Liberation Ichthyology: A Saga of the ‘Sixties

The third thing we had to do was a little more difficult. We call it Channeling. And it’s an effort in a democracy, although I realize this democracy has in its Constitution a provision which says we shall guarantee a republican form of government—and I have some doubts as to whether we've always done that or not—but anyway, in an organization such as we are, attempting to let everybody do as nearly as they can what they want to do, we hesitate to try to say to somebody that they are going to be an engineer or a scientist or something else, but we will tolerate beating him that way by deferment and threatening him at the same time by drafting him if he doesn’t take the deferment . . .

But just the same, we have tried for the last thirteen years, through the student system, and through the deferment of individuals after they got out; through very liberal deferments for post-graduate work, to try to channel people into what is said to be national interest. You people represent some of the groups who have said it’s in the national interest. I don't know and I don't have to know. When you’re pumping gas you don't . . . have to know the moral life of the guy who buys the gas; you just put it in and he drives off. And that is that.

—General Lewis B. Hershey, [http://www.ndu.edu/library/ic4/L64-084.pdf](http://www.ndu.edu/library/ic4/L64-084.pdf), four stars I suppose, just checking tires and following orders

I consider American higher education to be one of the greatest disasters in the history of the world, just after World War II, the Great Plague of 1348, and the Evelyn Wood speed-reading program.

—Me, lecture, 1964

What the hell’s a “dirt farmer”? It’s redundant. Who’s farming anything other than dirt? Maybe a dirt farmer is just a little guy who can’t afford fertilizer. But if that’s true, then what do we call the big guy who can afford fertilizer?

—Me, lecture, 1968

As George Wallace says, we was wrong. We used to go around shouting a slogan about how “you can’t trust anybody over thirty.” That’s a lot of nonsense! Thirty months is a full two and a half years, and anybody that old is already hopelessly messed up. Me and Rousseau are in complete agreement on this point.

—Me, somewhere, 1975

If you think this country’s a bummer, imagine how it would feel to live in a place where peasant women kill their own babies, and then try to find work as wet nurses for the rich. Then imagine the pride one would feel if Ronald Reagan were attacking this problem every day.
—Me, to me, 1983

Around 1969, a guy wrote an article for the Atlantic. He called it “The Faculty is the Heart of the Trouble.” He was, of course, entirely right: We are the problem, though not for the reasons this fellow had in mind. The endless series of reports condemning American education say essentially the same thing: Teachers do their customary crap year after year—mainly, talking at students in the grand medieval tradition—and the students don’t learn anything. We know, for instance, that most students cannot identify the country in which the Korean War fought itself. But they don’t give a damn, their keepers don’t give a damn, and we don’t give a damn.

—Me, 1998

If we who live by thinking, by our wits, continue forever this abject practice of kissing the backsides of the rich and powerful, we shall place our indelible imprimatur upon a form of academic life that will remain fundamentally, pervasively, and inescapably mickeymouse.

—Donald Duck, 1947

From the very beginning, I felt that I was doing little more than conducting a simple exercise in social science research: A little demonstration project, a simple “breaching” experiment inspired by the likes of Harold Garfinkel and Paul Goodman and probably other scholars whom I had only just discovered, like Jesus or Abindarráez el Abencerraje. Without a doubt, there were classical political issues: This I knew well. But I had another rationale: Paul Goodman, in a famous essay, says that the American Association of University Professors (AAUP)

... is a national craft union, largely of entrenched seniors, that copes with distant crises by dilatory committee work. According to its rules, it will not protect freedom in cases of pragmatic action, but only academic “inquiry” and teaching—but what kind of inquiry is it that is not essentially involved with pragmatic experiment and risk? And it explicitly enjoins against involving the name and strength of the community of scholars in any action that one may take as an “individual.” Such limitations would have been unthinkable in the medieval community of scholars.

This I could not believe! This outrage, if true, I could not endure! This was not the word received from the entrenched seniors who had trained me for all these years, men and women who had struggled for centuries to get themselves thus entrenched. And I trusted these men and women the way one would have trusted John Wayne, especially if The Duke, like my mentors, had had a first-rate mind—he freely acknowledged his shortcomings—and could have worked his way beyond all the predatory plasticity of late death-throes capitalism, and all the right-wing hogwash in which he took such delight. Or the way one trusted the Long Ranger (not the Lone Ranger, for God’s sake!), who did have a first-rate mind and was therefore into cedar shakes and into being pretty far left.
Or Tonto, ditto for damn sure.

Absent “pragmatic experiment and risk,” absent trial and error, we remain mindless. But Goodman’s argument was just a subsidiary of, or derivation from, my main research hypothesis. My main hypothesis also was formulated by Goodman, but it received considerable inspiration (at least for me) from the ingenious Harold Garfinkel:

> The AAUP is useful in its code of tenure and academic freedom; but we must remember that it is the pure style of the dominant Organized System to establish status and to transform intellect into conversation, with the proviso that nothing is in danger of being changed.

And that was not the style of Tonto or his sidekick, men whose responsibility it was to transform intellect into higher intellect, silver bullets into social justice, and whose masks—the Indian did not require a mask in the literal sense—were a protection against ego-tripping, against the insistence, appalling to the Hopi, that one must receive all due credit: One can slay the dragon without joining General Richard Secord and Ollie North and the grand pantheon of national heroes. At least, that was the way I had interpreted my assorted entrenched seniors, who of course (as far as I knew) were the same folks who had invented Tonto and the man they wrongly accused (in a mild cop-out) of being the Lone Ranger. Goodman, in short, was telling us that Tonto’s brand of academic freedom, as transmogrified by the modern American university, had become a lie, a farce.

Like Gandhi, I admired everything about Christianity except Christians.

My method was the classic ethnomethodological experiment of Harold Garfinkel, and the basic design of the project quickly conveys itself in the following document:

> To: Anthropology Faculty
> From: Department Chairman
> Subject: Special Department Meeting, Tuesday, March 9, 10:30 a.m.

One of our full-time, regular faculty has announced that he is no longer willing to make “public evaluations” of students and therefore does not intend to give any grade other than S (“pass”). Although the university recently adopted a pass-fail system, S is an illegal grade for most of the students in this case. Furthermore, there is a very real question whether students will receive credit with a grade of S.

I am calling a meeting of the departmental faculty on Tuesday . . . to advise me on what we should do to protect the interests of the students.

No more channelwork from me, sir, or from a short list of my like-minded colleagues.

I had been on the academic scene for many years, and was in the process of entering what any academic reader of Bernard Malamud’s A New Life would quickly recognize as an old life. The department chairman let me know, immediately and in person and according to his official duty, that if I persisted in my aberrations not only would it be difficult for the department to protect me (along with my students), but that I could probably not count on any help from the AAUP—he, in other words, accepted the Goodman hypothesis without putting it to empirical test, and this struck me as most inappropriate for a behavioral scientist
who was big on systematic “falsifiability” of researchable ideas. We then hassled at length about grades. About students. About the Vietnam war. The draft. Tests. Certification. Death. What a university is, should be, could be, would be. As the chairman’s arguments unfolded I became more and more convinced that my stand—my stubborn stand—was right, and I understood more clearly than ever why he had been selected to be our chairman. Beginning here, I felt, I understood precisely where department chairmen come from: As the acronym has it, they must be Safe, Uniform, Reliable, and Efficient. In essence, they must be condoms.

After all, I had been agonizing over such matters for many years. I saw the student protest movement that came alive in the late ’sixties, culminating in the infamous “Dow bust” that irradiated across our campus thick waves of tear gas that reached and nearly smothered many a professorial lung. I saw a status-quo oriented, consensus-mongering faculty’s non-response to every conceivable appeal that went beyond an occasional anti-war petition. I read about the endless antics of a reactionary Board of Regents, a coterie of condoms carefully selected and at least as out of touch as Duke Wayne, or our department chairman, or the national average as established by a number of social surveys—see, for instance, Rodney Hartnett’s sad booklet entitled College and University Trustees. Further, I had read the literature on academic reform and was bitterly aware of the university’s immense and increasing hostility toward the sorts of experimentation strongly encouraged by that neglected mass of literature. On the whole, then, this university did not propose to capitulate to anything at a time when the nation was engaged in war. Support the troops.

So, the chairman had no real choice, and neither did I. After consulting with a number of his trusted advisers and deciding what to do, he called a department meeting “to decide what to do.” The meeting consisted of two phases. In phase 1, I announce my concerns and my intentions:

Gentlemen:

With the end of the current semester, I have completed my first year as a member of the faculty of this university and my seventh year as a professor. My experiences during these years have led me to a number of conclusions about student evaluation and related problems:

First, the responsibility for making public evaluations of students—especially grades, but also such practices as the writing of letters of recommendation, personal contacts with potential employers of students, and so forth—confers on faculty members the power to exert a profound and lasting influence, potentially negative, on the life chances of many students.

Second, such power, now exercised by teachers at virtually all levels of American education, is demonstrably incompatible with the creation of effective learning environments, and it has been especially so in my case. The social, educational, and spiritual costs of maintaining this structure far exceed whatever benefits may derive from making student evaluations available to the various agencies that may request or demand them—including, may I remind you, the Selective Service System. Apropos of our cooperation with the Selective Service System, I believe with Ben Spock that American education, from the pre-school level to the post-graduate level, is an essential and crucial element of this country’s militaristic approach to third-world problems. In how
many American classrooms have teachers denounced the decision of the
Truman administration to destroy hundreds of thousands of innocent people, at
Hiroshima and Nagasaki?

I should also like to point out that, with the murder of the Reverend
King, and given the fact that most of us share with him his opposition to this
despicable war, our unwillingness to engage in mild forms of civil
disobedience, in opposition to agencies such as the SSS, makes us appear to be
hypocrites.

Third, while the faculty and administration of this university have a
right, indeed a responsibility, to demand that each of us uphold the high
standards of scholarship for which this university is justly renowned, there is
no legitimate authority that may impose on me and my students the
encumbrances and entrapments of the grading-rating system. In my view,
public evaluations should be made only with the mutual consent of individual
professors and individual students.

