examined in the writing studies literature, liberalism is in our field's DNA. To teach writing within the American university often means being constrained by and supporting, at least implicitly, a set of liberal assumptions. We best know what cause we are serving.

In sum, liberalism is everywhere in rhetoric and composition but rarely taken seriously. To change that, I will first (re)define liberalism, drawing on political theorist Michael Freeden's elaborate morphology of the liberal tradition. Freeden's approach is empirical, seeking to distill the "patterns of argumentation" that define political rhetorics (*Liberalism* 69). Engagement with empirical political science is rare in our field. Freeden's work thus offers a fresh perspective.

After articulating a set of core liberal principles, I will return to the composition literature. Through an examination of key texts, I will show that during our field's social turn of the 1980s, liberal thought and values were distorted. As a result, writing teachers lost a potent link between work and world. The methodology of my study is ideological history, particularly what Stephen Depoe labels "the strategic use of definition" (82). My real interest, though, is the future. Thus, I will close by discussing how a renewed commitment to liberal ideals might inform writing pedagogy. Of late, anti-racist writing pedagogies have grown in prominence. Some argue that these pedagogies are underpinned by dogmatism and essentialized notions of racial difference. As we will see, in practice, anti-racist ideas may be—and often are—used in a contextually sensitive and student-centered manner. A better understanding of liberal ideals can help ensure that this is the case.

Overall, I hope to demonstrate that while liberalism is a humble creed, its humility shouldn't be read as weakness. Liberalism, as essayist Adam Gopnik writes, is like a rhinoceros: ungainly but formidable. Indeed, what Gopnik defines as "the search for radical change by humane measures" has been perhaps the most potent egalitarian force in history (21). There is no shame in pursuing a liberal agenda in the classroom. This is especially true at a time when liberal democracy is under threat. Liberalism needs writing teachers, and ultimately, I hope to show that writing teachers need liberalism. A renewed conception of the term can inform both how we teach and how we see ourselves.

What Is Liberalism?

Liberalism, philosopher Duncan Bell writes, "is a spectre that haunts Western political thought." As the "metacategory of Western political discourse" the term takes on different meanings in different sites (683). For present purposes, I wish to foreground what might be termed modern political liberalism. This strain of liberalism is "modern" because it was first articulated in the middle of the nineteenth century, particularly in the work of John Stuart Mill. It is "political" because it is derived from the words and ideas of liberal political actors rather than academic philosophers (Mill, for instance, was a member of the British parliament).

It's also important to distinguish modern political liberalism from neoliberalism. Speaking broadly, the latter denotes a set of governing practices, in ascendance since about 1980, that posits economic exchange as a guide to all social relations (see Carter et al.). Though sharing with liberalism an interest in liberty, neoliberalism understands the term primarily as relating to freedom from social (i.e., governmental) coercion. It's thus a form of libertarianism and represents a hard break with the liberal tradition.

If not a philosophical system nor a free market fantasy, what exactly is modern political liberalism? I want to suggest that it's a progressive political project that connects reforms like the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade, the extension of the vote to women, and the legalization of gay marriage. As a belief system, it involves a commitment to democratic ideals but also a belief that all social action should be "fair, tolerant, inclusive, restrained, and self-critical, not simply the pursuit of majority rule" (Freeden, *Liberalism* 26). From a liberal perspective, the goal of cooperative action is to create conditions under which individual human potential can be maximized. Integrally, the same respect for the individual shapes the means by which liberals go about reform efforts. Liberals seek to achieve their goals not through domination but "through reasoned and (mostly) unimpeded conversation, demonstration, and debate" (Gopnik 24).

Understood as a centuries-long reform project, political liberalism has passed through several distinct phases. Each of these phases has contributed to the project in its current form. Freeden uses the metaphor of "layers" to describe the building process. The earliest layers, laid as a rising merchant class sought to curb the excesses of monarchical rule, emphasize individual rights and negative liberty (freedom from). The middle layers, laid as a new breed of reformers sought to curb the excesses of the now dominant merchant class, emphasize social support programs and positive liberty (freedom to). The most recent layers, laid in an age of global interconnection, recognize the importance of group identity and strive to limit group conflict (community among communities).

