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The Blessed of the Earth

Not long after graduate students at the University of Kansas voted to unionize, affiliating themselves with the American Federation of Teachers, I was invited to speak at Kansas on the future of graduate study in the humanities. In the course of my talk, I not only endorsed the unionization of graduate students at KU and elsewhere, but also referred, in passing, to what I called the "bad faith" attempt of administrators and faculty at Yale University to claim that their graduate students were simply students and not also "employees." As long as people are working as instructors or as teaching assistants and being paid for their work, I thought, it makes sense to consider them "employed," to consider their work "employment," and to admit, therefore, that they are in some sense "employees." And if administrators and faculty at Yale or elsewhere want to claim that their graduate students' wages are not "wages" because their teaching (which is not strictly "teaching") is merely part of their professional training as apprentice professors, then it makes sense to call the bluff: take graduate students out of the classrooms in which they work as graders, assistants, and instructors; maintain their stipend support at its current levels; and give them professional development and training that does not involve the direct supervision of undergraduates. *Then* we'll see how long Yale University can survive without the labor (which is not strictly "labor") of its graduate student teaching assistants.

At the time, I thought my support for graduate student unions--in a speech delivered to, among other people, unionized graduate students--amounted to endorsing candidates after they'd won their elections. To my surprise, however, I learned later that the graduate students were very pleased with my speech, and that

some even considered it "courageous." It seems that I had denounced as ridiculous Yale administrators' claims that graduate students were not employees in front of a number of Kansas administrators who had claimed that graduate students were not employees. (I told the students I had had no idea that my audience included actual bad-faith negotiators, and that my "courage" in denouncing them was therefore attributable to simple ignorance.) I asked them what other kinds of opposition the union had met; they told me of faculty in department after department who had insisted that the unionization of graduate students would disrupt "morale" and destroy the delicate, collegial relationship so characteristic of, and necessary to, healthy interactions between graduate students and faculty. When I asked these students whether their faculty had entertained the possibility that delicate, collegial relationships don't normally involve one party dictating the other party's interests and threatening punishment if party number two failed to act in what party number one had determined those interests to be, I was met with bitter laughter. It would be one thing, I was told, if the faculty's relation to graduate students were simply paternal rather than collegial; that would be undesirable but understandable. "But Michael," said one union leader, "half the faculty who spoke to us about the importance of faculty-student collegiality didn't even know our *names*."

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Nothing, I suggest, could make more palpable the vast differences between Yale and Kansas. If there's one good thing we can say of the faculty who broke the graduate student strike at Yale University, it is this: they knew their students' names. Indeed, had they *not* known their students' names, they would not have been able to preserve the delicate, collegial faculty-student relationship at Yale by submitting their students' names to Yale's administration for disciplinary hearings and possible expulsion. As Yale president Richard Levin put it in a November 1994 letter to the then-chair of Yale's Graduate Employees and Students Organization

(GESO), unionization of graduate students would inevitably "chill, rigidify, and diminish" the relationship between graduate students and their mentors and advisors on the faculty.ⁱ Accordingly, from that point on, Yale graduate students who were not satisfied with their warm, flexible, and capacious relations with faculty members would have to be punished harshly and swiftly.

I will not attempt here to retell the history of graduate student organization at Yale, or the Yale Corporation's long and sorry history of union-busting and unfair labor practices (for information on those histories, see Young, "Strike," or contact Gordon Lafer, research director of the Federation of University Employees, the union with which GESO had voted to affiliate).ⁱⁱ Instead, I want to examine a more narrowly professionalist issue--the role played by Yale faculty during the events leading up to the short-lived grade strike of 1995-96--and its implications for professional self-governance in American higher education. I believe the actions of the faculty at Yale have potentially grave consequences for the future of graduate study in the humanities and social sciences, just as they provide (less importantly but more poignantly) an object lesson in just how politically obtuse, short-sighted, and self-serving a university faculty can be.ⁱⁱⁱ

ⁱ 1 Quoted in Cynthia Young, "On Strike at Yale," *minnesota review* 45-46 (1996), pp. 179-95; hereafter cited as "Strike."

ⁱⁱ 2 Lafer can be reached at Glafer@aol.com. As of this writing, Yale had still not negotiated an acceptable contract with Locals 34 and 35, and contributions to the strike fund are, I believe, very welcome.

ⁱⁱⁱ 3 Here and throughout this essay, I need to exempt a handful of exemplary individuals, such as Michael Denning, Hazel Carby, and Rogers Smith, among others, from my wholesale castigations of "Yale faculty." Indeed, I owe Michael Denning, in particular, a

This is not to say that GESO has been always and everywhere beyond criticism, or that it is impossible for a well-informed person to lodge reasonable objections to the grade strike that precipitated the faculty's collective decision to crush GESO. That grade strike did indeed pit GESO against the interests of undergraduates and faculty alike, thus isolating the union politically, and it strained the meaning of "academic freedom" GESO had hoped would protect graduate students involved in job actions: to wit, GESO could claim that its members should be free from "academic reprisals, including letters of recommendation, disciplinary letters, academic probation, firing of teachers, denial of promised teaching jobs, or expulsion" (in the language of the resolution submitted by GESO to the MLA) and that any such action taken by Yale administration or faculty constituted a violation of academic freedom; but faculty could also legitimately respond that *their* academic freedom would be violated if they could not consider their students' participation in the grade strike as a factor in writing letters of recommendation or awarding teaching positions. At the very least, then, the grade strike muddied the question of whether the job actions at Yale were matters of labor relations or of academic protocol: if they were the former, then Yale was clearly involved in illegal union-busting; if the latter, then striking GESO members were clearly abrogating one of their primary obligations as undergraduate instructors by failing to turn in their grades.