Fourth, my professional responsibilities compel me to announce that I
am no longer willing to exercise any potentially negative power over the life
chances of my students, and that I consider the imposition of any such
responsibility to be a demonstrable threat to my academic freedom and to that
of my students.

The immediate reaction of my colleagues—about fifty of us were scattered around a large
meeting room—was most instructive. One astounded professor announced, through a
half-chewed half sandwich composed of garlic, pickle, and a half inch of salami between
slices of raisin bread spread thick with a highly sweetened cream cheese and heavily sprinkled
with seasoned salt and nutmeg, that I was crazy. Several others conceded that teaching, for
once, would become a real pleasure if classes could be taught in the manner I proposed. This
particular dialectic was dropped immediately, although the significance of it was not lost on
my esteemed colleague Edward R. “Big” Nurse, the incoming department chairman
(chairman-elect), who had landed the position by letting it be known that if he didn’t land it
he would resign. Big Nurse, as it turned out, was a master dialectician, although not entirely
of the Hegelian-Marxist stripe. (As it turns out, the salami sandwich grows on you—like
Jimmy Carter’s wife—if you can somehow take out the nutmeg.)

In phase 2 my colleagues, as Mark Twain might say, ambuscade the raggedy A-rab. I
quote from the official minutes of the aforementioned meeting:

CONFIDENTIAL!

Minutes of the Special March 9 Meeting of the Department of Anthropology
Attending: {c. 50 faculty colleagues, listed in alphabetical order}

(1) The Chairman called the meeting to order. He announced that the
purpose of the meeting was to consider Mr. de Foliantes’ intention not to give
grades. He asked Mr. de Foliantes if he would like to make a preliminary
statement.
(2) Mr. de Foliantes said that he had informed the Chairman that he would not give grades to his Anthropology 477 class and had announced his intention to the class at its first meeting. Students desiring grades were told that they should drop the course; those willing to continue in the course were told that they could drop at any time, should they change their minds. . . . Mr. de Foliantes stated that he would soon issue a white paper explaining his views in full and would have preferred to discuss them after it had been issued. . . .

(3) Mr. M. demanded that someone else immediately replace Mr. De Foliantes in the course.

(4) The Chairman said that such an action could not be taken by the department, in that it could only be done through dismissal proceedings. Dismissal proceedings would have to be instituted by higher administrative authority.

(5) Mr. T. asked about Mr. de Foliantes’ response to students who wanted grades. Mr. de Foliantes said that no one had made such a request. The Chairman, however, said that he had received complaints from students.

(6) Mr. R. said that our primary concern should be for the students now enrolled. He moved that the Chairman provide an alternative evaluation system, in which Mr. de Foliantes would have no role, for the students in Anthropology 477. The motion was seconded. . . . The motion was voted upon and carried. It was agreed that a special meeting would be held to discuss Professor de Foliantes’ white paper, when issued. The meeting was then adjourned.

After agonizing for no less than 23 minutes, then, my colleagues passed a resolution calling for the unprecedented action of an examination prepared and graded by committee, thereby displacing a regular faculty member. The next day, the following document was distributed to “my” students:

To: Students enrolled in Anthro. 477
From: Chairman, Department of Anthropology
Subject: Grades in Anthropology 477

Professor de Foliantes’ stated intention to give all students enrolled in Anthro. 477 this semester a grade of S (“pass”) is contrary to the rules passed by the university faculty. The faculty of the Department of Anthropology have discussed the issues raised by this situation at a special meeting. To protect the interests of the students, the department faculty have voted to provide an evaluation system for the course under the auspices of the department. A faculty committee will construct and grade a final examination for the course. The examination will be required of all students. Professor de Foliantes has requested that he not be asked to participate in the construction or the grading of the examination. If Professor de Foliantes provides grades of S or if he fails to provide any grades for the course, the course grade for each student will be determined by the faculty committee.
Thus spake my colleagues.

My colleagues. My beloved colleagues: Men (and a few women—alas, too few, Virginia) who had held themselves forth as advocates and exemplars of the open, liberal, free-thinking university, who had built a large reputation for being in a vanguard of those Americans deeply committed to change, who allegedly wished to make the university a mighty instrument of social justice, who had shown a capacity for protesting virtually any injustice brought to their attention—shocking indeed that such men, such honorable men as these, confronted with an injustice in their own midst and largely of their own contrivance, should choose the most reactionary of all possible solutions. Their action was made more palatable, as usual, by wrapping it in rhetoric about the need for protecting the interests of the disadvantaged and the downtrodden and maligned—in this instance, my students. A willingness to hear all sides, within a reasonable length of time after deciding the issue, was strongly in evidence, as witness the special hearing on my “white paper”—and much of our initial anxiety was sublimated into ritual conversation.

So far, everything’s breaking for Goodman.

(1) The immediate post-experimental environment

I do strongly agree with what you say, but I shall be frightened to death if you righteously say it.

—Eriatlov

These early results, as noted, were not entirely unanticipated: Faculty liberals, famous for their fast willingness to protest injustices far from campus, acquiescing as usual in the most blatant injustices within the cloisters. To this tendency I have given the name “huelga syndrome”—huelga is Spanish for strike—because I once listened incredulously while a faculty colleague, wearing a bright huelga button on his lapel, denounced a lovely strike mounted by the graduate assistants: Strikes are all right for those grimy field hands out there I know not where, and may they give the grape growers and the grope-grabbers fits—but these obstreperous whelps hanging around hereabouts had damn well better get back in line!

My decision to commit an overt violation of university regulations, to run a full-blown experiment in breaching, involved me in a highly aberrational form of behavior which, as a social scientist, I should be able to explain—at least in part. Insofar as I understand my own motivations in this matter and remain capable of the usual excesses of motive-mongering that give meaning and depth to American life—e.g., the official desire to bring democracy to Iraq¹, for an investment of mere tens of thousands of lives—it seems to me that the main triggering mechanisms were intellectual curiosity combined with an intense emotional aversion, accumulated over many years, against the authoritarian inflexibility of many faculty members and against the tendency for students to act like Uncle Tom.

No—actually this is wrong, because the usual problem with the authoritarian personality is his tendency to submit to those above him who wield the real power: the ubiquitous Generals Hershey, with their Will Rogers four-star charm exceeded only by their determination to control the world while claiming, as he does, that they merely pump gas
while it is the bad guys who pump oil. And it was this hidden nexus, this hidden deference, that was truly onerous, that truly needed to be broken. Furthermore, I had been severely criticized by student radicals for my own hypocrisy in conforming to the contradictory demands of the modern academic system while at the same time harboring large misgivings about what that system does to people, or fails to do for people. At the time, as now, there was little evidence that faculties around the country were interested in any save the most trivial types of reform—or, worse yet, the faculties were openly hostile to reform and, in many cases, even minor innovations. A charming example of this hostility was provided by a department chairman under whom I once languished, who saw fit to send me the following letter by campus mail. Since his office was located eleven short steps from mine, I assume that there must have been some sinister need to make this communication look more or less official:

Dear Gus:

You are aware from previous departmental deliberations that I think you should not teach 414 as we have conceived of it. I’m sure you do agree that we need another way to enable you to pursue your interest in deviance. I think one way might be for you to share in the teaching of 514—the graduate course in deviance. But I don’t want to try that just now. Understandably, R. might be a little upset if you were assigned 514 next fall. So I have scheduled him for it. What I have to say below has no relationship to this problem with the deviance course, not as such . . .

Finally, it looks as though quite a number of our majors have avoided your kinship and family courses. Do you feel this is correct? If so, what accounts for it? I have to level with you, Gus, and say that two members of our department have suggested to me in private that you are not pulling your weight. They have not yet complained strongly, but they have commented informally on it. When it becomes necessary to consider a tenure decision, this is exactly the kind of observation that can become critical. At that point, of course, a departmental committee will take action first. Not trying to scare you, Gus. Rather, I want to help you with any problem or misunderstanding that may have arisen in recent months.

And then, within this context of threat and coercion and body counts and subtle poetic imagery that tends to elude me, and a one-man good cop/bad cop routine wherein the good-cop personality merely wants to help me—where have I heard this before?—we have a not-so-subtle intrusion into the classroom, into course content. My captain continues:

Another worry is your practice of permitting students to “explore the library” rather than read a textbook or other required items. A number of students have come to me this semester to borrow books or journals, saying that they are desperate for material. Some say they have searched libraries all over the state and haven’t found what they need. Caveat: The library approach is suitable for independent study, graduate seminars, and the like. We have so many students here, though, that we simply cannot proceed as if everybody
were a Ph.D. candidate. A few top students will perform as desired, many will flounder or avoid the course, and most of the others will simply cheat. My view, Gus, is that you have not done justice to the course. The only way (caveat) a text can be avoided is to lecture in a highly organized way throughout the term, thus providing a text yourself. Question: Will your teaching be more organized, more thorough, now that you have finally licked your Ph.D. thesis? That’s it, Gus, right on the line.

{Signed}

My world, in short, was caving in with caveats. Even though I had already published my famous essay “How and Why to Cheat on Student Course Evaluations,” I could not discover an easy exit, other than to resign.

This has always struck me as an extraordinary document. In its own unique way, it is eloquent: I have never seen a clearer representation of what is wrong with higher education in America. It contains a set of assumptions matched in their untenability only by the arrogant fervor with which they are held:

First, that my courses should be as he, the department, and I conceive of them, not as my students and I conceive of them.

Second, that it is adequate merely to make an empty promise that I may have an opportunity to teach what I wish to teach and am prepared to teach, if it can be arranged—although apparently in this case it could not.

Third, that in the absence of any real evidence it is legitimate, on a conjectural basis, to arrive at important decisions about the effectiveness of a professor’s teaching.

Fourth, that it is legitimate under these shabby circumstances to invoke the matter of tenure, and to threaten an unfavorable tenure decision based in part on the “private” innuendoes of a pair of unnamed colleagues. I would soon learn to think realistically of tenure as a fluttering series of spiderwebs carefully placed between me and a Mack truck moving slow in compound low; at the time, however, I didn’t realize that a pair of determined colleagues working in concert have a good chance of tearing down even these lightweight protective devices.