What forces drive liberal reform? First and foremost, liberals value individuality, believing that all people are qualitatively unique and should be allowed to develop this uniqueness to the fullest. "The grand, leading principle" of the project Mill proclaims in his dedication to *On Liberty,* perhaps the foremost liberal text, is "the absolute and essential importance of human development in its richest diversity" (5). Individuality, as used here, should not be confused with individualism, as in the belief that lack of connection with others is somehow desirable or even possible. Integrally, modern liberals believe that humans are social animals whose individual uniqueness—whether material, spiritual, or intellectual—can only emerge via "beneficial mutual interdependence" (Freeden, *Liberalism* 62). They thus place great emphasis on sociality. In fact, we can say that, at its core, liberal reform is driven by a desire to structure social systems to maximize mutual benefit. In the United States, this desire has led to the creation of certain institutions: the welfare state, public schools and universities, regulated markets, and rule-governed courts. From a liberal perspective, such institutions are great accomplishments. Their maintenance and protection are of utmost import.

Liberalism's drive to identify points of shared interest sometimes leads to claims that it seeks to "erase difference." This is not a fair characterization. As noted, from its earliest articulation, liberalism has sought to cultivate difference by allowing more individuals access to the tools of self-development. Liberal institutions, when functioning correctly, further this goal. Modern liberals also recognize the importance of group identity. That said, liberalism is antisectarian; liberals strive to promote "the general welfare of the community," however that may be defined (Freeden, *Ideologies* 150). Relatedly, they reject the idea—key to much Marx-inspired leftist thought—that intergroup relations inevitably result in exploitation. Due to the complex nature of the social field, liberals believe that shared interests can always be identified and leveraged to create larger, mutually beneficial social groupings. Indeed, a steady movement towards larger, more inclusive groupings is key to the liberal project. This leads

Gopnik to connect modern political liberalism to a certain mindset, one that "seeks social conciliation" and thus "cherishes compromise not as a reluctant last post but as a positive engine of forward movement" (171).

Gopnik also identifies fallibility as key to the liberal mindset. Fallibility is simply the belief that our ideas about what is good, true, and possible are inevitably wrong or at least incomplete. This fact isn't to be lamented, but does suggest that reform is the best course rather than repetition or revolution. Indeed, more than any other principle, an insistence on fallibility separates liberalism from doctrines of the right and far left. Whether grounding belief in the dictates of authority and tradition or abstract notions of justice, both the right and far left share a sense of certainty that liberals do not.

While there is no single doctrinaire form of liberalism, I suspect that most people who classify themselves as liberal see their beliefs captured above. I suspect that many writing teachers do, too. This makes sense, as rhetoric and composition is a thoroughly liberal enterprise. Liberalism, at its core, is about the cultivation of individual potential, as is writing instruction. Indeed, the work of teaching and theorizing writing is so infused with liberal values, Matthew Pavesich writes, that resorting to liberal tropes becomes reflexive; we "re-enact [liberalism] in our opinions, arguments, and decisions, sometimes even without intending to" (85).

On the whole, our field has had difficulty accepting its liberal inheritance. Despite being a potent reform program responsible for social improvements from the construction of the London sewer system to Obamacare, "liberalism" and "liberal" are often used within the writing studies literature simply as shorthand to denote political or theoretical naivety (e.g., Condon and Young 11). At other times, the terms are used in a haphazard and unsystematic way (e.g., Greenbaum), or liberal beliefs are caricatured beyond recognition (e.g., Crowley). With some exceptions, such as Richard Rorty, overtly liberal theorists have been little cited. When a description of liberal beliefs is needed, the default move is to turn to liberalism's critics. Susan Searls Giroux, for example, credulously quotes Stuart Hall, a noted Marxist.