Of course, the grade strike made a crucial political point, a point that Yale's administration denied and incredibly *continues* to deny--namely, that a great deal of

number of accumulated debts in the writing of this essay, since he has been one of my major sources of information on the Yale strike, as well as a keen editor and consultant on the various editorials and brief articles I wrote in January 1996 when it looked as if the *Nation* was going to run a story on the events at Yale.

basic undergraduate instruction at Yale is carried out by graduate students. What's more, Yale students have convincingly argued that the strike was a measure of last resort; every prior attempt to meet and negotiate with Yale had been rebuffed. As Cynthia Young reports, by November 1995,

the grade strike was the only effective action--short of a teaching strike--left to GESO. Demonstrations, petitions, a one-week strike, a union election, and corporation visits had all failed to convince the Yale administration that graduate teachers were indeed serious about winning a collective bargaining agreement. It was this bleak recognition that mobilized GESO organizers with barely three weeks left in the semester to begin organizing graduate teachers to withhold their grades. A grade strike would not only reinforce the central import of graduate teachers' labor at the university, but it would also undercut the Yale administration's attempts to depict GESO as dependent upon the other two locals to secure a contract. A grade strike barely a week before final exams had the capacity to spur undergraduates and faculty to pressure the administration to negotiate with GESO. It was certainly not intended as a strategy to harm undergraduates; in fact, striking teachers expressed their willingness to write letters to graduate and professional schools evaluating the student and explaining the reasons for the grade strike. In any case, it is unlikely that any school would have disqualified Yale candidates because of their incomplete transcripts. A grade strike is far less disruptive of undergraduate education than an indefinite teaching strike, a possibility that seemed to loom on the spring horizon. Weighing these various considerations, graduate teachers voted to withhold their fall semester grades until Yale committed to negotiating a written and binding agreement with GESO's negotiating committee. ("On Strike at Yale," 188)

Even when considered in the light of these various justifications, however, the grade

strike seems to have made two tactical errors in a Machiavellian sense. First, it underestimated the possibility that such an action would in fact spur undergraduates and faculty to pressure the administration to move forcefully against GESO. Second, and no less crucial, it regrettably allowed Yale faculty to pretend, after the fact, that they had been sympathetic to GESO, or generally supportive of graduate student grievances, or even opposed to GESO but in favor of collective student organization--until that deplorable grade strike came along and ruined everything.

The level of faculty vindictiveness and doubletalk on this issue has been simply astounding. At various times, Yale faculty and administrators have claimed that they are opposed only to GESO, and not to the idea of graduate student unionization; or that they are opposed to student unions at Yale but not other forms of collective (and non-binding) student representation; or that they are opposed to unionization at Yale, but not elsewhere, at other schools. It should not escape notice that each one of these rhetorical escape-maneuvers begs the original question concerning the sanctity of faculty-student relations. Perhaps it is plausible, for instance, that GESO would disrupt the delicate, collegial relations between graduate students and faculty, but another union would not. Or perhaps it is plausible that faculty would look kindly on graduate student representation that took some shape other than that of a union, as Peter Brooks claims.^{iv} Or finally, perhaps it is plausible that unionization always disrupts the faculty-student relationship, but does so in ways that can be tolerated at plebeian, inferior schools like the Universities of Kansas, Oregon, Michigan, Wisconsin-Madison, Wisconsin-Milwaukee, Massachusetts-Amherst, Massachusetts-Lowell, Florida, and South Florida, or at

^{iv} 4 Brooks, quoted in Emily Eakin, "Walking the Line," *Lingua Franca* March/April 1996, p. 60; hereafter cited as "Walking."

Rutgers, SUNY, and Berkeley (all of them home to recognized graduate student unions), but not at an institution so prestigious as Yale University, where talk of "unionization" is not only harmful to morale but also, and more vexingly, *bad form*.

What's remarkable is not that different Yale faculty have appealed to these various, contradictory rationales for unionbusting; what's remarkable is that *individual* faculty members have frantically appealed to each of them in turn, desperately trying to justify not only their opposition to the grade strike but also their intransigence during all GESO's attempts to negotiate prior to the strike. For a vivid illustration of this brand of doubletalk I need turn only to my mailbox. On January 24, 1996, Annabel Patterson, Karl Young Professor of English at Yale, wrote a letter to Phyllis Franklin, the MLA's executive director, protesting the MLA Delegate Assembly's passage of the resolution censuring Yale for its handling of GESO. Patterson's letter, together with three other letters from Yale faculty and administrators, was circulated to the entire MLA membership in February 1996. There is much to remark upon both in Patterson's letter and in the manner of its distribution, but for now I want simply to focus on one crucial paragraph--the paragraph in which Patterson addresses what she calls "the nature of the 'union'" (nowhere in Patterson's letter does she employ the terms "union" or "strike" without scare quotes). The reason the paragraph is valuable, for my purposes, is that it voices almost every single rhetorical escape-maneuver I enumerated above; when read together with Margaret Homans' equally evasive letter, also distributed by the MLA, it provides us with a useful introduction to faculty psychology at Yale.

Patterson writes:

The university administration, whose leaders are all Yale faculty, has consistently refused to recognize [GESO] as a union, not only because it does not believe this to be an appropriate relationship between students and faculty in a non-profit organization, but also because GESO has always been a

wing of Locals 34 and 35 of the Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees International Union, who draw their membership from the dining workers in the colleges and other support staff. Yale is not prepared to negotiate academic policy, such as the structure of the teaching program or class size, with the Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees International Union. Yale administrators have made it perfectly clear that they have no objections to working with an elected graduate student organization other than GESO, one that is not tied to the non-academic unions on campus.^v

According to Patterson, Yale has properly refused to recognize GESO because the graduate student "union" is affiliated with the smelly hotel and restaurant workers, who don't know how a university works. But wait a minute: look at the closing and opening passages of Patterson's paragraph. Apparently, Yale has no aversion to "working with an elected graduate student organization other than GESO" so long as the organization is not tied to Locals 34 and 35. Does this mean that Yale would have been happy to recognize GESO if only GESO had had the good taste to affiliate with the AFT? The earlier passage had seemed to close off this possibility, declaring that Yale has refused to recognize GESO as a union because "it does not believe this to be an appropriate relationship between students and faculty in a non-profit organization." So what is one to conclude from this? If only GESO hadn't affiliated with a non-academic union . . . if only GESO had been something other than a union . . . and (by the bye) if only the Yale Corporation were something other than a non-profit institution . . . *then*, obviously, Patterson implies, we'd have had no objection at all to dealing with these students in good faith.

