

Chapter 5. Political Awareness and Political Passions

My political life was evolving alongside the transitions of my personal and academic lives, and would ultimately come to underlay the values of my professional life, and thus my writing within the profession. Accordingly, my political awareness deserves a parallel account within the development of my writing (for another account of my growing political awareness see Bazerman, 2011f).

Suburban Disillusionment

While I have a few visual memories of pre-school life in a small Brooklyn walkup apartment on the Olmstead designed Eastern Parkway, my memories of the social and political climate began when we moved in 1950 to an early suburb—Forest City in Wantagh, Long Island. I remember being comfortable in our small ranch house (and five years later in another larger house a few blocks away in a different school district). Within the growing middle class of the post war prosperity, I was immersed in the early television of cartoons, Howdy Doody, and WWII movie reruns. But news of the right-wing manipulation of anti-communism by Joseph McCarthy and the House Unamerican Affairs Committee started to seep into the margins of my consciousness. Even more present were stories of nuclear testing and fallout threats, amplified by the duck and cover drills we practiced regularly in schools. All the while, through my early school years I soaked up the triumphalist, individualist, exceptionalist ideology of the inspirational making of America.

By the time I entered junior high school in 1957, I started to become more consciously critical, opposing nuclear testing and making minor acts of resistance, such as sticking anti-nuclear testing cartoons from SANE (National Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy) to the walls whenever we were led out for bomb drills. My political education was magnified by my closest friendship from seventh grade until near the end of high school with Jesse Smith. While my parents had moved from thirties communism to fifties suburban business life, Jesse's father remained a working-class radical and union leader, even as his job as a school shop teacher supported life in a middle-class suburb. Jesse aspired to be a journalist, in the mold of Jack London, and introduced me to the work of Upton Sinclair, Richard Wright, John Dos Passos (in his earlier left incarnation), and radical novelists of the early twentieth century. We read *Brave New World* and *1984* together. He introduced me to *Catcher in the Rye*, and together with other friends discovered *Catch 22* when it was first published in 1961. We were partners on the debate team, spending hours arguing over rhetorical choices for our presentations and evaluating the various sources and their persuasive power. Together we listened to Leadbelly and other early blues (which even my coolest eighth

grade English teacher suggested was too unpolished and raw—again confirming my edgy radical credibility). Early in our friendship Jesse’s parents took us to see the legendary off-Broadway production of Brecht and Weill’s *Threepenny Opera* with Lotte Lenya, a major milestone in my left education. Afterward I played the cast recording endlessly, and then a recording from the 1931 German movie, which I finally saw when I was in college. Recently when I resaw the movie, I felt echoes of the emotional power it had for me when I was younger, arousing an intense cynical, despairing anger, yet gleeful in its critical opposition. I remained a Brecht fan through my undergraduate years—reading everything I could get my hands on, seeing every play production in New York, and collecting every recording available. Brecht gave a harder, more activist edge to my earlier, milder Mark Twain irony.

My papers for English classes became a search for social justice, as I wrote on Lorraine Hansberry’s *Raisin in the Sun* and Langston Hughes’ poetry. When I was required to write on nineteenth-century novels like *The Scarlet Letter* or *Jane Eyre*, I submitted critiques of Victorian morality. These latter called forth moralistic responses from my teacher—much to my delight in being part of a non-conventional vanguard. My research papers began weighing the implications of religious resistance to science, the *Communist Manifesto*, or the psychological effects of nuclear war.

Throughout my adolescence as I became aware of the diversity and vibrancy and resources of New York City in the late fifties and early sixties, I became dissatisfied with the conventionality, narrowness of thought, and limited resources in the suburbs. I first experienced the more eye-opening aspects of city life through the theater and museums. Hal Holbrook’s reenactment *Mark Twain Tonight* was an early revelation. My eyes were further opened as I haunted the environs of Columbia and then the whole city on my weekly Saturday trips. In the magazine and book stores in Manhattan I found left wing magazines and bought my first copies of *The Nation*. I couldn’t wait to leave the suburbs.

This budding critical awareness led me to question the military role of physics in the cold war atomic era. I began to puzzle over the ideological justifications of “pure research” that tried to insulate scientific complicity. This questioning was to continue in my search for values and meaning and my need for a socially useful career during my college years, and my disillusionment with the studies made available to me, even as I succeeded in them.

The Weight of the Vietnam War Draft

This search for a meaningful life was heightened by the problem of how to respond to the military draft. As I was finishing high school, U.S. involvement in Vietnam was expanding and the threat of being sent to war loomed over all young men. When JFK started to escalate the war in 1961, I was already suspicious of cold-war rhetoric and actions. As the war expanded, I wondered about

my country's justification for engaging us in war, and I wanted to have no part of it. When the Johnson administration released its notorious February 1965 white paper giving its rationale for engagement in Vietnam, I remember discussing it with my classmates and dismissing it as a flimsy rehash of old lies already discredited in the press.

I had several physical exams for the draft and avoiding service became a major life theme as I went through college and graduate school. I neither wanted to be killed nor to put myself in a position of self-preservation to kill others for a cause I did not believe in. Yet I could not make any decisions about my life without considering whether it would make me liable for the draft. This anxiety about our futures and our potential complicity hung over most young college men of my generation, though we made different choices about it. A few embraced it. A few felt obligated. But most clung on to their 2-S student deferments, and then when that ran out sought alternatives. While some of us in the protected academic world were sensitive to the class and race divides that sent others to die instead of us, we did not see that sacrificing ourselves would do much to change the inequities, and the most we felt we could do was oppose the war at home.