Of course, outside of writing studies, many pages have been filled with critiques and defenses of liberal governing practices. Speaking broadly, critics on the left argue that liberalism— with its insistence on incremental reform, reasoned debate, and the rule of law—is merely the ideology of the bourgeoise, a convenient cover-up for unjust power relations. Critics on the right claim that the same demands are a dangerous threat to tradition, family, and community. Perhaps the strongest rejoinder to either is that liberalism simply works. Yes, of course, in practice liberal governance has often failed to live up to the high-minded ideals of liberal rhetoric. Racism, sexism, and economic exploitation have often been exacerbated by liberal policies. Every public order

system, though, throughout history, has been marked by inequities and moral blind spots. Liberalism is unique in that it provides mechanisms to address its own failings, mechanisms that, over the past 150 years, have proven capable of doing so: slowly, often haphazardly but better than any other system yet invented (see Fukuyama). The liberal mindset itself, defined by fallibility and a desire for social conciliation, is key among these mechanisms.

A similar argument might be made in favor of liberal beliefs in the writing classroom: they're not sexy, but they work. An embrace of liberal values doesn't mean a certain pedagogy. It does mean, however, an intense focus on individual students and local needs. Few would argue that writing can be taught otherwise. Liberalism also provides a framework to connect the day-to-day practice of writing instruction to a larger project of social improvement. It suggests, in short, that the development of individuals is social improvement, thus giving added meaning to our labors. Unfortunately, liberalism's use value has been obscured. During composition's "social turn" of the 1980s, liberalism's leftist critics captured our field's political imagination. Their ideas continue to hold sway.

The Social Turn's (Unfortunate) Mischaracterization of Liberalism

In the most basic sense, rhetoric and composition's social turn of the 1980s represents a shift of disciplinary interest from individual writers to the political, institutional, and cultural contexts in which writing occurs. This shift in interest was underpinned by a theoretical shift, particularly the introduction of postmodern theoretical frames that presented writing and the writer as social constructs (see Trimbur, "Review"). The changes wrought in this disciplinary moment still resonate. Writing research expanded both in scope and complexity, and a number of explicitly political pedagogical movements emerged. Queer, feminist, postcolonial, and neo-sophistic approaches are all of note, but the tenor of the times is perhaps best captured by the meta-categories of critical pedagogy and cultural studies. The former, drawing on the work of Paulo Freire, emphasized the critical examination of experience via collaborative dialogue. The latter, associated with the British Birmingham School, focused on the interpretation of cultural artifacts. Though varied in their manifestations, in their purest forms, both these "emancipatory movements," as Andrea Greenbaum calls them, sought to promote more just social relations via resistance to a hegemonic status quo. Per my map, they are thus leftist.

As Richard Fulkerson has chronicled, between 1990 and 2005, critical pedagogy and cultural studies, which he groups with emancipatory feminist pedagogies as "critical/cultural studies" (CCS) (654), came to dominate the composition literature. These approaches were often championed by self-

described political radicals who juxtaposed their views against the avowed liberalism of process theorists. In the process of differentiation, I want to suggest these self-described radicals succeeded in defining the field's political landscape. As detailed below, they did so by arguing that liberal political beliefs were out of step with the postmodern theory coursing through the field at the time.

My claim is a narrow one: whatever gains the social turn delivered (and I believe there are many), the field was ill-served by the concomitant dismissal of liberalism as a basis for progressive pedagogy. By centering individuals and insisting on the possibility of mutually beneficial exchange, liberal ideology can sustain the highly localized work of the writing classroom. By centering abstract and oppressive social forces, the leftist thought of the era—which continues to dominate our field's political imagination—may unintentionally devalue such work.

To justify my claim, it is necessary to examine some key texts. As a survey of the period's entire literature is impractical, I will narrow my focus to a trio of particularly important and representative scholars—two leftist and one liberal. In addition to being widely cited, these scholars stand out because they explicitly discuss composition's politics, thus defining (or seeking to define) the field's political identity.

A natural place to begin is with the work of James Berlin. Berlin was one of the field's chief proponents of cultural studies and a self-described Marxist; in "Rhetoric and Ideology in the Writing Class" from 1988, he presents an influential taxonomy of writing pedagogies and their respective ideologies. His goal is to promote social epistemic rhetoric, a postmodern ontological system which holds that both self and world are constructed by dynamic, competing discursive forces. Acceptance of this ontological view, Berlin argues, allows for a sort of critical consciousness, a refusal to take truth claims at face value or naturalize unjust social relations. He thus believes it is innately democratizing.