Fifth, that experimental classroom procedures cannot be used if a few students do not approve of them, even if these students are demonstrably incapable of finding information in the world’s paramount Information Society. In other words, experimentation is ruled out if it is true experimentation in the sense that there is a possibility that the usual “successes” will not be achieved, or that new ways of defining success will emerge.

What we need is “pragmatic experiment and risk,” trial and error. Consider the alternatives: Trial without error is impossible; error without trial is what we already have; an absence of both trial and error is death.

Sixth, that we know definitively and a priori the circumstances under which the “explore-the-library” approach is appropriate, even though our
libraries seem, to this man, to be short on books. Incidentally, I have estimated that the public libraries of the state in question, already trodden from end to end by a few wayfaring students, contain at least 70 million volumes; clearly, this man studied under Evelyn Wood.

Seventh, that we know what constitutes “highly organized” knowledge in the social sciences, and that only such knowledge has a place in the college classroom.

Finally, caveats to the contrary notwithstanding, the system is really trying to help me, my students, and probably the entire Underdeveloped World.

These are precisely the sorts of assumptions, in all their authoritarian splendor, that professors who seek reform, who seek to humanize the classroom, are up against. After receiving this letter I understood clearly what Thorstein Veblen meant when he said that the only way to live honorably in an American university is to be perpetually on the edge of getting fired. I realized that one of the proudest moments of my life had occurred in 1954, when Mr. W. Frederick Stinnard, principal, Manual Arts Finishing School, had exiled me from the Los Angeles City School District. I hadn’t done nothin’—that, of course, was alleged to be the leading problem. Beyond that, nobody asked.

The French philosopher Simone Weil, then, captured perfectly my evolving educational philosophy when she summed up a large part of her own foreshortened career by saying, “j’ai toujours considéré la révocation comme la couronnement de ma carrière”—I have always considered my firing to be the crowning glory of my career. I’m a little saddened, however, that Simone uses révocation in the singular. She didn’t have enough years to make it plural.

After an inordinate amount of soul searching it became clear to me that I was caught between the faculty’s insistence on maintaining a rigid, repressive status quo and the deplorable willingness of so many students to adopt the machinations necessary to beat the system’s pernicious little game. At this moment—so it seemed to me—the scales fell from my eyes and I suddenly came to the further realization that every time I tried to make a thoughtful, stimulating class presentation only to have my efforts rewarded by the inevitable uptight junior asking whether he would be held “responsible” for that particular lecture on some future test—a humiliation that most professors have known scores of times—we were merely creating another instance in which the system exerts a chilling effect on free inquiry. Anything short of outright refusal to cooperate, it seemed to me, would involve an unacceptable compromise of academic freedom—mine, and that of any of my students who gave a damn.

Which brings me to my final self-assessed motivation: I wanted to know whether it is possible in the academic community, in modern America, to act on principle. If you do not have clout among the old boys, do you automatically get beaten down? I do not know whether it was ever possible in the long history of the university for scholars to act on principle in the style claimed by Paul Goodman, and perhaps Goodman’s ideas about a “community of scholars” are merely the delirious dream of a poet trying to revive an Arcadian past that never existed. But if it never existed, perhaps we must invent it! My students, even those who were organizing protest activities on my behalf, never fully
understood that the reason I refused to consult them or anybody else about the advisability of my actions, and the reason I never actively sought political support for my position even after being “unjustly” fired, was that such consultation and such potential support struck me as being entirely superfluous to a clean test of the Goodman hypothesis—a simple lesson that must be driven home both to students and to faculty colleagues. A breaching experiment must be a simple repudiation of bad faith, not a grandiose political exercise.

I had enjoyed my slumber through any number of interminable faculty meetings called in the midst of crisis, in which the most intransigent professors would make the incredibly self-delusional argument that, after all, they were merely trying to preserve the apolitical character of the university. Such flummery could be quickly dissipated by merely skimming a few random pages of Clark Kerr’s classic The Uses of the University. If, as a member of this supposedly apolitical sand heap, I had been able to hold forth a credible threat of a major campus uprising or, better yet, if I had been in a position to threaten an important budget, and assuming that the university’s second-strike capability could have been effectively deterred or interdicted, I would doubtless have received a hearing, an opportunity to raise an exotic and unusual question of academic freedom. A first-class campus recruiter for the CIA could have raised the issues much more effectively than I did, in my capacity as a mere professor.

While it could well be argued that Clark Kerr is an advocate, exemplar, and staunch defender of the liberal’s university, it should be recognized that, contrary to popular belief, not all faculty members are liberals—even among the social scientists and humanists. I once wrote an article on this topic, under the title “The Myth of the Liberal Professor.” In any case, the indispensable complement of the aforementioned huelga syndrome liberal is the strongly conservative (if not absolutely right-wing) faculty member who would like to see the service-oriented liberal’s university—the American university of the postwar era—completely dismantled. I soon discovered that such men and women seem to have a strange affinity for faculty “radicals” (gossamer contact with reality?), although their feelings are almost never reciprocated. Perhaps there is a belief that a true service-oriented university should be able to take care of the needs of Marxists as well as Dowists. Many of the department’s thrice-blessed mandarin professors, the high priests of academe, the huelga syndrome complement, individually and privately gave their frank approval—by telephone, brief note, or while breathlessly hanging on my office door—although my “means,” to many of these colleagues, were a cause of some consternation. This response, assuming that I interpret it correctly (perhaps these colleagues were merely Judas goats, willing to march with me to the last drop of my blood: I know they made me feel like the Paul Newman character, in Cool Hand Luke), was a most pleasant surprise, a little like receiving a compliment from a Thoughtful Duke Wayne. Less surprising, but equally entertaining and edifying, were the anonymous notes that began arriving with the appearance of my “white paper”—some friendly, some derisive, but all affirming something about the allegedly benign character of the faculty’s historical role:

Professor de Foliantes:
Enclosed is your screed on grading and academic reform, which is doubtless valuable to you but just so much plunder in the eyes of the University faculty, whose mailboxes have been stuffed with it by your student supporters. The sloppy thinking and the over-writing provide ample explanation (to all but the author) why, after seven years as a faculty member, he is still an assistant professor. The fault, of course, lies in the “system.” It could be imbedded in the author, who obviously needs further exposure to elementary logic and a good course in freshman composition.

{Unsigned}

Imbedded in the author? Better an over-writer than a lousy writer! This guy makes it sound as if my major faults were no more serious than a subcutaneous contraceptive.

Uninformed, mind closed, never having talked to me in person, is this professor “unthinkable in the medieval community of scholars?”

And another:

MEMORANDUM

To: Gus de Foliante

Thank you for sending a copy of your position paper on the structure of academic authoritarianism. It is both fascinating and articulate—articulate in a way that I have always admired.

Would it be possible to borrow your mimeograph masters sometime early next fall? I would like to run this paper off and use it as a discussion paper in a number of our courses and in some of our advanced non-credit student faculty seminars.

Thank you.

{Signed}

P.S. By the way, I hope you get this published.

It is always nicer when these notes are signed. As for the anonymous contribution, I simply do not have the imagination to discover how I can possibly blame my lack of upward social mobility on the grading system—the true source of my difficulty is probably some subtle interaction of the grading system, monopoly capitalism, and Planters Cheez Balls. I had always hoped—nay, anticipated—that by now I would have achieved the status of, say, ex-Attorney General Ed Meese. Far more valuable, however, than downward-mobility diagnostics was the suggestion that a little additional coursework would be in order, although I find that my major educational deficiencies are not in the realm of language but rather mathematics. My math, I fear, is worse than my writing. Therefore, shortly after receiving this strong admonition I repaired to the office of the Dean of Faculty and inquired whether there were any regulations—since I do not take university regulations lightly—that would rule out my earning a degree in mathematics. The dean, at first uncomprehending and then utterly unbelieving, said that he had never looked into the matter but that he could not imagine why any professor, already holding the Ph.D., would wish to take another academic
degree. Actually, he allowed, the degree itself did not mean much—that is, the degree I might take, not the one I already possessed—and why not merely audit whatever courses I needed? That, he said, is what any sensible faculty member would do. (And therefore I dooz it.)

Shortly afterward I talked to some grad-student friends who were majoring in mathematics. I told them that I had it on high authority that any sensible person would not take a meaningless degree in mathematics but would merely audit whatever coursework he or she needed, and go on from there. Some of these friends dropped out, while others took their rightful and long-awaiting places at the barricades. As we shall see later, I have a real talent for driving folks from the temple.

The lesson was clear: Faculty members are not to be encouraged to learn anything from one another (except, perhaps, from those few who share the same limited and limiting specialty), and the politics of sand-heap solipsism will remain intact. Our more advanced and enthusiastic students will doubtless continue to learn far more than we; but who cares, particularly since we never have to let it hang out?

And then came the long-awaited special convocation on my white paper. Entitled Dunce Cages, Hickory Sticks, and Public Evaluation: The Structure of Academic Authoritarianism, this screedish essay was the result of a month’s feverish work. Chiefly because of the catchy title, I suppose, a few colleagues had actually read it—I know for a fact that their mailboxes had been stuffed with it. In any case, this “emergency” (where?) meeting constitutes the first and last meaningful discussion of basic educational policy—as contrasted with the usual trivia—that I have ever had with faculty colleagues at any of several institutions in which I’ve served over a career of forty years. Although the discussion rarely moved beyond superficialities, it touched upon every major issue that we obstreperous protesters had been trying to raise: the incompatibility of teaching and evaluative roles; the intricately related problems of measurement of student performance, “feedback” on their performance, and evaluation of their performance; the contradictory organizational requisites of the “service-oriented” multiversity; the role of colleges and universities in “status allocation”; admission policies of graduate and professional schools; whether learning must be accompanied by pain, both for students and for teachers.