Understanding Class, Race, Regional, and Gender Divides

My awareness of the nexus of race, class, and privilege crept into my middle-class life, at first through noticing the divides in my town and my father's business and then reading and writing about literature and history in junior high and high school. By the end of high school, I was on local labor picket lines taking up causes of Black workers, and participating in civil rights marches. While I was at Cornell, the campus was also starting to become more racially integrated, as was Telluride, particularly through the work of the Executive Secretary Bea McLeod, who actively sought out diverse candidates for the summer programs and then house membership. Yet, I have to say I barely began to understand the depth of the racial and class issues in the US until I started inner-city teaching, and even then I saw only the consequences and not the underlying structures, practices, and attitudes that have made racism such an obdurate problem. It is still something I am attempting to understand in myself and the world around me. Over my career, however, teaching in New York, Atlanta, and California has provided me with lots of experiences to think about and learn from. Not only has my vision expanded, but so many of my culturally received assumptions about literacy, audiences, and what was worth communicating have been challenged as I started to ask myself what was really necessary, fundamental, and equitable.

My understanding of the political world, reinforcing my personal identity struggles, drove my searches for meaning, my critical and argumentative attitudes, my choices of models and topics, and ultimately my commitment to literacy education and writing research that would contest traditional literary notions

of literacy. Later when the opportunity emerged to support writing in Asia and then Latin America, I saw offering my support as a matter of social justice. Yet I tried not to overstep my position as an outsider—supporting local developments and decision-making, fostering regional ownership and perspectives, and trying to avoid neocolonialist tendencies.

My awareness of feminism was somewhat slower in coming. When I was in high school there were as many academically successful young women as men, so I never doubted women's talents and roles; as a non-athletic young man interested in the arts and intellectual matters, I felt alienated from the masculine culture I was surrounded by. The entire gender politics of dating confused me and I never was very good at it, but it seemed to me a problem of finding and appealing to young women who would share my interests. I did not yet understand how gender roles at the time limited the number of women who could express interests and modes of self-presentation that would make it possible for me to connect with them. Nor did I reflect on the low number of women in the science programs I participated in. By college I was already moving into a world of humanities where I was surrounded by bright and talented young women. So this just seemed the way things were, and people's interests fell along gendered lines.

Then when I began teaching of writing I found that the women were at least as talented as the men, and what I taught was equally applicable to both, so I found no differentiation in my teaching, though in trying to understand the motivations and resistances of individuals I did find some gender-related issues. Overall, however, I came to perceive writing as a means of acting with equality, engaged at social distance and with even potential sex and gender anonymity. All modes of writing seemed available to all people, at least in the educational settings where I taught.

As I came to study writing in the world, however, I saw that some genres, styles, and social actions were available only to those in certain social roles, and those social roles were unevenly distributed. I saw the best way I could intervene was to support the development of all people, including both women and minorities, so they could demonstrate their capacity to enact more roles. Only in my own workplace in the university did I have more direct means to influence equitable hiring and promotion practices.

When my personal friendships with women deepened, however, I became more conscious of the way sex and gender had been tied to victimization and domination, and had led to limiting roles for everyone. I also began to understand how sex and gender intersected with race, class, and other social positions. These are issues that I of course learned a lot about through my partner of a half-century, Shirley Geok-lin Lim.

The impact of feminism more directly on my scholarship I see as further muted. I appreciate the work of the many scholars who have recovered the work of pioneering women rhetoricians and have examined the consequences of the teaching of writing being a highly feminized profession, but that has not been

my work. My studies of historical and social arrangements of writing have been looking at practices pervasively dominated by men, but in a way that was unmarked, so my historical work has been narrowed by gender because the history was narrowed. I foregrounded gender in my historical studies only when the role of women was changing. Those social roles, however, were still often gendered, as in the domestic consumerism and urban home aesthetics of the later nineteenth-century that influenced the marketing strategy of the Edison companies. As domains of writing and writing roles opened to women, my studies included all those who worked in those fields. In my studies of contemporary practices and classrooms, the study populations reflected the diversity of the writers in the school and workplace.

I had specifically chosen to enter teaching of writing for the very reasons some people historically had considered it as women's work and given it low status, in that it was practical and devoted to the development of young people. Accordingly, I have experienced many of issues associated with feminism simply as part of the struggles of the field to gain support and recognition. Practices of collaboration, listening, respecting silence and difference, which some people associate with feminism entered into my world through multiple sources. Attentiveness to others and understanding the importance of ethical personal relationships had been growing within me from high school days and then through undergraduate philosophical readings to be made effectively operational during my later therapy based on Sullivan's interpersonal psychiatry and progressive social scientists of his period, which also opened my thinking about collaboration. Even later I was to find such ideas in Joseph Priestley's low church views about collaboration and attentiveness to others (see chapter 21). Ideas fostered by feminism certainly influenced me, but I didn't see or experience them as particularly having to do with gender. They were in my mind just about being human with each other.

Discrimination, differentiation, and inequality, whether through race, class, gender, or other projected markers are constructed over generations at the macro-structural level, at the meso-level of conscious choices and decisions, and the micro-level of interactions. I have done my best to try to recognize these and act equitably personally on all these levels. Professionally and through my writing, moreover, I have tried to understand the ways writing wields power and makes things work—and then through my teaching to make that power of writing more widely available. I have, however, largely left it to others to examine how these structures of power with their uses of writing have come to discriminate as they have. That is one of the reasons, among many others, that we need stories of many different kinds of writers.