Margaret Homans then adds two more "if" clauses to this already impressively

^v 5 Annabel Patterson, letter to Phyllis Franklin, MLA packet of 9 February 1996, p. 6; hereafter cited as "MLA."

obfuscatory list when she writes, in her January 14 letter to the MLA,

Quite possibly, it would be appropriate for students to unionize at those schools where teaching loads are much higher than at Yale and where reliance on graduate teaching is much greater. Part-time and adjunct faculty with PhDs present an even more legitimate motive to unionize, although they are not part of the union movement at Yale. (MLA, 11)

If only they were worse off, like those students at second-rate schools like Berkeley . . . if only they were among the *truly* exploited, like part-time and adjunct faculty . . . why, of *course* we would break bread with these students. Note here that Homans' admission that graduate student unionization is sometimes appropriate (at lesser schools) makes hash of the claim that faculty-student relations are destroyed by unions. Yet Homans' attempt to play one underpaid constituency off another--in this case, juxtaposing graduate students to adjuncts--presents an odd mixture of fuzzy thinking and bad faith: fuzzy thinking, because adjunct faculty already have the right to unionize (precisely the right denied to Yale's graduate students), and bad faith, because the nation's largest union of college faculty, the AAUP, had already disposed of this question, when its Collective Bargaining Congress passed a resolution on December 2, 1995, strongly endorsing the right of *all* graduate teaching assistants to engage in union activities, from collective bargaining to grade strikes.

It is possible that somewhere deep in the recesses of its political unconscious, Homans' text always already acknowledges its bad faith in adjudicating and ranking the rights claims of graduate students and adjunct faculty; for no sooner does Homans mention the exploitation of adjuncts than she moves on to threaten Yale students with the exploitation of adjuncts. "The students who introduced the resolution," she writes, referring to the MLA Delegate Assembly's resolution to censure,

captured and capitalized on a legitimate anxiety, widespread in the

profession, about the exploitation of non-ladder instructors. But graduate students at Yale are "paid" more (in some cases twice as much) for running a weekly discussion section of a lecture course (often with as few as fifteen students) than PhDs are paid for teaching their own independent courses at area schools. . . . If they were paid the local rate for part-time academic work, they would receive a good deal less. (MLA, 11)

What is the implication of this last sentence? Take *that*, you pampered, sheltered students! You people haven't yet *seen* what we could do to you if we really wanted to *exploit* you! If Patterson's letter was notable for the extent of its author's identification with the Yale administration--"Yale is not prepared to negotiate academic policy . . . with the Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees International Union"--then Homans' is notable for its author's willingness to begin the unionbusting herself. For why else would Homans remind Yale graduate students (as if they needed to be reminded) that PhDs are working for even lower wages at the University of Bridgeport or Southern Connecticut State? (Though Homans does not acknowledge as much, rumor has it that the endowments and budgets of Bridgeport and Southern are somewhat smaller than Yale's.) Is GESO, then, supposed to be grateful that their masters and overseers at Yale are at least treating them better than the freeway fliers at the college down the road? "Well," one imagines a Yale ABD replying, "we're paid \$2000 less than Yale's own cost-of-living estimate for New Haven, and Yale requires that we live here so that we cannot seek higher-paying part-time employment elsewhere while pursuing our degree; but golly, it's great that we're doing so well compared to the part-time schleps and losers at New Haven's own Albertus Magnus College, a nearly penniless institution. Thank goodness Professor Homans straightened us out on that one."

Despite the passages I've cited above, Homans' letter is not unaware that unethical labor practices might in fact be unethical. Though Homans is not shy

about suggesting that graduate students be paid "the local rate" for discussion sections in which they do all the grading (so that people like Homans don't have to), she is appropriately uneasy about the charge that Yale might have had plans to hire "replacement workers" to take on the teaching responsibilities of striking graduate students when classes resumed in the spring of 1996. The aura of hiring "replacement workers" is apparently more unsavory than the aura of breaking unions and depressing wage scales, and thus Homans writes:

The most basic standards of evidence were not adhered to in the formulation of the resolution, which complains (for example) of faculty being asked to "serve as replacement workers for striking graduate student staff." Faculty teaching lecture courses are in fact responsible for all grades; forms for reporting grades are mailed only to the faculty in charge and not to the Teaching Assistants, who are exactly that--assistants. We can't be described as replacement workers if we turn in grades for our own courses. (MLA, 10)

One has to admire the faculty member who can write this without fear of exposure or contradiction. *Faculty are responsible for all grades:* the wording suggests that Yale faculty are actually reading the papers and evaluating the written and oral work of all their undergraduates, when, in fact, teaching assistants in lecture courses are hired precisely to release faculty from much of the labor associated with those tasks. (Hence the rationale for the grade strike.) One wonders how many MLA members, many of whom are actually college faculty themselves, are going to be fooled by Homans' reasoning here: *the grade forms are mailed to us and not to the "assistants," so obviously we're the ones doing the grading!*

Delectable also is the "we" in Homans' declaration that "we can't be described as placement workers if we turn in grades for our own courses." For one thing, the fear at Yale was not that Professors Homans and Patterson would step in and teach extra classes; the fear was that *junior faculty*--who you mean, "we"?--would be

"asked" to teach in place of graduate students, or, still more outrageously, to do the grading for the lecture courses of senior faculty (some reports indicate that this latter request was in fact made by the senior faculty of the English department). And for another thing, Homans' letter is in this respect directly contradicted by Patterson, who admits freely that "some classes had been reassigned to faculty members" (MLA, 5). (Personally, I am glad that Yale faculty have so little practice in conducting disinformation campaigns. Were they more practiced at the art they would never have let a major slip like this get into a mass mailing.) Homans, of course, would countercharge that faculty can never be considered "replacement workers." Again, though, one wonders who might be fooled by this. Even if faculty turn in all the grades "for their own courses" (once their teaching assistants have collected them, that is), that doesn't mean that faculty are not being used as replacement workers when they are asked to turn in the grades for *other people's* courses, particularly when those other people are out on strike. A faculty member who is asked to teach a course or lead a discussion section for a striking graduate student is being asked to cross a picket line, and thus to serve as a replacement worker. That should be clear enough. And when the faculty member in question is untenured, then such a request broaches serious ethical and professional issues that neither Homans nor Patterson attend to. That, too, should be clear enough.