Throughout the dialogue it became more and more clear that the major impediments to abandoning the grading-rating system were, first, a fear that such a commitment would be the harbinger of a more experimental, innovative, demanding approach to the despised teaching role, and even the small amount of time spent discussing this prospect seemed, to more than a few participants, an exorbitant waste; second, a strong fear that the faculty’s traditional control over classroom and curricula would be undermined by students no longer afraid to challenge authority; third, a fear that our responsibility for sorting out students, for determining which of them should be rewarded for their merit or punished for their vices, could not be carried out in the absence of the grade-credit-degree system, and that our employer would have no recourse but to punish us, the entire department, if we rejected the task. Which, incidentally, is precisely what management threatened to do. In raising this threat, they were very apolitical.

We then resolved this “heated and wide-ranging discussion” with a fiery motion to adjourn.
It was all terribly depressing, and I spent the better part of the meeting near a window watching sailboats glide slowly and indifferently across a nearby lake, knowing that I had correctly anticipated that nothing of importance would be or could be accomplished by a group of men so utterly defeated as these. Again, we witnessed a classic instance of Goodman’s ritual conversation, conversation as a means of obscuring an intention to continue the same patterns of indifference and acquiescence that had long since transformed our university into an efficient machine of repression that one adapts to most expeditiously by simply turning off one’s brain and joining the blessed battalions of sycophantic organization men or long-forgotten senior faculty vegetables. For the former, ritual conversation becomes a way of life, a way to achieve pissant power on a more than paltry scale; for the latter, involved in an adaptation that I first learned about years ago by listening to faculty T-group confessionals, one hopes that masturbatory conversation has a richness rarely found in the empty, moribund convocations of the modern academy.

I did, however, accomplish one thing: A few colleagues adopted my practice of referring to the Examinations – Grades – Accumulation of credits – Degree system as the EGAD! system.

The next day, perhaps not by coincidence, I had the honor of receiving my first direct, personal communication from the dean—in fact, from any dean, if we exclude letters of appointment, recruitment interviews, budgetary quibbles, and other such formalities such as the question I had raised a few days earlier about the advisability of broadening my education:

Dear Professor de Foliantes:

I understand from several of your department colleagues that you feel certain questions need to be raised about the grading system in use at this university, as well as other aspects of the undergraduate program.

I should like to point out, first of all, that the grading system is to be reviewed by an appropriate faculty committee this fall. Thus, there will be an opportunity for you and other concerned faculty to raise suggestions for change, including the nature of course requirements, the separation of evaluation from teaching, and many other issues that appear to be of current interest. I am most gratified to learn of your interest in improving undergraduate education at this institution, and I hope you will join your colleagues in this continuing effort.

Until such time as changes have been introduced, I know that you have already been advised that each faculty member is expected to comply with existing regulations (e.g., Fac. Doc. 1403, 13 February 1947; rev. 2 June 1954; rev. 13 September 1954) as a part of his responsibility to the university.

Sincerely,

{Signed}

This letter felt like the traditional eleven-stepper—the “Dear Gus” letter above. My reply:
Dear Alexander:

Although I am fully aware of my obligation to the College and University to observe the existing faculty regulations, I believe that I have additional obligations of a professional nature that, in the present instance, compel me to refuse to comply. The rationale behind this argument is set forth in detail in my recent "white paper," of which you should have received a copy—you might check your mailbox. Incidentally, the study and research that I have conducted over the past few weeks, in preparing the revised and expanded version of my "white paper," have convinced me even more strongly than before that I have no alternative but to refuse to participate in traditional evaluation processes.

I believe that I would be doing the University a disservice if I were to follow the many strong suggestions that I turn in legal grades, for this action would correctly be interpreted as an example par excellence of a professor caving in under the various pressures that "the system" is able to exert; capitulation would be seen as a sell-out that would mainly sacrifice the interests and concerns of students. Professors and administrators, as you may know, are often seen as being largely indifferent to the interests of students, and some of the feedback I have received on my white paper indicates that students are largely correct in this assessment: Many professors have told me that they don’t give a damn what use society makes of grades, credits, and degrees, or what our admission and certification policies may be, so long as the University continues to provide ways in which professors may "insulate" themselves from the burgeoning hordes of undergraduates. . . .

Beyond that, Alex, I’d love to say a few more things about the role of the Selective Service System in all this, but my friends at the Law School tell me that I’m going to get into serious trouble with the FBI if I keep bad-mouthing the SSS and the low-life, apolitical sonsabitches who fuel it.

Sincerely,
{Signed}

And the dean’s reply to my reply:

Dear Gus:

It would be useful for you and me to discuss the subject of our recent correspondence. I am almost certain to have a free afternoon next week, but if you’re away then, as seems likely, perhaps a time can be arranged during the following week. Unfortunately, I’m going to be out of town most of the first week of June.

Please call my office and set a convenient time.

Sincerely,
{Signed}
Again, a strange anomaly: The promise of an entire afternoon in the life of a busy man indicates urgency, but the usual scheduling delays and the routine snafus are an essential part of the larger ritual, which is perhaps not all that urgent.

And note the extraordinary transition! Prior to my receiving the dean’s first letter, the cool-out/warning, I had had no direct contact concerning the issues of the day with administrative authorities superior to my department chairman. Apparently this channelwork continues unabated until such time as the bluesuits deem it necessary that a relatively high-level bureaucrat come on with overwhelming formalistic splendor—e.g., a salutation to Professor de Foliantes and an impressive recitation of rules and procedures and legalistic references, whereupon the wrong-headed recipient of all this attention is supposed to realize that this vast organization, with its massive resources and all its complex regulations and elegant procedures, is no mere pipe to be played upon. It all reminded me of the last time I was cooled out by an insurance company: An agent with an apolitical MBA nearly convinced me that my household was in excellent shape despite the fact that it had been hit by a tornado followed by a fire and a flood, and had also been electrocuted. I must concede, however, that I had technical problems in going ahead doggedly with my claim: The regulations did not provide at all for electrocution of one’s household.

My lengthy conversation with the dean took place a few days later and was the soon-to-be notorious occasion on which he finally conceded, after jawboning aimlessly for perhaps an hour, that a bachelor’s degree in the social sciences or humanities tells us next to nothing: It tells us that the recipient is a certified organization man, able to follow instructions, and can probably read if called upon to do so. The dean, I felt, saw nothing particularly distressing about this arrangement, and this attitude more or less turned me off to the man while at the same time helping me, again, to understand why the established practices persist.

Our leaders are charming, skillful, brilliant men and women—who question nothing. They cannot permit themselves to doubt the realities on which their careers are founded, for doing so would jeopardize those very careers, perhaps even jeopardize one’s self-esteem. We will never see a university president who will simply not accept the fact that the successful varsity basketball coach-grifter “earns” ten times more than the most brilliant assistant professor. By “not accept,” I mean risking his or her career in order to carry out the famous French admonition, écrasez l’infâme!—écrasez l’infâme!

By this time “the system” had begun deteriorating badly. So badly and so beautifully, in fact, that it became necessary for a nervous chancellor to escalate matters dangerously by seeing to the appointment of a new committee. As reported by a local newspaper:

UNIVERSITY TO UNDERTAKE
GRADING SYSTEMS STUDY
Traditional Method Under Fire

A special committee of the faculty will be named to study the grading system at the University.
The faculty’s powerful central executive committee said it would appoint a special committee due to the “considerable interest on the part of the students and faculty in a re-evaluation of the traditional grading system.”

It added that, during the interim, the “letter and spirit” of the current grading system, adopted by the university faculty in 1954, will prevail.

The action follows a number of proposed changes in the social science departments. At least nine junior faculty members have indicated that they will grade either A or F, eliminating the B, C, and D grades. A few faculty members have said that they will not turn in any grades.

In one case, a class reportedly voted to allow the faculty member to give either the A or F grade. The faculty member had proposed the system and asked for the class vote.

In the psychology department, one professor tentatively was allowed to grade in this manner for the first semester, but the department retained the right to intervene and grade the students in the course itself.

Unhappiness among some faculty members in the government department has also been publicized.

By semester’s end this committee, forging ahead with all deliberate speed, had filed an interim report containing the following remarks:

... we may conclude that the present grading system does not result in uniformity among all units of the campus.

Recent Letters and Science figures indicate that there has been a sudden and significant upward shift in grades during the Spring semester in contrast to a relatively stable pattern in the past. Those freshmen in liberal arts courses with a GPA of at least 2.0 now comprise 81 per cent, in contrast to 61 per cent in the previous year. For all undergraduate students, the average GPA has increased from 2.49 last Spring to 3.01 this Spring. Other information indicates that this is more likely to be attributable to changing grading patterns among faculty, rather than to other possibilities including a marked improvement in student effort and accomplishment.

... we feel that the present grading system is not being used with the degree of uniformity and stability that it deserves as a reliable instrument of overall academic evaluation. This need not mean that the system is unworkable, only that, as a minimum, it needs periodic review and adjustment.

This report points to hyper-inflation comparable to that which destroyed the German money system between the world wars, and it was most edifying to listen to assorted faculty Schicklgrubers (where are the liberals?) as they offered to take over the registrar’s office—to have themselves appointed Lord of the Files, as it were—in order to bring these horrendously inflated and non-uniform student evaluations back into line. These chaps were definitely prepared to carry out the necessary “review and adjustment.” It is encouraging, perhaps, that the administration never seemed to show much interest in launching them. But how would I
know? For those of us who believe in nonviolent civil disobedience, the situation recounted in this report is simply delightful. It is our goal. At least, it is a means to our goal.

All these developments convinced me that the surest and quickest way to undo the grading system and related maladjustments is not for a few faculty crazies—exemplars, in the good old days, of the student moderate position—to take direct action, but rather to bring about mass subversion of the spirit (perhaps not the letter) of the EGAD! system by assigning technically legal grades that are intentionally and demonstrably meaningless. Assign them randomly, assign mass A’s, let the students supply their own grades—the latter, granted, may not be entirely meaningless, but within the worldview of the EGAD! system, it surely is. Such an approach, in effect, will dispel the mythology underlying current practices by highlighting their absurdity. Along these lines there are many unique opportunities: If, for instance, we assign grades randomly, using an efficient statistical simulation such as Minitab, there will occur among students whatever variation we wish to write into the program, and I recommend that we form an honor society to pay our respects to those high GPA students who, perhaps destined for Wall Street careers in any case, will thereby have achieved flashy early successes in “casino capitalism.” The Nixon draft lottery helped to prepare us mentally and spiritually for these eventualities, as do the contemporary state lotteries and the boats I so love, at Vicksburg, where Union cannon tore down the bluffs.

