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features

# the collegial quest for truth

**Toby Miller**

1. For the first time in my adult life, I'm in a non-unionized industrial sector. As if in some communistic utopia, I work for a self-managed autonomous collective.

2. It's called a privately-owned American university.

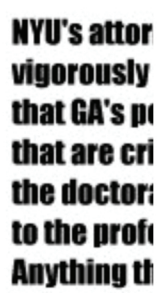
3. These places are so extraordinarily collaborative and non-hierarchical that they transcend employer-employee relations. Why? We are all embarked on a collegial quest for truth. So it's essential that we don't know what the truth about what other people earn, that our pay is not set through transparent categories of productive labor, that our rights and responsibilities are not codified, and that those studying under and working for us also join the party on these terms. These truths, if known, would break down a sense of trust and common purpose. Ah huh.

4. Coming to this country in 1993 from Australia, a place where university employees had recently (ten years earlier) won the right to collective bargaining once the courts held that education was an industry, I was struck by the atmosphere engendered by my new environment.


5. In the past, when I was paid a third of the money given to people I worked with who performed identical tasks (except that they didn't publish) I felt able to say: "you are paid a lot of money; kindly do some effing work." Suddenly, I had no idea what anybody was being "compensated" (such a sweet euphemism--where I come from, it refers to payments to those injured at work). I had no idea what the norms of performance were, and no sense of the poles of collaboration and competition that I was seemingly meant to swing between.

6. The struggle by graduate students at New York University (NYU) to be permitted to have a democratic vote about affiliation with the United Automobile, Aerospace and Agriculture Implement Workers of America (UAW) finds me in conflicted subject positions. I am not a reliable student's "friend" or "co-worker." I am a Professor who wants extremely dull, decidedly non-developmental tasks, such as endless photocopying and the filling out of forms, to be performed by others. As someone who has held many jobs where such tasks were constitutive, I have no hesitation in describing them as routine and awful. Their execution is, of course, vital to a chain of labor that produces, one hopes, an active and empowered citizenry through the educational process. That's what we're here for. Right?

7. I am also the Director of Graduate Studies (DGS) in my Department, with responsibility for graduate degrees and students' progress through them. In that subject position, I speak with incoming Graduate Assistants (GAs), who are assigned to professors to do banal administrative and research tasks for them. I tell them that the performance of these tasks is crucial, both to the success of the Department and their selection as suitable Teaching Assistants (TAs) further down the track. Then I move into another mode, driven by ideology and commitment to unionism. I proceed to encourage them to recognize my DGS subject position for what it is-as managerial,



non-consultative, and directive. How might they deal with "people like me?" By organizing.


8. This Janus face was clearly on display when I was called by attorneys for the UAW to give evidence and submit to cross-examination in Case No. 2-RC-22082 of the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) in late August 1999. My technical competence to testify derived from my professional position as DGS, and my comments were restricted to that competence. Many things germane to the topic that an ordinary reasonable person might have thought crucial-such as the unsustainability of a binary opposition drawn between student development and labor-were essentially unsayable. NYU's attorneys argued vigorously for the notion that GAs perform tasks that are critical to obtaining the doctorate and moving on to the professorial ranks. Anything that is done for money is not done because NYU needs it done, but because it will assist students in one day telling their own GAs what to do. It is postulated that if some of these tasks involve learning on the part of the GA, they are "developmental." Photocopy thousands of pages of Social Text in a semester and you might learn something. Somehow.

9. It struck me during proceedings that this position implies a dim view indeed of American employers, and hence NYU itself (I presume it does actually employ someone-they must be blue-collar, and the University must accept their unionization, as it doesn't threaten to impair collegiality. Right? Duh). The dim view is this: employers should not seek to develop their employees by training them, offering them opportunities to learn and increase their labor-power/income potential. If such development occurs, then the employer-employee relationship is undercut. This is the corollary of arguing that a smidgeon of development puts an end to claims for student unionization because development excludes employment, it is purely a category of learning.