Berlin's articulation of social epistemic rhetoric is one of the key moments of the social turn. It codifies ideas, long-circulating, about the constructive power of language. It also provides a framework to explain the relationship between the individual writer, language-in-circulation, and power structures. One may not agree with the specifics of Berlin's text-centric ontology or his use of ideology as a God-term; still, it is hard to deny that his thought has helped multiple generations of writing teachers (myself included) better understand and teach writing.

Though Berlin is a Marxist, nothing about social epistemic rhetoric necessitates radical politics. He presents a long list of teacher-scholars he claims hold social epistemic views. Notably, the list includes Kenneth Bruffee, a self-described liberal. The upshot of understanding ideologically infused discourse as constitutive of reality, Berlin seems to claim, is simply a healthy

anti-essentialism. Rather than taking truth claims at face value, we see that discourse "must continually be challenged so as to reveal its economic and political consequences for individuals" (489). Liberal thinkers of the era, such as Bruffee or "postmodern bourgeois liberal" Richard Rorty, would agree.

Berlin breaks with liberals like Bruffee or Rorty, though, in regard to the prescriptions that flow from their shared ontology. For Berlin, there is no "outside" of language, and language, at least as typically encountered, is an oppressive force. The equation at the heart of his work is really quite simple: dominant discourses cause unjust social relations. Thus, dominant discourses must be rewritten via collective action. There is little room for compromise. If you accept that identity is a discursive construction, Berlin's argument goes, you agree that political agitation must be privileged over "creative realization of the self" (487). If you agree that all truth claims can and should be interrogated, you agree that students labor under "forms of false consciousness" and "must be taught to identify the ways in which control over their own lives has been denied them" (490). Of course, the former beliefs in no way necessitate the latter. It is possible to believe that individuality is a social construct, for example, but that it is a construct that should be cultivated. It is possible to believe that discourse shapes perception but that within the discursive flux, mutually beneficial exchange is or can be the norm. In other words, social epistemic rhetoric, anti-essentialist thought, and pedagogies that analyze the connection between language and power could very well be put in service of a liberal reform project. Berlin's stridency obscures this fact, though. Indeed, throughout his influential body of work, social epistemic ideas about rhetoric, CCS-style writing instruction, and radical politics are conflated. As a result, liberalism appears unsophisticated and incompatible with emerging theoretical frames.

Another influential theorist, Sharon Crowley, makes a similar case. Her *Composition in the University*, from 1998, is notable for its extensive treatment of the politics of writing instruction; indeed, it is one of the few works in our field that treats "liberal" and "liberalism" as terms that require explanation. Unfortunately, as detailed below, Crowley's explication of these terms leaves much to be desired.

Crowley is perhaps best known for advocating the "abolition" of mandatory first-year writing (FYW) courses. The general idea argued throughout *Composition in the University* is that because of its institutional position, mandatory FYW is hopelessly compromised. Among other faults, Crowley claims it was designed and inevitably functions as a "policing mechanism" (42) meant to shape student subjectivity into an appropriate middle-class mold. Crowley identifies as a leftist, sharing with Berlin a belief that writing instruction needs to help students identify and challenge "the debilitating means by which their

culture defines them" (235). Because, as she sees it, mandatory FYW is one of those means, it can never act "as a venue for a radical instructional politics" and should thus be discarded (235).

Crowley's work reflects a view of sociality that is prevalent in our field's politically engaged scholarship to this day. In short, she takes what might be called a "top down" approach. Time and time again, she stresses how individual behaviors (e.g., student writing or classroom interactions) are shaped by larger forces, such as one's "location in physical and ideological space" (221) or "the master discourses of our culture" (223). This tendency to understand the concrete and local as determined by the abstract and distant influences her attitude towards FYW. The existence of the mandatory requirement, she argues, "supersedes anything that specific composition teachers operating in local spaces may want to do for their students in the way of helping them to become writers" (217). Crowley's "abolitionist" views have sparked much debate (see Roemer et al.). In privileging abstract forces discerned through sociocultural analysis, though, Crowley strikes a chord that still resonates.