These suggestions, I think, contain the major implications of this study for future research, which should get under way sometime in the early years of the new millennium—although grant money is likely to be minimal.

(2) Veblenian celebrations

Anybody who becomes a professor, and then tries to retain her adolescent idealism, deserves whatever she gets.
—Anonymous

As it became clear that our beloved EGAD! system was under siege, the dean hastily withdrew his affection. When the freshman GPA suddenly spurs from 2.49 to 3.01 with no upper limit in sight (Durkheim!), administrators get very upset—regents, legislators, and alumni begin breathing at the poor chaps. Affection showed signs of dissipating throughout the campus, and our next relevant document appears near the end of what was probably the most consciousness-expanding semester ever experienced by my departmental colleagues, whether faculty or students:

SIT-IN PROTESTS PROFESSOR’S DISMISSAL

About 175 university students conducted a sit-in Monday to protest the dismissal, effective in June, of Professor August R. de Folliantes, an assistant professor of Anthropology.

De Folliantes had refused to assign letter grades to students in his classes.
Eight other professors having the same contract were offered renewals for the next academic year. Several of these professors expressed concern over de Foliantes’ dismissal.

Professor Edward R. Nurse, chairman of the department, denied that de Foliantes’ refusal to give grades was the reason for his not being rehired. Nurse has refused to discuss the reasons for the department’s decision on the ground that to do so would not be ethical.

Graduate student Thomas Henry, 27, said: “We have no legitimate channels—as the faculty normally defines the term—to express our concerns. Therefore we decided to have a sit-in, or mill-in, to tie up the secretaries and the office for an hour, or perhaps the rest of the week.”

Several hundred students have signed a petition asking the Anthropology department to meet with them in order to discuss the de Foliantes case, and hiring and promotion generally.

De Foliantes plans a protest to the American Association of University Professors, which could put the university on its list of censured administrations. De Foliantes said he wanted to dramatize his view that he does not consider it part of his job to perform public-access evaluations of students.

Although abrupt, my firing was neither shock nor sorrow. Several weeks earlier a campus guerrilla theater troupe had begun performing a play called “The Persecution and Assassination of Augie de Foliantes, as Portrayed by the Inmates . . .” Because guerrilla theater regularly predicts catastrophe it is bound to be highly prophetic, and therefore the handwriting was already on the wall. To watch a play about one’s own persecution and assassination is an edifying and unforgettable experience; it took me back to Savon Drugs, Crenshaw District, L.A., 1947, the first time I suffered an explosion of a triple-decker super-scoop ice cream cone.

Actually I’ve forgotten most of what happened in the play, so I can’t say much about it. As for the ice cream cone, it was structured in the classic tradition: Aristotelian, top-down, concentric spheres, smooth transitions, divine inspiration. Act I: lemon mousse supreme. Act II: escalope de banane provencal—or something that behaved a hell of a lot like it. Act III: chocolate mint julep, and a few sprinkles of powdered instant coffee give an ironic Platonic twist. The explosion occurred because I was forced to open the performance with Act III, which was fast melting.

The third de Foliantes memorial sit-in—or perhaps the fourth, I lost count—was held a few weeks later at a most inauspicious time when (for largely, although not entirely, separate reasons) the social science building was occupied by an impressive force of seventy or eighty policemen, tucked away in its secret places. The student-power advocates had suffered their first real defeat and ultimate humiliation: There would be no concessions by the departmental or administrative power structures, and all past, present, and future firings of faculty, however arbitrary and unjust in the eyes of students, would stand and would be enforced, if necessary, by the local and not-so-local gendarmerie. Thenceforth the dwindling energies of protesting students were sublimated into alienated forms of ritual protest—they had read Goodman faithfully—and with my fancied martyrdom the adoration of the Magi was
soon upon us. The annual student-faculty Christmas party, an unusually strained affair that had to be postponed until the arrival of the vernal equinox, culminated in an inspirational gospel reading, a lengthy production from which I’ll quote briefly:

In this season of the year we all gather together for great celebration and merriment. This is as it should be, but all too often we forget the true meaning of this joyous Christmas season.

If I may, I would like to recount for you the miraculous Christmas story which we celebrate on this occasion:

“And so it came to pass that Joseph and Mary came down to the city of A. R. Radcliffe-Brown to undergo analysis. But as there was no room in the small groups laboratory, they prepared their bed in the ping-pong room. Now Mary was heavy with child, and on that night the child was born. They named the child Augustin and laid him in a humble bed of shredded computer printout.

“And it came to pass that the child, Augustin, who had astounded the great priests in the temple of the AAA with his wisdom, had grown into a man, and had come unto the shores of Atod’nem to be baptized. And Augustin, when he was baptized, went up straightaway from the mossy fundament. And lo, a voice came out of the Carillon Tower saying ‘This is my beloved son, in whom I am well pleased,’ and the tribe of anthropological ecologists bestowed upon him a three-year contract.

“And walking along the shores of Atod’nem, he saw two brethren, Thomas and Paul, casting their minds into great Reports of the Census Bureau, for they were demographers. And he said unto them, ‘Come ye away with me, and I will make you students of humanity.’ And they straightaway left their Hewlett-Packards and rusting counter-sorters, and followed him. And in such ways Augustin gathered about him a multitude.

“And Augustin went about all the social science buildings, teaching in the classrooms and preaching the word of the kingdom, healing all manner of ignorance and all manner of apathy among the sufferers. And the word went forth to all the campus, and there followed him a great multitude . . .

“But then was Augustin led off into the museology lab to be tempted by the executive committee, who bade him to look out into the social science building, and said, ‘All of this kingdom shall be yours if you cease your preaching and worship us.’ And Augustin said unto them, ‘Get behind me, bureaucrats, for it is written that ye shall worship learning and truth, and only learning and truth shall ye serve.’

“And soon the priests and elders were deeply angered by Augustin, and demanded of David, the governor of the land, that Augustin be put to death. But David was much vexed by this man, and so he took Augustin and eight other prisoners before thirty judges so that they might decide upon a punishment. And it came to pass that the judges said, ‘Let us have the eight.’ And David, the governor, said, ‘But what will ye have me do with this man,
Augustin?’ And they cried out, ‘Terminate him!’ And so it was done, on the hill called Mocsab, and David the governor washed his hands.”

Verily, verily, I say unto ye,
Do not take this fable seriously!

As a matter of fact, my only opportunity to drive money-changers from the temple occurred when, as a kid about the same age as Jesus on that memorable occasion, I discovered the technique of running through the Sunday school classrooms shortly after classes had let out, and scooping up the small change—ultimately intended by mommie and daddy for the silvery collection plates—that had managed to liberate itself from the pockets of the careless, squirming kiddies. At the formal church services a little later it was always entertaining—at a moment in the proceedings when entertainment was sorely needed—to see the children overcome with anxiety at their inability to locate the precious coins. They would rummage their pockets desperately, creating a lovely disturbance, and they occasionally found it necessary to flee—that is, they were driven from the temple! It wasn’t all glory, however: I usually had to stick around until the sermon burrowed itself, deeply down, to a halt. Then I would rush to the church gift shop and buy anything that I could find of a non-denominational—make that non-ecclesiastical—nature. Even Long Ranger comics I defined for the moment as non-ecclesiastical, which of course was totally ridiculous—American churches support the Long Ranger and Tonto for the same reason Spanish churches support bullfights: They are at the theological center. Still, I saved enough money that I was able to go into the loan sharking business among the first-year catechism kids. They actually had a much bigger need for diversified financial services than the older kids: Another generational gap.

The gospel production said little about me, for I felt about as martyred as Muhammad Ali when his title was taken from him in the same way that one takes wet from water. But the ritual exercises of our Christmas party said a lot about students and what they appear, at times, to be seeking. The students who created the unrest of the ’sixties and ’seventies, if I understood them correctly, wanted the university to make itself into a sort of church or religious sect—not in terms of the usual doctrinal mumbo-jumbo and boundless bigotry, but in terms of lifestyles, of social structure. It is no accident that a book like Hazel Barnes’ The University as the New Church was read by more than a handful of young people. We persuaded ourselves—perhaps deluded ourselves—that the more benign features of religious organizations, especially informal, sect-like organizations, could readily be adopted by colleges and universities: first, their more open, egalitarian, voluntary character; second, the fact that they are not highly bound up with the class systems and “manpower channeling” systems of the larger society—we propose to dis-establish the infamous Protestant-American Establishment; third, the fact that we the preacher-teachers will not be called upon to render public judgments of our parishioners—I would, however, be willing to grade members of my flock if the grades could be communicated only to them and to the Deity, assuming that She’s interested; fourth, the fact that church affiliations may be a life-long proposition undertaken voluntarily, not a brief series of tough trials that end abruptly with a ceremony called commencement—your real commencement, say you religionists, occurs when you go belly-up; fifth, the fact that most religious tribes address themselves to the whole range of
emotional, spiritual, and (delusions, again!) intellectual needs, rather than concentrating on the last of these in not-so-splendid isolation.

And what we learned from our good friends the Vietcong was that we cannot use religion as an excuse for blowing away neighbors who hold some radical notion. Professors, we believed, were being urged by their students to become secular preachers simply because our cookie-cutter theologians—including Richard Nixon (“Nix the Dick”), John Mitchell (“Mitch the John”), and even our beloved Spiro Agnew (“Ted the Fed”)—had failed us. We believed, in fact, that we were witnessing an extraordinary historical transformation: the ultimate fulfillment of Auguste Comte’s (demented?) dream of a Religion of Humanity, a religion in which the rich would make sacrifices for the poor, and in which eleven o’clock Sunday morning would no longer be the most segregated hour in America.