Yet why is it *not* clear enough to most of the senior faculty most immediately involved? I want to suggest that something strange is going on here. When a professor of English begins sounding like an employer of migrant citrus workers (*at least you're being paid here--at Sunkist they give their workers only an orange a day*), or when the possessor of a named chair at one of the world's wealthiest universities insists that \$9,750 is more than adequate compensation for graduate teaching assistants (see Patterson, MLA 6), then clearly some of the protocols of the profession have gone haywire. For the response of the Yale faculty to GESO is by no

means confined to the rhetorical circumlocutions of Homans and Patterson; on the contrary, as Patterson herself notes, a special late-December meeting of Yale faculty, attended by 170 persons, indicated "*overwhelming* support for President Levin's policy of refusing to recognize GESO, with perhaps half a dozen voices against it" (MLA, 7; emphasis in original)--and Michael Denning, one of those half-dozen voices, does not dispute the numbers. David Brion Davis, professor of history, went a good deal further than Homans or Patterson, and submitted the name of one of his students, Diana Paton, to the office of the Dean for disciplinary hearings, as did Sara Suleri-Goodyear, postcolonial critic extraordinaire (in the case of Cynthia Young)^{vi}; meanwhile, Thomas Carew, chair of Psychology, called one of his students in India during the winter break, "falsely informing her that everyone else in the department had dropped out of the grade strike."^{vii} Some faculty, it appears, were truly eager to go the extra mile to break the strike and punish the students they "mentor."

But the full extent of the group psychosis involved in these faculty responses to GESO doesn't begin to come clear, I think, until you step back and realize that for all their bellowing and blustering, *Yale faculty had no direct stake in the prospect of*

^{vi} 6 Of the disciplinary hearings of early 1996, Cynthia Young writes, "it was clearly no coincidence that all three of the strikers charged [the third was Nilanjana Dasgupta] were members of the Team Leaders' Committee, GESO's leadership council. However Dean Appelquist insisted that we had been individually identified by our faculty supervisor, because two of the professors involved--Sara Suleri-Goodyear in my case and David Brion Davis in Diana Paton's--wrote letters requesting our grade records and then referred our cases to the Dean when we refused to submit them" (191).

^{vii} 7 Beverly Gage, "Have You No Shame?" *New Haven Advocate*, Dec. 21, 1995, p. 11; quoted in Young, "Strike," pp. 189-90.

unionization. GESO was not demanding to have their salaries augmented by stripping Annabel Patterson of the Karl Young chair; at no time did GESO demand that David Brion Davis be personally prevented from dictating university policy regarding class size and health care for graduate teaching assistants. Nevertheless, many Yale faculty insisted that graduate student unionization would take fundamental issues concerning graduate employment out of their hands, apparently oblivious to the fact that most of the issues GESO had placed on the table--from salaries to health care--were always already out of their hands. Faculty resistance to GESO, then, was almost entirely a matter of imaginary relations to real conditions, as Peter Brooks amply demonstrated when he claimed that "a union just seems to militate against core values" (quoted in "Walking," p. 58).

No commentator on the Yale strike has yet made this most obvious point: Yale faculty had nothing important to lose in recognizing GESO. By contrast, once the grade strike was underway, *then* Yale faculty most certainly had something material at stake--namely, public recognition of the fact that graduate students do more hands-on teaching and evaluating of undergraduates than faculty do.^{viii} One would think that any sane, calculating university faculty members who are interested in maintaining their privileges and hierarchies--and few faculties, clearly,

^{viii} 8 No claim is more hotly contested by anti-union faculty than this one. Yale President Richard Levin insists, for instance, that graduate students teach only three percent of the courses above the freshman level; but that figure relies on Yale's insistence that teaching assistants are not to be counted as "teachers" for the purposes of calculating figures on "contact hours." However, according to a comprehensive report compiled by Yale graduate students, *True Blue: An Investigation into Teaching at Yale*, graduate teaching assistants in the humanities and social sciences spent 864 hours in the classroom each week whereas full-time faculty spent 756.5 hours.

are so interested in this as are Yale's faculty--would have foreseen the potentially explosive political ramifications of well-publicized job actions by graduate students, and moved to palliate GESO with band-aid, stopgap measures while the faculty still had nothing at stake in the dispute. The fact that the faculty did not do so suggests that we should not look for "real" explanations of the Yale dispute--we should look instead to the realm of the Imaginary.

By their own report, anti-union faculty at Yale were stunned by the volume of GESO's sympathetic support among faculty members at other institutions; hence their obsessive insistence on their own near-unanimity in opposing the grade strike, and their willingness to accuse GESO of lying in order to manipulate public opinion. As Annabel Patterson puts it, when Yale received over three hundred letters from faculty protesting Yale's refusal to recognize GESO, "we observed that many of [the letters] were from people conscious that they were hearing only one side of the story" (MLA, 7). In other words, GESO's external supporters were really rather tentative, because they knew they had not yet taken into account the weight (and the prestige) of the opinions of Yale's senior faculty. The arrogance here is palpable. But if you want to get a vivid sense of just how insular and blinkered Yale's senior faculty have been with regard to the broader issues at stake in the recognition of GESO, Patterson's letter is insufficient on its own; you need to hear another side of the story. You need, at the very least, to read an account of the Yale strike written by people for whom the legitimation crisis of American higher education is always foremost on the agenda:

There can be little doubt that graduate students at Yale, like graduate students almost everywhere, are exploited as cheap labor. Teaching assistantships are notoriously poorly paid, and the rationale that they should provide a welcome "apprenticeship" for future college professors looks more and more shabby as universities increasingly rely on these cadres of relatively untrained teachers

to supplement their regular professorial ranks at discount prices. In fact, Yale has been better than most institutions at requiring its "big name" professors actually to teach undergraduates. But even at Yale, *the habit of fobbing off the ever more expensive education of undergraduates on teaching assistants is a scandal waiting to be exploded*. For graduate students, teaching has more and more become simply a form of financial aid instead of a genuine apprenticeship; for universities, graduate students have become more and more like a pool of migrant workers.^{ix}

There isn't a false note in this passage, but you'll search in vain for this succinct, scathing analysis of American universities' labor relations in the pages of the MLA Newsletter. It appeared, instead, in that stalwart voice of trade unionist activism, the *New Criterion*.