Regarding liberal ideology, Crowley is also a trendsetter. In her view, liberal process teachers are guided by unsophisticated and even ridiculous ideas about self and world. "Liberals assume that [the writer] has clear and unmediated access to whatever desires motivate behavior," she claims (219). Likewise, liberals posit a "perfectly private arena of individual thought . . . uncontaminated by either communal memory or public discourse" (219). In short, liberals (and, by extension, liberal process teachers) view the self as a transparent social atom. This contrasts with her own view, which, as noted, emphasizes the influence of social factors on individual thought and action.

Crowley's definitional work, though light on citation, seems to be influenced by feminist critiques of philosophical rather than political liberalism. This is an important distinction. As Freeden explains, despite "superficial allusions to the historical liberal tradition," philosophical liberalism is "almost entirely ahistorical," adopting a "conceptual purism" that is alien to liberal political thought (*Ideologies* 227). Indeed, according to Freeden, the autonomous and ideally rational notion of human nature Crowley critiques has no precedent in the liberal tradition.

Crowley cites only one supposed liberal: Maxine Hairston. A former CCCC chair, Hairston became the voice of the process-oriented establishment in the early nineties via a series of curmudgeonly missives railing against "low-risk Marxists" ("Comments" 695). Hairston believes that writing instruction should cultivate love of writing (Findley and Rea). Towards this end, she promotes a depoliticized, cooperative classroom in which students write about familiar topics in order to "find out how much they know and to gain confidence in their ability to express themselves effectively" ("Diversity" 186).

By focusing on personal experience and avoiding hot-button political issues, Hairston believes she is creating an environment in which students can help each other develop as writers. Crowley believes that such an approach is naïve. Hairston's "sunny liberalism," Crowley writes, causes her to overlook differences of race, gender, and class and the "disparate access to cultural power" they entail (226). Because Crowley believes that our social position has great determinative value, she holds that such an approach will backfire, creating "a recipe for pain" (227).

Earlier, I argued that liberal values are not incompatible with postmodern ideas about the nature of self and world. Likewise, liberal pedagogy does not equate to a refusal to ask students to examine their relative social positions. Nor does it equate to non-confrontational pedagogies of validation (see Andrea Greenbaum's expressly liberal "bitch pedagogy," for example). However, Crowley is right that Hairston's approach is liberal in one regard: it is premised on the possibility of mutually beneficial exchange. As discussed above, liberals believe that due to the complex nature of the social field, points of shared interest can always be identified and leveraged. Though her arguments lack nuance, this is basically what Hairston claims to achieve. Despite the reality of social inequality and imbalanced power relations, in her classroom, students are able to work together—temporarily, provisionally—to help each other develop as writers. Whether this actually happens, I don't know; neither does Crowley. Thinking within a paradigm that privileges the abstract and distant over the concrete and local, Crowley dismisses Hairston's claims outright.

Of course, there are all kinds of reasons for the varied stances we strike, rooted in disposition, life experience, and self-interest; I am hesitant to claim that any one stance is definitively correct. That said, for writing teachers, there is a certain freedom in Hairston's perspective. To insist on the power of individuals and the possibility of mutually beneficial exchange opens up a space of opportunity. On the other hand, when we put too much faith in big ideas about the nature of social relations, opportunity might be foreclosed. At the very least, our gaze might shift from local to structural, from concrete to abstract. This can be a problem for teachers because the local level is, of course, where teaching actually occurs.

A statement by Trimbur, issued in response to one of Hairston's attacks, is telling. He claims that expressionist writing teachers are powerless because they "cannot begin to imagine collective forms of social action that empower rather than violate individuals" ("Response" 697). Of course, Donald Murray, Peter Elbow, and even Hairston herself do imagine—and intricately theorize—collective forms of social action that they claim can empower individuals. These collective forms of social action are called writing classes. From a liberal perspective, good work within these collectives (and the institutions that enable

them) is sufficient to fulfill one's obligation to self and world. For liberals, there is no gap between individual development and social development, and the former, while never guaranteed, is always possible. For Trimbur, the equation is slightly different. The structural takes precedence over the local, interceding and often rendering local interventions mute. Thus, social progress can only be achieved when one thinks and acts beyond "individual students and their successes" (Fox 569). Whether one view of social obligation is more correct in a metaphysical sense, I do not know. What is certain, though, is that Trimbur's stance is harder to square with the day-to-day reality of teaching. During the social turn, the ideas that underlie it became increasingly common.