What I tried to show the students, in essence, is this: There is nothing especially good about me; there is nothing special in one who tries to pick up babies thrown from cars. Statistically, for those who lie comfortably in printout, I imagine I fall around the 50th percentile. At least half the people out there, on whom you must set to work forthwith and forever, are a hell of a lot better than I am. And that is why we of the Left already have won.

The bottom line, then, is this: I was not the salvation of anybody, and perhaps I never will be the salvation of anybody despite the fact that I now carry a KOA credit card. I was nothing more than a minor disciple announcing the coming of the revolution. I still announce the revolution, but with one stipulation: The Savior has already arrived, She is always hiding inside the heads and hearts of our students, of our young and our not-so-young, and when they finally discover Her we shall all stop consuming locusts—or perhaps we’ll switch to the chocolate-covered variety!

A classic aggravated assault, undertaken by one of the more pious among the faculty against the lead actor of the gospel production, caused our departmental Christmas party to end abruptly. We tried to invoke the standard thirty hours’ Christmas truce—but this, remember, was the month of March! The battle was short, swift, non-decisive, and highly injurious to a nearby large bowl. The good news is that the only effective punch thrown during the melee had reposed in that bowl. Actually, that’s the bad news.

The student protesters, thoroughly frustrated, soon dispersed. The last I heard, the leadership cadres were living communally in the Napa Valley of California, enjoying sunshine, the juices of grapes, stripped locusts—and “waiting.”

(3) Post-experimental depth interview

If you’re a generalist in an American university, you’re dead. Ten per cent of the time you’re treading on some colleague’s personal turf, you’re treading an angry bird, and she concludes that your efforts are superficial, if not arrogant; then she rejects the ninety per cent of your approach that she did not understand.

—Anonymous

When Big Nurse, our new department chairperson, gave me the news about my being fired, he invited me to stop by his office (pseudo-Gemeinschaft? Again?) in case I should wish any further insight into the matter; I sought, of course, a full
understanding. After a delay of several days during which I was preoccupied with the department’s annual football banquet—my teammates wanted to honor me for my ability to carry on despite the fact that my body was riddled with undergraduate bone fragments—there took place an edifying dialogue that must be recorded for posterity.

DE F: Well, Big, I got your letter the other day, and I guess I’m a little curious about some of the more obscure reasons for my dismissal. I’m not sure I know what’s meant, for instance, by all this stuff about “contribution to the functioning of the department” and by “service to the community.” You have to admit, these are hazy notions—motherhood, apple pie, creationism. If this is simply a matter of my research and writing being unsatisfactory—well, hell, I agree! But they’re a lot better than most of what comes out of this department. {Unlike Sugar Ray Leonard, I believe in opening strong, carrying the battle to the enemy.}

BIG {defensively}: No, I don’t agree with that, Gus. As you know, the department makes a very thorough and systematic effort every year to evaluate all its members—it’s a big department, and the annual evaluation is a massive amount of work for all of us that takes up hundreds of man-hours. In your case, I must say that of the many years I’ve been in this department I have never seen anybody so thoroughly and fairly evaluated as you were. You turned in, as you know, an exceedingly large amount of written work, probably three or four times as much as what we ordinarily receive from junior faculty members, and I think that just about every bit of it was read by most members of the personnel committee. Your case was discussed for the better part of an hour by the committee, and the decision was unanimous. I think the feeling was especially strong on your research and writing, you know, with most members of the committee feeling that, while you’re probably a very intelligent guy—

DE F: Jesus, Big, c’mon. I haven’t heard that sort of thing since I got kicked out of junior high school back in ’49. Just give me the straight horseshit.

BIG: Well, I think you’ll agree that they have a right to their opinion! But the ultimate feeling in any case was that, frankly, you just don’t care about establishing truth. You’re careless with data, you make all sorts of causal interpretations of things without any real justification, you have a way of combining disparate ideas that don’t seem to hang together, you seem to show a sort of pride in your own biases, you get into all sorts of undisciplined speculation and then make no effort to test out your speculations. I think the basic feeling here is that you’re not very scientific in your style of work. You turned in a couple of mimeographed papers—for example, your piece on the oedipus complex—and after reading that paper and a few others—hell, nobody was able to figure out where you were going substantively, and then suddenly the whole paper seems to degenerate into a technical methodological treatise—

DE F: I don’t know where the paper’s going either, Big! It’s very loose and disjointed and experimental—although they loved it in Madrid, ¿verdad?—and what I originally wanted to do is not going to work out. I wanted to use cross-cultural data that simply are not available, and one of my major purposes in the study was to get familiar with cross-cultural methods. I thought about attaching the methodological section for all of fifteen seconds, and I’ll bet I can remove the staple faster than that, if that’s the major issue. If I had just added the section as an obscure little appendix, single-spaced, nobody would have noticed. I must say, it bothers me to be in a situation where my future turns on a sub-title and a staple.
Frankly, Big, I think we should set up a public forum where we can argue out these heavy epistemological issues. Maybe even throw in a couple of alligator clips.

BIG: Well, look Gus, I’m just citing one example among many. The same feeling was even expressed about your published papers—like the one on George Wallace professors. The damn thing is shot through with weaknesses—isn’t that the one that was criticized by somebody in a follow-up article in the same journal?

DE F: Yeah, right, I ran a rebuttal. The whole issue, I would say, turned out to be a Mexican stand-off. The critic never really came across what I would consider, now, to be the more basic weaknesses of the paper, although the questions he raised were worth talking about. But how many journal articles elicit any kind of intelligent response, or detailed discussion, critical or otherwise?

BIG: But the point is that the department seemed to think that your critic had gotten the better of it—you know {pausing, shifting} there was also some evidence that some of your students were unhappy.

DE F: What I find entertaining here is that the paper on George Wallace professors, with all its problems and shortcomings, was the basis for my being hired in the first place according to the scuttlebutt I’ve picked up hereabouts—and now you cite it as a basis for my dismissal. So I gather there has been a sort of agonizing reappraisal within this truth-devoted discipline over the last nine months or so, and I guess somehow I missed out on it. Maybe we could have one a those instant replays, ’cause it sure as hell got past me.

BIG {leaning forward}: Who discussed your hiring with you?

DE F: Hey, Big, word gets around. My source, or sources, swore me to secrecy. You can take that as a singular or a plural, if you wanna hunt ‘em down.

BIG {leaning back, somehow aggressively}: Well, the department made its judgment. You have to recognize the department’s right to evaluate the work of its members and to take—

DE F: Oh, I do, for sure, but I think my colleagues are being fickle if not frivolous. All this business about truth: Give me an example of a significant truth discovered by any member of this department—maybe you could come up with a few, but for every example you give I’ll devastate a half dozen articles produced by the same bunch. If the mere existence of effective critics is any criterion, Malinowski should have been canned early on and Margaret Mead should have been zapped at the outset. I think we should reward people for having critics. Most of what’s worth a damn in the social sciences comes out of bitter argument. The best thing about the journals these days is that they have a little section at the end where people fight it out. A cockfight without end—maybe without spurs either.

BIG: Well, maybe the problem is that you tend to have a conflict orientation in a department where most folks are trying to work together, you know? Surely you agree that this department has a right to select scholars it sees as being congenial—

DE F: Yeah, congenial. But now you’re opening a whole new can of dirty worms. You’re saying that I’m losing out in a popularity contest, is that it?

BIG: Maybe. But in a way I’m not sure there’s anything wrong with that—although it’s impossible to say what went on in the minds of personnel committee members. You know—let me tell you this: It became very clear in meetings of the committee that there were many members of the department, especially the senior faculty, who hardly knew you at all. I mean, you apparently hadn’t made much of an effort to meet your colleagues, so perhaps if
they had gotten to know you and had had a chance to size up your potential a little better, they might have decided otherwise. It’s impossible to say, Gus. But the basic feeling, again, was that you just do not and can not fit in here, that you really have no future here, and as far as I know it’s always been the policy of this department, when we decide that a candidate—uh, an assistant professor—has no future with us, that we try to let him know as early as possible. It’s not in his interest to stay around here year after year when he has no place to go.

DE F: Well, I don’t know, Big, I suspect that I could find a little niche somewhere in this vast multiversity of ours. But, anyhow, what you’re telling me is that while I’m a virtual unknown to most of my colleagues, ten months of uncollegiality has been an adequate basis for concluding that I’m not sufficiently devoted to truth, all my written work has been re-assessed, stood on its head and found wanting, and it is not in my interest to hang around and get acquainted—and my students be damned! Is that the general drift?

BIG: But your work is probably much better known—is better known—than that of just about any other member of the department—

DE F: Oh bullshit, Big.

BIG: —and most people thought there was a lot of potential there, but that you just didn’t have the academic style we were looking for. Frankly, a lot of people around the country would like to have your job, and would be far more congenial to the situation here and perhaps a lot better in terms of departmental needs.

DE F: This gets us into the realm of manpower channeling!

BIG: Well, call it what you will. {smiling} What’s that? This Selective Service business?

DE F: Wait till I turn this over to the draft-resisters’ union.

BIG {after a pause}: You know, another thing that probably weighed heavily in the department’s deliberations—although I don’t believe this actually came out in any of our official meetings—is that many members of the department felt that you had seriously stepped out of line on a number of occasions. I know this may seem presumptuous as hell to you, but maybe this is one of the consequences of your never having gotten acquainted with anybody, maybe the real problem is that you need some feedback. You see, it’s not just this matter of your getting to know people—I’ve gotten to know you pretty well and, well, I sort of like you, to be honest. And I think most members of the department would like you too. But what you did on the grading controversy, and the black protest thing, what you did to this department—and then you tried to humiliate some of the most devoted members of the department! It’s your attitude, Gus. Do you remember the department meeting last fall where you denounced a proposal made by Professor Anders? Why, he’s been more concerned, over the years, with undergraduate education than just about any other member of this department. And you’d been here, what, two months?

DE F: So this is my alleged “contempt” for colleagues?