Of course, the folks at the *New Criterion* have only a limited sympathy with GESO, and they go on to inveigh against the existence of *any* university-based unions, not only among graduate students but also among faculty, claiming incoherently that "the idea that students of any description should seek to organize themselves into a union is preposterous. The spectacle of graduate students doing so is only marginally less ludicrous than the prospect of undergraduates or high-school students doing so would be" (3). Somewhere between paragraphs, surely, the *New Criterion* editors forgot that graduate students teach classes whereas undergraduates and high school students generally do not; and you would think Roger Kimball, managing editor of the *New Criterion*, would have good reason not to forget this, since he himself taught undergraduates at Yale when he was a graduate student in the English department at the turn of the eighties (such was the basis of the claim on the back of his famous book, *Tenured Radicals*, that he had once taught

^{ix} 9 Editorial, *The New Criterion*, February 1996, p. 3.

at Yale). But whatever the source of the *New Criterion's* schizophrenia concerning graduate teaching assistants, one thing is indisputable: when the editors of the *New Criterion* have a vastly better sense of what's at stake at Yale than the faculty at Yale, it's time for some serious *perestroika* in the groves of academe. Yale officially insists, of course, that all its "teaching fellows" are guided and supervised by a faculty member, but this claim is emphatically contradicted even by one of GESO's strongest critics, Camille Ibbotson, who told *Lingua Franca* not only that "no faculty member has ever visited my class or expressed an interest in what I was doing" but also that "there is no formal teacher training in my department" (quoted in "Walking," p. 60).

Surely, part of this debacle is attributable specifically to pathologies endemic to Yale and Yale alone. The Yale Corporation has long had a history of toxic aversion to unionization of any kind, be it among graduate students or clerical workers, and the vast majority of Yale faculty, apparently fully interpellated as members of the Corporation, seem to have such an enormous investment in their own prestige that the very idea of unionization threatens their sense of privilege, their sense of *distinction* from mere public universities like Kansas and Berkeley. The weight of "prestige" in the collective faculty imaginary should not be underestimated here. The *New Criterion* casts Yale graduate students as "exploited cheap labor"; Peter Brooks insists that "they really are among the blessed of the earth" (quoted in "Walking," p. 56). They are not, after all, just any garden-variety cheap labor; they are cheap labor *at Yale*. What makes Brooks' insistence all the more interesting is that Brooks is reportedly one of the few anti-union Yale faculty who freely admit that TA teaching loads (in contact hours) have risen over the past twenty years while wages (per hour, adjusted for inflation) have fallen. That profile sounds more like the plight of post-Fordist American workers in general--higher productivity, lower wages--than like a description of the blessed of the earth. Does

Brooks know a secret the *New Criterion* and the AAUP do not know? Or is Brooks revealing something about the assumptions undergirding graduate instruction at Yale?

Let me propose the latter, and let me further propose that if I am right, then many Yale faculty may have been not merely offended but positively *hurt*, emotionally and professionally, by the existence--and the persistence--of GESO. When Yale graduate students point to the job market as evidence that humanities PhDs are not automatically to be classed among the blessed of the earth, what must this argument signify to Yale faculty? The very premise of the school is that there is no need to pay graduate students a "living wage," since the Yale degree assures them of lucrative academic employment at the end of their term as "apprentices." When Yale students reply to this premise by pointing out their school's abysmal placement record in the humanities, what are they saying? They're saying that Yale is not exempt from the rest of the economy in American higher education. They're saying that they're not the blessed of the earth, any more than are the graduate teaching assistants at the University of Kansas. And *that* means that Yale faculty are no longer so uniformly powerful as to grant their PhD students exemption from the great depression in the academic job market.

Recall that Yale has more to lose than most schools in this respect, particularly with regard to the self-regard of its faculty in the modern languages. It was not long ago that Yale was not merely a school but a School, where protégés and epigones could be produced in the high European manner, carrying forward the work of the Yale masters in learned journals and even (sometimes) in the interior of the continent. Back when Roger Kimball was still working away at his dissertation, Yale dominated the English charts in the manner of the early Beatles, and Paul, J. Hillis, Geoff and Harold "Ringo" Bloom made their insights and influence felt even as they redefined "influence" and "insight." Later came the breakup, the solo efforts,

the persistent rumors that Paul was dead. But all that did not matter, because the imprimatur of the Yale degree was still a sure thing, academe's version of a vintage Lennon/McCartney single. If GESO has done nothing else, the union has put Yale faculty on notice that this is no longer the case. And the revelation is so painful, it seems, that the vast majority of affected faculty can only respond by lashing out at the students who would dare to act on the recognition, *pace* Homans and Brooks, that graduate student labor at Yale is not, in the end, significantly different--even after the PhD has been granted and the years of "apprenticeship" ostensibly ended--from graduate student labor at Kansas.

In one sense, then, Yale is an object lesson only for Yale. But in another, more important sense, Yale is not a special case at all; on the contrary, the events at Yale in 1995-96 might very well signal a new day in higher education throughout the United States. Toward the end of her letter to the MLA, Margaret Homans names the problem precisely, arguing for Yale's exemption from the academic economy in terms that make clear why Yale is not exempt from the academic economy: "I believe the delegates [who voted to censure Yale] confused legitimate problems in academic labor relations with issues quite specific to the situation at Yale, issues of which they seemed content to remain ignorant. . . . The exploitation of academic professionals--a national problem--is being trivialized for the sake of winning a small, elite group a fleeting PR victory" (11). In a dazzling display of looking-glass logic, Homans has derived exactly the wrong lesson from the job actions at Yale: her argument is not only (once again) that there are real problems *elsewhere* that have no bearing on the blessed graduate students of Yale; now, her argument is that GESO, by highlighting the "national problem" of exploited academic professionals, by putting the issue in the pages of major American newspapers up and down the Eastern seaboard, has somehow *trivialized* the problem. Thank goodness the *New Criterion* knows better: the exploitation of academic professionals is indeed a

national problem, and Yale is but the leading edge of a national scandal.