10. I endeavored to explain that the primary work done by GAs was labor that we needed performed, that they provided a cheap labor pool for crucial tasks that we didn't want to undertake ourselves because they were dull. I also explained that there was very little time available for such students to undertake research for us, so onerous were these clerical duties. And that what research they did manage was of no necessary benefit to their studies.

11. Some of the difficulties I experienced before the Board derived from my desire to speak colloquially. So when I said that GAs were expected to 'keep their noses clean,' this was incomprehensible, as was the idea that something was 'as rare as hen's teeth.' I promised to eschew metaphor from that point on so that the assembled attorneys would be able to follow.

12. Other communicative problems flowed from my attempt to talk about the contradiction that is at the heart of NYU and other such institutions. We rely on discounted labor performed by students, even as we claim that they need these "fellowships" to become more like us. The NLRB's presiding officer and the cross-examining lawyers for NYU may have been troubled by my UnAmerican Metaphors, but they were deeply disturbed by the use of the word 'contradiction.' The identification and explication of contradiction was deemed 'opinion' and hence unsayable before I had detailed why I found the concept helpful and what the relevant contradictions were. "Contradiction" as a category was, in this sense, inadmissable. Why am I not surprised that this useful wee word should so exercise the minds of those assembled before it? Might it be that its lineage lies in a conflictual view of social thought rather than an integrative one-that it stresses power inequality over behavioral normativity?

13. The other unsayable aspects to my testimony were detailing the respective career benefits of teaching as a TA and an adjunct. The learned gentleman cross-examining me for the University sought to establish that I saw the sale of this labor-power as part of financial aid assisting study rather than remuneration. Of course, it is both. To compete with other leading schools for graduate students, we have to offer money. At the same time, to keep our undergraduate cash crop sustainable, the graduate students must provide cheap services. GAs and TAs exist to perform both these functions and to undertake such administrative tasks as fronting the offices of those departments that NYU elects not to staff with qualified full-timers.

14. In a tuition-driven institution like NYU, TAs are crucial to the delivery of a credible and profitable undergraduate curriculum. Their noses clean and their interpersonal fumbles as rare as hen's teeth, we unleash GAs onto recitation sections, where they in a sense replicate and develop what they have done as GAs in the new subject position of TA. They are still performing tasks that Professors would rather not do (intersubjectivity with the Great Unwashed, AKA undergraduate students). The University would rather not fund through people who are a) fully qualified in their discipline and b) regularly available to students and in a position to vouch for the curriculum. Adjunct professors at NYU, currently the subject of a campaign by the American Association of University Professors, are crucial educational workers. They are also key categories for graduate students, since many of our doctoral candidates who have finished their course work receive no financial assistance in order to write up their research. They must compete to teach as adjunct professors in the curriculum, with their own TAs selected from the student cohort behind them. So TA and adjunct labor is different from GA work, in that it presumes a mastery of academic material and of pedagogy, though how these abilities are attained is a mystery-they just burst forth from the collegiality native to non-unionized workplaces.

15. In a University dominated, as are most, by the notion of science as the heart of knowledge, I find NYU's position on unions and collegiality not only politically dubious, but analytically spurious. Let's leave to one side ideological issues and focus on methodology and truth-claims. How does anybody know that there is collegiality at NYU? How would they know if it were absent? Where is it deemed strongest and weakest on the campus, and how is this divined? What is done to rectify a loss or an absence of collegiality? And what is the who/when/where/why of the negative correlation that is claimed to inhere to unions and collegiality, here and elsewhere? Definitions and data please, and testing.

16. In short, let's have some rigor in this discussion. NYU is claiming that something (collegiality) exists-good, let us know how to define and identify its presence and absence. NYU claims that a relation (unions destroy collegiality) exists-good, let us know the same answers. Otherwise we are dealing with a set of assertions that lack any basis whatsoever. I think a TA would not give good grades to a term paper that demonstrated such tendencies. That is, a TA committed to the collegial quest for truth, of course.

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