BIG {shrugging}: Call it what you will, Gus.

DE F: Do we have a similar test for all the folks in the department? What about contempt for students? Or teaching assistants? Or, say, contempt for professors who give a damn about teaching assistants? What about contempt for new ways of looking at the goddamn world?
BIG: Most people around here do not express contempt as openly and blatantly, as brazenly, as you do. And you don’t just do this before the departmental faculty: You’ve gone before the entire university faculty a few times and done things that— {pausing}. For instance, the meeting last fall of the university faculty where we were called on to enact the regents’ new disciplinary code for students. You delivered a very dramatic and drastic speech at that meeting, and a number of us were there—frankly, we were appalled. You may not know this—apparently you don’t get much feedback, which I think I mentioned before—but after you made that speech, especially after the local newspapers picked it up and people from other departments heard you repeat the same stuff over the radio—

DE F: Yeah, that was great, they played excerpts from it on the hour—

BIG: —well {smiling}, I started getting a lot of feedback. Some of our friends in other departments, like Mathematics, but actually several other departments, would call me and say things like, “uh, your man de Foliantes, can’t you sort of reel him in a little bit? Everything he said was right, but we all know what the regents are up to— Really, it was a good speech, but the way this guy handles himself! What if we all blew our cool like that?” You know, this is pretty much the gist of it.

DE F: What do you mean, blew my cool? I knew exactly what I was doing and why the hell I was doing it. I agree that the speech was pretty eloquent—especially the part where I quoted Becket; that was very cute. All I did was to point out that I resented being brought into a meeting in order to rubber-stamp a chicken-shit regent policy that was pure repression, when I had already done a hell of a lot of homework on what we were told would be a matter of faculty policy. We were supposed to be the legislative body, not the regents.

Talk about your precious man-hours going down the tubes! Also, it’s kind of interesting that all these friends of yours seem to resent the fact that here I was spreading truth—I’m supposed to be some sort of obscurantist or a heavy-weather nihilist around here, right? I thought it was damned dishonest, frankly, that after an hour and a half or so nobody thought to mention that we were simply being asked to submit to the usual humiliation by the dear old regents.

BIG: Oh, it wasn’t that. Most faculty agreed with you.

DE F: Jesus, Big. If you believe that, you must believe Jane Russell when she says her girdle’s as important as her bra. If the faculty agreed with me, then why was my resolution to shoot down the damned regents voted down four to one?

BIG: You don’t understand, Gus. It was nothing more than your style of approaching the faculty. These friends of mine in Math and other departments, they’re sensitive men. They’re among the more liberal members of the faculty, you know, they’re thoughtful men and women who support all the causes like Faculty for Peace and all the rest. These people have the right values, just like you and me. But there were many other little things you did, and these people made their own interpretations. I may have thought they were wrong in their interpretations—

DE F: So, what am I supposed to have done?

BIG: Well, for instance, you refused to stand at the microphone that had been provided for faculty members, and you forced the chancellor not only to give you the rostrum, but to fasten his own microphone around your neck. This was seen as total arrogance! I kind of suspected otherwise: I think you were probably a little nervous because you had never addressed the faculty before and wanted to stand at the rostrum for that
reason—but faculty members are only human, don’t forget that, and they make their own interpretations.

DE F: Christ, Big, it’s only human to be nervous. Did anybody catch the symbolism of the chancellor’s placing a noose around the neck of a wild-eyed faculty radical?

BIG: Pardon?

DE F \{perplexed\}: Look, Big, that damn faculty microphone was practically in a ditch, and there was no rostrum near it. Hell, I had a little stack of papers I had to make reference to during my speech, and I think the chancellor was aware of that, since he cleared away some of his own paraphernalia.

BIG: Well, it was seen as an attempt to humiliate the chancellor.

DE F: Bullshit! I like the chancellor at least as much as you like me—so far. That was only his second faculty meeting, you know. What I resented about the situation, frankly, was that faculty members were expected to address the assemblage from what was literally the lowest place in the whole damned auditorium. Nine hundred professors, bending over to try to hear collegial echoes from the depths! I guess that as an ecological anthropologist of sorts—maybe echo-logical—I’m a little sensitive to the echo-ology of social interaction, and I refuse to stand in a hole, ten feet below the chancellor who’s basically harassing us anyway, when I denounce those ignorant regent bastards who should be sitting at our feet trying to learn something for once. This was the problem with our whole damned anti-war movement: We were trying to talk to the country from a ditch.

BIG: I don’t see any connection, Gus.

DE F: Well, I guess I’m basically a faculty man. I mean, who really has contempt here—

BIG \{smiling, shrugging\}: Well, look, you admit it then. And that’s exactly the kind of thing that the average faculty member is going to interpret, right or wrong. I mean, it’s simple social psychology, the stuff those boys in sociology like to do, and you can’t expect these people to understand every minor symbolic gesture the same way you intended it. Most of the faculty thought we had wrested some pretty important concessions from the regents, like the permanent study committee—

DE F: If you believe that, Big, that’s your problem.

BIG \{leaning forward, with solemnity\}: Look, Gus, that wasn’t all. That’s not the end of it. \{again, a pause\} You were also chewing gum.

DE F: What?

BIG: Gum, Gus, gum. You were chewing gum when you addressed the faculty. See, there are certain standards of decorum here, and these matters are taken very seriously by people, even faculty. My god, you should know that! I mean, you expect too much from men and women who are all too human. Almost everybody I talked to, in this department and several others, noticed the gum chewing, and frankly they were insulted. As far as I could tell, you were trying to chew inconspicuously, but I know it was noticed—everybody I talked to noticed it—and it was just that sort of thing—

DE F \{dejected\}: Well, I’m sorry that happened. Jesus, Big, so much of what you say takes me back to junior high school—this is a very exhilarating experience. You know, when I came to that meeting I had no idea that I was going to make a speech. But after an hour’s horseshit, I’d had it. I was aware of the gum—I’ll tell you, pal, I’m not totally insensitive. But, look, I could either swallow the goddamn thing, which isn’t very healthy, or stick it
under my seat, which struck me as obviously infra dig for a professor, or I could stick it behind my ear. But that was out of the question: I haven’t had a haircut for the past seven years. My kids say I’m hard of hearing. I tried to chew unobtrusively, and I appreciate the fact that you noticed that. I’m really sorry people were upset. But I’ll tell you, Big, I wonder whether intelligent faculty members should allow themselves to be swayed by such trivia. I mean, I felt that I was bringing out some real issues, and if they actually cast their votes on the basis of some fancied insult—

BIG: Gus, they’re only human—

DE F: Who has contempt here?

BIG: —and you have to remember that this is a faculty with its back against the wall, and they are not about to cross the board of regents! When you demanded—literally demanded—a division of the vote on your resolution, I think many faculty members, and probably the chancellor himself, were deeply offended and completely turned off. Basically, you know, if you want to get along with this faculty or any other faculty, and if you want to get anything done, you have to be a team player, and the biggest problem with you and some of the other newer faculty at this university—some of them in this department—is that you look upon your senior colleagues as the enemy. I probably know you as well as anybody else in the department, and I don’t think you’re really a bad guy. But that’s not the image. I suspect you’d probably be a good friend—

DE F: How can you lay on all this flummery when you’ve just canned me?

BIG: That was a departmental decision. {pausing} O.K., I’ll give you another example. The grading caper itself, all the inflammatory speeches, and all the rest of it might not have been so serious if you hadn’t been so insistent on holding to your commitment that you would never again grade your students. Some of the other faculty innovators admitted that they were wrong and even stood up before the department and apologized—and some of these guys, as you know, are not about to take any shit from anybody. Also, Gus, a lot of people were offended when you had your white paper published last month by that damned underground newspaper—what’s the name of that thing?

DE F: Incidentally, I want to thank the department for paying our typist—we really needed the money.

BIG: Well, you knew the political complexion of that particular paper and all the other sponsoring student organizations you picked up. You should have known that the mere association would create presumptions. Also, you could have confined your white paper to ideology rather than opening with a detailed account of the actions you took on the grading issue—that was seen, again, as an attempt to humiliate this department, and the department had no choice but to respond to your case as it did.

DE F: Hell, Big, I did it in the interest of accuracy, in the interest of truth. You know, maybe the department deserved to be humiliated. Also, it seemed to me that all my rationale without the action meant nothing, and the action without the rationale would have meant less than nothing. If I actually believed all the crap I’d written, there was no alternative but to refuse to cooperate. Sometimes, if you have your head screwed on straight, there’s only one way it’s gonna point.

BIG: Well, unfortunately, I don’t think anybody shares your definition of academic freedom—the AAUP certainly doesn’t.
DE F: Hey, Big, the AAUP is not the alpha and omega on academic freedom. They’ve only been pushing their definition since World War I. Mine goes back to Tom Paine, Tom Jefferson, and the Bill of Rights, not to mention the Magna Carta. Hell, mine goes back to the little guy in 2001 who’s trying to figure out how to get his buddy to stop bashing him over the head with a longbone taken from the sonofabitch they just dispatched. Everything you’re saying supports my decision not to publish ideology separately from action. If I had a definition of academic freedom so far out that none of my colleagues could share it, yet so compelling that it would lead me to toss away my job, then perhaps my colleagues would take it more seriously than if it were merely an ideological matter of no consequence. I’m a Marxist, Big. Ideas don’t mean squat to me if they don’t have material analogues.

BIG: Well, apparently the department was not convinced. My recollection is that the decision on your case was unanimous.

DE F: Of course, the colleagues are not the alpha and omega either. But tell me, Big, are there any regulations that would prohibit my approaching other senior faculty members for a little additional feedback on my firing? Especially on my research and writing?

BIG: Far be it from me to tell you who, uh, whom you can talk to, Gus. But as you know, our personnel decisions are made in the strictest confidence, and it’s in your interest that they be done that way. Frankly, I think you’d be compromising other members of the personnel committee if you approached them, and I suspect that it would just cause embarrassment all around. You can try, if you wish. But they won’t talk to you. Actually, it wouldn’t be fair to your colleagues.