Think of Yale this way: the university's endowment is already well over \$4,000,000,000, and recently has been growing faster than the national debt. According to Michael Denning, "The University's investments manager recently revealed that Yale's endowment is having its best year in a decade. In 1995-96, the endowment will earn roughly \$1 billion -- after accounting for all expenses, Yale is earning almost \$2 million a day, every day of the year."^x Moreover, whatever the limitations of its humanities faculty, the school remains relatively well-respected and much in demand among high school graduates (though one presumes that aspiring graduate students in the modern languages, if they have some sense of self-preservation, will want to apply elsewhere in the future). Given Yale's extremely fortunate position in American academe, then, it should not have been hard for Yale faculty to have adopted something like the following reasoning: *if Yale University can't pay graduate students a living wage, complete with free health care, then who can?*

The reason so few Yale faculty have adopted this reasoning, I suggest, is precisely that they cannot see any structural relation between Yale and the vast legions of lesser American schools. The idea, for instance, that destroying GESO at Yale might just have deleterious effects for graduate student unions elsewhere (even at schools where such things might conceivably be necessary) seems never to have occurred to Homans or to her colleagues in arms. Likewise, none of GESO's opponents on the Yale faculty seems even to have entertained the possibility that other universities might look to Yale and say, "if a school so incredibly rich can farm out so much of its undergraduate instruction to adjuncts and graduate students,

^x 10 Michael Denning, Internet bulletin to the Faculty Committee to Support Striking Yale Workers, May 13, 1996.

surely we have all the more reason to rely on part-time labor." Nothing, I submit, could be more painfully indicative of academe's *idiot savant* culture than the spectacle of dozens of bright, articulate scholars, skilled at reading mediations, overdeterminations, and cultural texts galore but incapable of understanding that their relations to graduate students at their own university might just have repercussions for labor relations at other universities.

As if this spectacle weren't depressing enough, there's the further question of GESO's relation to Locals 34 and 35 of the Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees International Union. Here I must shed the temperate language I have used to this point, and speak bluntly for a change: in late 1995 any damn fool, even a distinguished Yale professor, could have seen that the Yale administration's attempt to crush GESO was but the prelude to its full-scale attempt to crush Locals 34 and 35 in the spring of 1996. Yale faculty may have been offended that their doctoral students had chosen to consort with menial laborers, but Yale administrators had a much better reason to oppose the affiliation: recognition of GESO would have complicated--perhaps even short-circuited--their plans to devastate the working conditions of Yale employees across the board.

Here, in a nutshell, is what those plans look like. One of the world's wealthiest universities proposes to cut future workers' wages by 40 percent and redefine them as ten-month workers so as not to pay them benefits. Again, this is at a school that's clearing a cool two million dollars a day. As Denning notes, "Since Yale is realizing this level of profit under the current labor contracts, it cannot be that drastic cuts are required for the university's fiscal health."^{xi} The Yale labor pool is (of course) overwhelmingly nonwhite and drawn from New Haven, the seventh poorest city in the United States; Yale is by far the city's biggest employer,

^{xi} 11 *Ibid.*

accounting for roughly one in seven city jobs. According to Gordon Lafer of FUE, when Locals 34 and 35 went out on strike, during one of New Haven's coldest winters on record, the University tried to ban workers from keeping fires in oil cans for warmth on the grounds that the fumes would violate campus air quality standards; when a local bakery offered its day-old bread to striking workers, Yale threatened to cut off all future contracts with the bakery unless the bread was thrown out. Yale's new policies for its service staff are so draconian and mean-spirited, in fact, that I do not know whether to call them post-Fordist or pre-Fordist. So let's simply call them obscene.

Annabel Patterson's letter to the MLA, as I have noted, remarks that the leaders of the Yale administration "are all Yale faculty"; presumably Patterson made this point in order to suggest that she and her colleagues were professionally bound to stand by their men in their opposition to GESO. The question for Patterson and her colleagues, then, is this: does that logic also dictate that Yale faculty should support their administration's Dickensian assaults on the workers in Locals 34 and 35? Financially there is absolutely no justification for Yale's latest effort at union-busting: the university is rich and getting richer, an enviable position for a non-profit institution. One would think, therefore, that Yale's senior faculty, being the humane, decent people they are, would oppose their administration's policies with regard to Locals 34 and 35. But then, one would also have thought that Yale faculty, being the smart, well-spoken people they are, would have seen the connection between their university's opposition to GESO and their university's broader plans for union-busting on campus.

If ever an institutional crisis demanded the attention of professional organizations like the MLA, this is it. But the MLA's response to the strike at Yale has been somewhat less than encouraging. Six weeks after the Delegate Assembly passed the resolution censuring Yale in December 1995, the MLA conducted its

mass mailing of the letters of Homans, Patterson et al., introducing its twelve-page document with the words, "we write to initiate a new procedure" (MLA, 1). The chief purpose of the mailing was to circulate to the MLA membership the views of Yale faculty opposed to GESO, the grade strike, and the resolution. No views sympathetic to GESO were included. In subsequent communications, the rationale for the mailing became clear: the GESO forces had had their say during the MLA convention, and, according to Margaret Homans, Yale faculty had not been able to respond sufficiently to the resolution at the time it was proposed: "if the MLA sees itself as representing and honoring diversity of opinion," Homans wrote, "the process by which the resolution was pushed through gives the lie to that claim" (MLA, 10). (Homans and Brooks were both present at the Delegate Assembly, though Homans' letter does not indicate as much.) The MLA staff dutifully investigated the charges that the resolution had been improperly introduced, and found, in the words of executive director Phyllis Franklin, that "the assembly's action was valid" (MLA, 1). So much for Homans' precarious sense of proper procedure. Nevertheless, the mailing itself quite clearly seems to accept Homans' charge that "diversity of opinion" was not honored at the convention; no other explanation will account for the MLA's curious decision not to seek opinions sympathetic to GESO for the purposes of the mailing. As a result, the claims of Yale faculty were allowed to stand utterly uncontested--including Homans' unsubstantiated and grossly misleading "procedural" complaints that "the most basic standards of evidence were not adhered to in the formulation of the resolution" (regarding the status of faculty as "replacement workers") and that "the resolution violates several of legal counsel's criteria for acceptable resolutions: it is factually erroneous, slanderous, and personally motivated" (MLA, 10).