Liberalism and Writing Pedagogy

Writing in 2012, following the crest of critical pedagogy's Freirean "first wave," Paul Feigenbaum noted a sense of disillusionment among progressive educators. Beset by the "progressive teacher's challenge" of "trying to subvert an unjust status quo while serving institutions that primarily sustain it," he writes, entrapment had replaced empowerment as critical pedagogy's defining metaphor (6). It seems that now, more than a decade later, we are in a decidedly "second wave" moment. Paralleling broader social trends, the "call to teach a critical consciousness" (Rhodes and Alexander 483) once again echoes throughout the writing studies literature as a wide array of scholars foreground issues of social, racial, and linguistic justice (Condon and Young; Gere et. al; Inoue "Antiracist"; Martinez "'American Way'"). As with critical pedagogy's first wave, I think there is much of value here. That said, the reforms, frames, and pedagogies proposed by anti-racist and other social justice advocates shouldn't be adopted uncritically. Instead, as with the innovations that marked the social turn, writing teachers must carefully consider the consequences of this new paradigm. In particular, we need to take pains to avoid the sense of entrapment that Feigenbaum argues followed the rise of CCS approaches. I would suggest this requires a progressive vision that centers individuals and refuses to devalue local interventions. Such a project can be furthered by a robust understanding of liberal thought and values; it also requires familiarity with the claims of liberalism's critics.

The most potent critique of liberalism at the moment is leveled by critical race scholars. Arising out of far-left challenges to post-civil rights era legal discourse, critical race theory is based on the premise that epidemic racism is a permanent and constituent feature of American life (Bell; Ladson-Billings). Sweeping change is needed but impossible via incremental liberal reform. Furthermore, critical race scholars claim key liberal notions such as individual liberty and equal treatment under the law are impediments to change. The "new racism," Aja Y. Martinez explains, is "color-blind racism" in that it re-

lies on abstract liberal rhetoric to suggest that all subjects are free and equal, thereby obscuring "structural practices" which operate to keep certain groups subordinate ("'American Way'" 587).

Of late, critical race tenants (along with those of the related program of whiteness studies) have been deployed in a number of innovative ways within rhetoric and composition. Martinez and Carmen Kynard, among others, use critical race counterstory—a rhetorical use of narrative—to interrogate and revise academia's racial understandings. By sharing "positionality stories" with students, Cristina V. Cedillo and Phil Bratta do the same in the classroom. Other scholars suggest ways to add a critical dimension to conventional multiculturalism. In terms of pedagogy, such work often involves engaging texts from subaltern groups (similar to older cultural studies approaches) but making race and racial disparity the dominant interpretive frame. Daniel Barlow argues that such an approach is of value both because it helps educate students about race and because the sensitive nature of racial matters sparks particularly deliberate and self-reflective student writing. In forwarding a similar program, Octavio Pimentel, Charise Pimentel, and John Dean note the importance of instructors "deconstruct[ing] their own privilege" and interrogating how we "read and write our students as raced texts" (112, 113). Such work, they argue, is necessary to ensure that seemingly innocuous actions don't harm marginalized populations.

All told, the dominant theme of the above scholarship is the importance of consciously and self-critically addressing issues of race and racial disparity. Nothing about liberalism as I understand it is incompatible with such work. That said, at least in our rhetoric, the line between composition's leftist and liberal camps is as stark as ever. The felt necessity of resistance to an oppressive structural other, maintained by and challenged via discursive practice, continues to be a key point of disagreement. For example, in an influential CCCC chair's address, Asao Inoue compares white supremacy to a "steel cage" and connects its bars to how we use and teach language. Martinez describes her work as challenging a rhetorically embodied "empire of force" that "manipulates, destroys, and exploits" ("'American Way'" 586).[2] In both their ontological assumptions and political commitments, Inoue and Martinez channel Berlin, Crowley, and other social turn-era leftists.