(4) Interpretations and Extrapolations

... my beloved colleagues: Men and women who, if only I had been an alcoholic or a coke freak or a schizophrenic or a cat burglar or a quadriplegic or a lesbian, would have been immensely helpful, solicitous, supportive, and understanding. In a word, they would have been collegial.

—Anonymous

Over the next several months, prudence encouraged me to spend many days sifting through job advertisements, mailing out applications, conducting early negotiations, and making on-site visits. I did, however, find time to put one of my major hypotheses to a definitive test: A lengthy grievance was submitted to the American Association of University Professors, the guardian of academic freedom in America. By and by there came a reply which, to me, provides clear, succinct, and sad support for Paul Goodman’s suspicions about that venerable confraternity:

Dear Professor de Foliantes:

I wish to apologize for our delay [why?] in acknowledging materials you sent relative to the matter of your dismissal, i.e., the non-renewal of your contract with your present employer. We assume at the moment that matters have not been resolved by your finding new employment.

I personally have studied your documentation in great detail and, while I have a high degree of sympathy for the causes and concerns which you have
tried to raise, I am sorry to report that there do not appear to be any grounds for intervention by the Association. The various faculty committees and administrative units deciding your case have indicated that, even though the case has many unique features, an effort was made to render judgment on the basis of traditional criteria; among these, your general contribution to the department and to the university may have been of paramount importance.

It is clear that one could readily argue, as you do along with your supporters, that certain aspects of your performance were not adequately evaluated, or that many extraneous factors were brought into the evaluation. However, the entire burden of establishing that sort of claim—essentially a claim that non-renewal of one’s contract was violative of academic freedom—must rest with the probationary faculty member. As you may know, these procedures are very different in cases involving tenure, where the burden of proof is shifted to the institution.

This Association, as you know, has unmasked many instances in which personnel committees and administrations have overtly violated the established principles of academic freedom. The Association takes appropriate action whenever it is feasible to do so.

You will perhaps be pleased to learn that the Association has begun a massive study of the entire issue of grading systems, student evaluations, draft deferments, and related matters. We hope that this investigation will eventually show us some improved ways of handling this most unpleasant business.

Good luck.

Cordially,

{Signed}

Right. And good luck to you, you pathetic sonofabitch: If you believe in tenure with that degree of conviction, you’re going to need it.

As predicted, then, the AAUP (American Association for Universal Prolixity) fails to deliver. A vulnerable young professor raises a serious issue of academic freedom, takes a risky stand mandated by accepted principles, and our beloved mentors, our gurus, those whom we admired so much that we tried to create ourselves again in their image, our fathers, our Nestors—these colleagues do not exist. The AAUP’s “massive study” is no doubt proceeding apace, but so far as we know it has not yet succeeded in creating a revolutionary situation. Once again, it is most revealing that the EGAD! system is recognized—even before the completion of the forthcoming massive investigation!—as a most unpleasant aspect of American academic life. Yet, nobody seems to insist that this abomination become the topic of debate. It is this fundamental hypocrisy that kills intellectual life in the United States.

A small, fledgling faculty union gave me some support, claiming breach of contract by my department, but they had nothing more than logic and good arguments on their side, and their lack of political power rendered them irrelevant. A large number of junior faculty colleagues supported me on similar grounds, but they too were without power and were therefore ignored. I contacted several attorneys around the area, but none of them was able to get past the basic bugaboo of my deliberate violation of university regulations—one can
see why these chaps, unlike assistant professors, so often win political office. As it turns out, then, Paul Goodman was right, and we cannot reject his central theorem: It was all a good toot, replete with pleasant, edifying conversation. But, in the end, it was nothing more than pure ritual.

During its detailed investigation of my grievance, the faculty union uncovered evidence suggesting a strong possibility that several slanders had dispatched themselves toward me. This was a development that Goodman—a stellar Marxist puritan—had not anticipated, and I myself, with a far greater cynicism, was more than a little surprised—for the first and last time. I had felt for several weeks that something more or less treacherous was afoot: On one occasion, a small delegation representing the students who had been raising hell on my behalf came to my office and told me that they had received strong hints from unnamed (why?) faculty sources that the departmental oligarchs “had something” on me. They were, I suppose, understandably apprehensive (how conventional!) over the horrendous vision of their champion’s being involved in extensive philandering among innocent undergraduates. But they had only arrived at the philandery hypothesis through a process of elimination: They knew from clear evidence that I wasn’t into drugs, term-paper mills, pimping, embezzlement, or anything else having to do with money, and what else is there for junior faculty members—especially the top jocks of the departmental football team—except being heavily into students? Truth is, I hadn’t done anything really wild since the last time I attended a singles church service in Orange County, California. Incredibly, I soon discovered that it is no longer possible for a young male faculty member—faculty women are almost never suspect on these grounds—to convince student radicals that he is not philandering amongst their constituents: Philandering is (or, at least, was) so much a part of emergent post-industrial lifestyles that it is held at once to be totally inevitable and politically suicidal, a sort of Gary Hart or Gary Condit syndrome—which is precisely where the Revolution was hung up! It’s the old schism of the Cultural Revolution versus the Political Revolution.

The main slander, as it turned out, amounted to this: At the time I took the job from which I had just been fired, I had received a second offer from another university, a university of immense reputation. Big Nurse told the union representatives, my only credible source of political support, that it was his belief that I had been lying about receiving this competing offer. To me, this was a shocking disclosure; up to this time, I had been satisfied that most of the real nastiness would remain more or less overt, and that nobody would take the risk of casting himself as a sub rosa slanderer or behind-the-scenes hatchet artist. Big, I felt, had now placed himself at a moral disadvantage, had hit the low ground, and his allegedly powerful case against me would surely be tainted by his enthusiasm for an untrue tale. However, when proof of my veracity in the matter—the original letter of offer—was circulated by my students among members of the departmental personnel committee, the response was twofold: first, a refusal to ascertain whether the slander had gone beyond Big Nurse and the union representatives; second, a firm denial that the slander had gone beyond Big Nurse and the union representatives. The union reps did have their doubts.

The trouble with slander among academicians is that powerful memories ensure that labels, even arbitrary labels that affix themselves to a lot of nothingness, will endure forever. This is the way Zora Neale Hurston was done in. And our famous academic cat burglar of Santa Barbara will never be forgotten by those who knew him—but perhaps, of course, this
state of affairs results solely from the fact that his feline phenomenology was a major intellectual breakthrough among those who insist on heisting things unobserved.

When one tries to change an organization run by organization men who did not cheat on their personality tests, it is impossible to attack the system without appearing to attack the men and women who comprise it. If you tell a colleague, for instance, that he lives in the midst of institutional racism, that if you scratch the surface—or flood it—what is going to hang out is New Orleans, he is likely to be personally affronted. It does not matter that the concept itself does not imply conspiracy or even large numbers of culprits acting alone. Typically, the men and women of organizations are deeply ego-involved in their system, for this is essentially what it means to be an organization man. Once again we see the imprint of the me generation, of the modern cult of personality: If the system has created me in all my splendour, it can’t be all bad—it must be, in fact, pretty damn good. It is revealing that such men and women call themselves the Establishment, as if the social structure defined what they are. The Establishment is the antithesis of the Corporate Person, in which the idea of personhood defines what the structure is. Some of these men and women—the bluesuits and the fluffsuits—have badly inflated egos, a sort of steatopygia of selfhood, and it would be difficult in any case for rebels to tread softly in their midst. In short, if the bluesuits and the fluffsuits do not hate you, you are not living up to the Veblenian standard.

Beyond that, there is a tendency among these colleagues that goes way beyond mere egotism, a tendency best illustrated by an incident that occurred on our campus during the Cambodia/Kent State/Jackson State uprising. A band of trashing students had heaved stones through several large windows of a colleague’s office. This colleague, a renowned scholar, responded to the gesture by patching one of the windows with a poster reading more or less as follows: “I have stopped my murderous, war-related research done in complicity with the military-industrial complex, to atone for the slaughter of hordes of innocent women and children for whose destruction I bear a major responsibility.” That, my friends, is the earliest whimper of the me generation; it is the voice of a man crying in the organizational wilderness, of a man frightened and alone, of a man who is truly value free. As one who witnessed at close range the nocturnal destruction of vast amounts of public property during the anti-war disturbances, I am able to report that, judging from many similar incidents elsewhere on campus, this colleague’s office was selected because (1) his windows were as good a symbol as any other easily destroyed target; (2) helicopter-borne floodlights, supplied by the National Guard, were at the moment supporting mock military attacks elsewhere on campus; (3) some large missiles were close at hand, and these missiles only had a range of about twelve feet.
Despite my colleague’s retirement, the same criteria will be in effect next time. Next time, however, we plan to be better prepared: First of all, we’ll have a better missile—not the kind one flings, but rather the kind one sings. And we plan to name it the Long Ranger.
Notes

(1) The good news is that Iraq lacks weapons of mass destruction (WMD’s), it lacks ties to Al Qaeda, and it lacks Cadillacs. The bad news is that it lacks American democracy. Invade and correct.

(2) The only important difference between Manual Arts and nearby Garfield high school—the latter made famous by the movie Stand and Deliver—is that we used to regard the Garfield football team as pâté de foie gras, a nice way to get ready for the main killer course, which was Jeff—Jefferson High School, central Los Angeles. It is revealing that people who have seen this movie, which is essentially about a very good math teacher, feel the same affection for the teacher as did his calculus students: We love him as they loved him. And why did they love him? Because he broke his heart, literally, to help them get ready, no holds barred, for their future encounters with outside villainy, represented in the movie by the Educational Testing Service. Teaching and evaluation were sharply separated in this story, and nothing was ever said about grading. The teacher regarded the ETS as the enemy—even offering to “kick the shit” out of an ETS official. This is the only appropriate attitude for a teacher and his students—toward the ETS and what it represents, toward the corporate world beyond, and toward the inhabited universe.

(3) For an excellent discussion of bad faith and how to exorcise it, see Peter L. Berger, Invitation to sociology: A humanistic perspective. Basically, you exorcise it by saying no.