When I first read over the special MLA mailing, I was appalled--so appalled that I did not consider it worth my time to complain to the MLA directly. Instead, I

considered leaving the organization altogether. A great deal of effort and deliberation had obviously gone into the production and mailing of this unprecedented and one-sided document; a portion of my MLA dues had supported it, as had a portion of the dues of every graduate student and adjunct faculty member in the MLA; and as a result, my own professional organization had clearly given its members the strong impression that the Yale resolution was ethically dubious and factually mistaken. Ironically, Homans' claim that the MLA had violated its commitment to "diversity of opinion" had been circulated to over 30,000 faculty and graduate students without a single word of rebuttal; the claims of Yale faculty that the Yale resolution was ethically dubious were themselves circulated in an ethically dubious manner.

At the very least, the MLA mailing suggested that when confronted with a professional dispute between senior faculty and graduate students, the organization would go to extraordinary lengths, even "initiate a new procedure," to publicize the views of senior faculty *at the expense of* the views of graduate students. It is worth remembering here that the Yale resolution is the only substantive resolution the MLA has passed in many years that materially addresses the professional working conditions of MLA members; the other burning issues on the table for 1996, for instance, include a resolution expressing "appreciation of and respect for the support staffs in our departments" and another resolution recommending a "common application form" for fellowships in the humanities. It is difficult, in the wake of the MLA's February 9 mass mailing, to imagine what the professional role of the MLA--and its Delegate Assembly, to which I was recently elected--can conceivably be. For the moment, it appears that the MLA is quite efficient at passing resolutions about being nice to secretaries, treating books with extra care, condemning U.S. foreign policy, and refusing to hold the national convention in 46 of the 50 states. But when the MLA at last confronts an issue that addresses head-on the crisis of labor relations

in American universities, the entire "resolution" system is thrown into profound crisis--by, of all things, the objections of a small handful of elite faculty seeking to win a fleeting PR victory.

And yet if recent MLA Newsletters are any indication of the state of the profession at its highest echelons, MLA inattention to academic labor relations may prove to be much less harmful to the profession than actual MLA *attention* to academic labor relations. In the winter of 1995, as the Yale standoff heated up and thousands of new and recent PhDs made their preparations to attend the MLA convention for yet another costly and generally fruitless exercise in job-hunting, the MLA Newsletter featured a column by the brilliant and internationally-renowned Sander Gilman, who, writing his final column as MLA President for 1995, proposed a novel solution to the job crisis in the humanities. The column was titled, "Jobs: What We (Not They) Can Do," and it was written explicitly as a response to angry graduate students caught in the job crunch. Gilman opens by narrating a confrontation with such graduate students at the 1994 MLA convention, remarking that "it was clear that the candidates' anger was directed not at any amorphous 'they' but at their own professional organization, the MLA, and that they were yelling at me not because I had done anything specifically to block them from getting jobs but because I represented that force of nature, the MLA--that is, 'us'."^{xii} He proceeds thence to suggest that the MLA create "postdoctoral mentored teaching fellowships--nontenured, two-year appointments with limited benefit packages" ("Jobs," 4). These mentored postdocs, writes Gilman, will solve the profession's employment crisis by offering younger colleagues "serious, meaningful employment" ("Jobs," 5) while also affording "the flexibility administrators demand in our fields" ("Jobs," 4).

^{xii} 12 Sander Gilman, "Jobs: What We (Not They) Can Do," *MLA Newsletter* 27.4 (1995), p. 4; hereafter cited as "Jobs."

One can only guess at what "flexibility" might mean here (it seems to be a synonym for "fire-ability"), let alone why "flexibility" might be an employment criterion that a professional organization like the MLA would seek to embrace. Gilman notes, in a brief remark uncannily like that of Annabel Patterson's insistence that Yale's leading administrators are also Yale faculty, that his plan will be smiled upon by those above: "we can create new jobs in our departments if our administrators, many of whom are also members of the MLA, see that we are serious in our desire to reallocate resources" ("Jobs," 4). In other words, our administrations are downsizing, but *they* are really "us"; the graduate students who were once part of that "us," in an earlier paragraph, are now resources to be reallocated so that "we" can show "our" administrators how serious we are about signing on to the latest downsizing initiative. Gilman briefly suggests that his proposal is a kinder, gentler form of exploitation--"new PhDs will become better teachers," he suggests, as if they haven't already done enough teaching as graduate students, and "faculty members will have rewarding mentoring tasks" ("Jobs," 4). But what if the senior faculty don't want to "mentor" these two-year, part-time, piece-work pseudo-colleagues? No problem, says Gilman--we'll just leave out the "kinder, gentler" part: "if we [note the "we" here] don't want to take on a mentoring role because of our overloaded schedules, we can create two-year lecturer positions" ("Jobs," 5).

What follows this bizarre suggestion is a still more bizarre paragraph insisting that we should not hire undergraduates as unpaid laborers to teach "drill sections." "Nor should we listen," continues Gilman, "to the argument that this arrangement provides a perfect apprenticeship for students who plan to go to graduate school" ("Jobs," 5). Here, I think, is an "argument" beyond human comprehension: who, exactly, is arguing that we should staff undergraduate courses with undergraduate teachers as "apprentice" graduate students? I cannot answer this question, but I can suggest that Gilman's stern, forceful paragraph ruling out the use of undergraduate

instructors serves the purpose of making his own mentored-postdoc suggestion sound "reasonable" by juxtaposing it to the truly insane option of having undergraduate classes taught by unpaid undergraduates. There's nothing wrong with creating a new tier of second-class faculty, in other words, but when it comes to charging undergraduates tuition to teach themselves in drill sections, *that* we will not countenance.