Thirty years later, Hairston's gadfly role is filled by Erec Smith. Drawing on the work of W. E. B. Du Bois and William James, among others, Smith argues that recent anti-racism initiatives in rhetoric and composition suffer from a "disconnect to social and material reality" (xiv). A Black scholar committed to fighting racism, Smith believes that anti-racist pedagogy, rather than providing students of color the intellectual and rhetorical tools they need and demand, too often traps them in a predetermined victim narrative. Though

directed at a new target, Smith's argument is not new. He basically levels the same complaint once leveled against social turn-era leftists. In short, he argues that anti-racist educators place too much faith in their own ideas. In their battle with the hegemonic other, they end up as preachers rather than professors, attempting to convince their students of a certain vision of true and false, right and wrong. The result is disengaged students and disheartened teachers. Like Hairston before him, Smith thus rejects the rising progressive conceptual apparatus.

While Smith's stance is bold, rejection of critical race precepts may not be palatable for many progressive educators. They find value in the concepts and frames Smith dismisses. Assuming one also respects Smith's critique, the question thus becomes: How can teachers use these concepts and frames responsibly?

Let's consider Daniel Barlow's classroom. Barlow's pedagogy has students grapple with the "difficulty and sensitivity of race" and race-based social disparities (415). He wants students to sharpen their writing skills while also examining, and perhaps even revising, their thinking about social inequality. Many would argue, and I would agree, that this is exactly the sort of work progressive educators need to be doing. The question is how to do it effectively. How can teachers apply anti-racist insights without granting abstract concepts undue power?

Andrew Harnish asks similar questions. A queer, Christian writing teacher who often works with disadvantaged students, Harnish, like Smith, detects a dogmatic element in some anti-racist thought. Nevertheless, he values anti-racist ideas; the key is to apply them "selectively and strategically" (307). When giving student feedback, for instance, Harnish—in line with anti-racist precepts—is careful not to demand conformity to dominant language norms. At the same time, however, he rejects the idea promoted by Inoue that anti-racist feedback practices must be guided by resistance to "a White racial *habitus*" that privileges "clarity, order and control" (27). Harnish argues that the ability to produce prose marked by clarity, order, and control increases individual agency. Students—especially students of color—might very well benefit from feedback informed by such values.

Harnish connects his position to a line of anti-racist scholarship that is "practical and student-centered" rather than "overly strict [and] subordinated to a programmatic vision of racial differences" (315). The work of Lisa Delpit is representative of this line. In "The Politics of Teaching Literate Discourse," for instance, Delpit challenges the idea, derived from postmodern theory, that teaching mainstream language norms is inevitably oppressive. She argues that students from disadvantaged backgrounds, when given proper support, can gain access to and ultimately transform dominant discourses. To think otherwise "is a dangerous kind of determinism" (546).

Taken together, Harnish and Delpit display a willingness to adapt, or even reject, abstract concepts in light of local context and student needs. Their work may very well further a larger political project, but politics is downstream from the cultivation of individual student capacity. In this regard, the progressive vision presented by these scholars is fundamentally liberal.

David Bartholomae, another scholar known for his work with disadvantaged students, presents a complementary vision. Writing in 1993, a year before Delpit, and touching upon similar ideas, Bartholomae situates basic writing instruction within "the grand narrative of liberal sympathy and liberal reform" ("Tidy House" 8). A self-described liberal, Bartholomae admits that he finds this narrative appealing. He worries, though, about liberalism's idealist impulse. The "quintessential liberal reflex," he writes, is to believe "that beneath the surface we are all the same person" (18). In other words, because of a desire for social reconciliation, well-meaning reformers may paint others as different but in a restrictive way.

Bartholomae's words, like Delpit's, act as a warning for progressive educators. Obviously, it is no longer sufficient not to consider (and help students consider) the often divergent ways that individuals are read and written as "raced texts." At the same time, though, we need to respect the singular and often idiosyncratic nature of human experience.