For what, in the end, is Gilman really proposing, and how would it work? In his antepenultimate paragraph, he writes:

Graduate programs that still admit masses of graduate students could temporarily amalgamate two teaching assistantships into a two-year postdoc. Institutions would receive the same amount of teaching for less money, because they would not have to pay graduate school tuition for these postdoctoral fellows. (5)

Let's parse out this suggestion carefully. Apparently, Gilman's postdocs would teach at twice the pay scale of graduate teaching assistants, and teach twice the courseload, thus providing their institutions with the labor of two graduate students. All right. At Illinois, that would mean that the Sander Gilman Flexible Postdoctoral Fellows would earn just over \$21,000 a year for teaching four courses per semester. And, Gilman adds, Illinois would not have to pay their tuition. But of course, Illinois does not "pay" the tuition of any graduate student; it *waives* graduate student tuition in return for undercompensated teaching (and even that arrangement is being contested as I write). No money changes hands in a tuition waiver; the transaction happens entirely in an executive assistant's software program, as spreadsheet numbers are fiddled and adjusted. The idea that universities "pay" their graduate students' tuition, in other words, is an especially threadbare fiction, though it seems to have been put to good use by the anti-GESO faculty at Yale, who are apt to claim that their students are "paid" almost \$20,000 yearly in tuition waivers--as if the

university is gallantly taking a loss by providing graduate students with \$20K worth of valuable instruction at no charge. It is this threadbare fiction that allows Gilman to present his plan as a money-saver ("the same amount of teaching for less money"), as if universities actually gave tuition waivers in cash, and could pocket the dollars themselves by hiring a Gilman Flexible Fellow.

Tuition waivers, however, are not the crucial issue for Gilman's argument. The crucial issue is that if Gilman's argument becomes widely circulated in American universities, the profession of college teaching as we know it is basically finished. "Let us generate new postdoctoral fellowships throughout the country," writes Gilman ("Jobs," 5). Lethal as this might be to the future of tenure-track employment, in some ways it is not a bad idea: if the going rate for these Gilman Fellows is \$2500 per course, many of my former students, teaching at small colleges as part-time laborers, are in for a raise of anywhere from 60 to 200 percent. But I don't think that's going to happen. The colleges that now employ PhDs at the rate of \$800 to \$1500 per course are not likely to sign on to the Gilman Program in order to convince senior administrators of their "seriousness." (And, I should add, PhDs who teach at these rates are extremely unlikely to need further "mentoring" to hone their pedagogical skills.) For many American colleges, then, Gilman's proposal is simply irrelevant. What then of the colleges that now employ PhDs as assistant professors, at the rate of \$30,000 to \$40,000? Wouldn't they do well to cut their salary and benefit costs by eliminating tenure-track faculty entirely and hiring, instead, new Gilman Fellows with limited benefit packages? For such colleges, I cannot imagine a labor-relations "solution" more administration-friendly than Gilman's. If you want a flexible workforce at a discount rate, there's no need to mount difficult, costly legal challenges to the institution of tenure; just hire a gaggle of part-time Gilman Fellows at \$20,000 with optional health coverage (mentoring also optional), and presto, you've created a new stratum of part-time faculty while saving your institution

untold thousands of dollars in salaries and benefits. And *that* will show you're serious in your desire to reallocate resources.

What Gilman is proposing for new PhDs, in other words, is precisely what Yale is proposing for Locals 34 and 35: a forty percent pay cut (from \$35,000 to \$21,000, more or less), redefinition as part-time labor, and a significant rollback in benefits. For some reason I do not understand, Gilman seems to believe that university administrators will agree to create a wholly separate category of underpaid, part-time, short-term faculty *while also maintaining full-time tenure-track lines* for truly distinguished new PhDs--say, candidates from Yale or Chicago who've respected their mentors and haven't caused trouble. Yet the only difference between Gilman's proposal and Yale's attempt to eviscerate its local labor unions is this: Gilman thinks *his* proposal will be attractive to administrators, faculty, new PhDs and undergraduates alike. "Indeed," he writes, "postdoctoral mentored teaching fellowships will provide a real model for undergraduates who may wish to enter graduate school in the humanities" ("Jobs," 5). Thankfully, Gilman does not go into detail about what kind of undergraduates would be enthralled at the prospect of attending graduate school for seven to ten years with the hope of eventually becoming a two-year Optionally Mentored Fellow at \$20,000.

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I have tried, in these pages, to analyze what I regard as the deeply destructive response of Yale faculty to the prospect of graduate student unionization, and I have taken that response as a harbinger of future labor relations in the academic professions. Further, I have tried to link that response to broader tendencies in the leadership of the MLA, an ostensibly "professional" organization that should, if it is going to serve any useful professional function, be defending professional standards for the treatment of its most impecunious and vulnerable members. But I hardly

know what to make of my own analysis. When Patricia Meyer Spacks served her term as MLA President in 1994, she addressed the job crisis by candidly admitting that she had no idea how to address it;^{xiii} Sander Gilman, by contrast, has come forward with a considered, detailed plan for redressing the crisis, and his "plan" turns out, instead, to be a blueprint for dismantling what little job security still exists in academe. I am compelled to conclude that our recent MLA presidents would do better to ignore the job crisis than to attempt to speak to it, for when they speak to it they sound strikingly like the faculty at Yale: overidentified with the budgetary priorities of university administrations, clueless about their relation to American higher education at large, and all too willing to sustain the profession's ever-dwindling positions of privilege by assigning basic undergraduate instruction to underpaid and overworked adjuncts, "teaching fellows," and graduate students.

By opposing and finally breaking GESO, Yale faculty set an awful precedent for faculty and administrators elsewhere in the country. The MLA, in turn, committed both a tactical and an ethical error by not including GESO spokespersons in their mass mailing to members of the profession with regard to the Yale resolution; and when it comes to professional leadership with regard to the job crisis, nothing could be worse than to have Sander Gilman's postdoc suggestion fall into the hands of cost-conscious administrators. But worst yet--or, perhaps, best of all--Yale faculty and the MLA leadership have now sent an unmistakable message to graduate students, adjuncts, and part-timers everywhere that their nominal spokespersons and their professional organizations are singularly ill-suited to represent their interests, and may in fact be best suited, on the contrary, to the desperate, misguided preservation of systems of prestige and reward that are no

^{xiii} 13 Patricia Meyer Spacks, "The Academic Marketplace: Who Pays Its Costs?" *MLA Newsletter* 26.2 (1994), p. 3.

longer defensible in American higher education's post-Fordist economy. By the AAUP's most recent count, part-time faculty now make up approximately forty-five percent of the American professoriate; and at many large American universities, graduate students teach more than half the introductory undergraduate courses in all fields. All told, adjunct faculty and graduate teaching assistants now make up the bulk of the workforce in U.S. higher education. The time has come for that heretofore silent majority to take matters into its own hands.

Notes