Bartholomae provides guidance as to how writing teachers might engage big ideas without imposing a certain worldview. In his classroom, students don't study race, culture, or ideology. Instead, they study writing—their own and that of their classmates. They study arguments, assumptions, and the origins and consequences of ideas. Through such study, they gain insight into larger social forces, but integrally, such knowledge is always complementary to the work of production. The instructor's goal is not persuasion but the promotion of more sophisticated, graceful, and expansive student texts. As Bartholomae writes elsewhere, composition's object of concern is always "how and why one might work with the space on the page" ("Composition" 336). On the page, ideas, identities, and ideologies are examined at a certain remove. They can thus be questioned and put into conversation, and our relation towards them can perhaps be revised. In other words, through close attention to student writing and student writers, space is opened for mutually beneficial exchange.

I suspect that Bartholomae would support the above reading. More provocatively, though, I want to suggest that he also asks writing teachers to commit to a sort of empiricism. He models an empirical approach by engaging the infamous "fuck you" paper, a vulgar screed by a student writer named Quentin Pierce. Though Bartholomae admits that he had no idea how to read this paper upon receiving it eighteen years before, he attempts to approach it and its author on their own terms, enabling him to tease out a main point

("existentialism is logical but stupid") and recognize the text as a work of "considerable skill and force" ("Tidy House" 7).

Bartholomae's approach is empirical in that it takes concrete experience as its starting point rather than abstract theory. It is also deeply liberal. In his overwhelming concern with specifics, Bartholomae demands that we understand each writer and text as qualitatively unique. This nominalist understanding of social space is how we avoid predetermined narratives. By forcing us to distinguish between ideas and individuals, it helps us avoid pushing a set social vision and unintentionally alienating our students. I must note, though, the extent to which such nominalism goes against the grain of much progressive writing scholarship, the impulse of which, as we've seen, is to abstract up and away from the singular and specific. For example, one could easily read the "fuck you" paper as an enactment of white privilege. Bartholomae resists this urge, just as he resists the affective pull of a liberal narrative in which writing teachers are heroes. In both cases, the act of generalization works to simplify and thus contain the object of study. It works to limit human potential.

Respect for the specifics, even when they are uncomfortable or illegible, ensures that professors don't become preachers. It also makes our work sustainable. As we've seen, post-social turn, politically engaged writing scholarship often betrays a top-down approach to sociality. Teachers and students, writing and writers, thus risk becoming mere effects of abstract social forces. This can result in a sense of entrapment and, ultimately, disillusionment with education as a progressive project. A liberal perspective reverses the dynamic. With increased attention to the local and concrete comes increased faith in practice. Material, technological, and discursive forces appear not as stable monoliths but as ever-changing human constructions. Such a view allows for a particularly fluid conception of social space. It also situates teachers and students as active agents. Specific interventions—Bartholomae's engagement with Quentin Pierce, for instance—will inevitably be limited and local, of course, but a liberal, bottom-up understanding of sociality allows local actions to have systemic impact. I believe that this is a productive way to conceive the relationship of part to whole. It provides a means to "socialize" writing instruction without diminishing it.

Conclusion

In the above pages, I've sought to redefine how our field understands liberalism and the liberal tradition. I've argued that liberalism is a political reform project that seeks to structure social systems to maximize human potential. Liberals believe that all individuals are qualitatively unique but also innately interdependent; indeed, individuality can only be achieved through sociality. With its emphasis on individual development as a means to promote the gen-

eral welfare, liberalism deeply informs the teaching and theorizing of writing. During our field's social turn of the 1980s, the creed's progressive potential was obscured. This was to the field's detriment, as liberalism can inform teaching practices as well as provide a useful conceptual bridge between our work in the classroom and the world at large.

A commitment to liberal ideals doesn't necessitate a certain writing pedagogy. It simply means recognizing the importance of individuality, the possibility of mutually beneficial exchange, and the reality of bottom-up social transformation. It also means protecting liberal institutions from those who, in the name of profit or grievance, seek to dismantle them. The writing class, writing program, and university are powerful forms of collective social action. By reaffirming our commitment to liberal ideals and institutions, we can make our work more meaningful and, ultimately, more fun.

Note

1. This article is dedicated to Dave Bartholomae (1947-2023), a true liberal.

2. Iris Ruiz summarizes the leftist perspective nicely, writing that, ultimately, the "possibility for agency and change lies in the demystification of the oppressive effects of discursive practices as well as the liberating effects of discursive practices" (33). James Berlin would agree.

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