

## The Point Is To Change It: Reflections on Academics and Activism

Dana L. Cloud  
University of Texas, Austin

“A new and ominous phase of global politics has now opened, which not even the most cloistered of academics will be able to ignore. Even so, what has proved most damaging is the absence of memories of collective, and effective, political action.” –Terry Eagleton<sup>1</sup>

The Germany of the Weimar Republic in the years before the rise of Hitler to power was a heady space of intellectual, theatrical, and artistic challenges to orthodoxy. Weimar culture foregrounded the role of radical artists and intellectuals who shunned mass working class politics in favor of avant-garde experimentation.<sup>2</sup> Yet their allegedly radical critique had no practical impact as the socialist movement in Germany was crushed and Hitler rose to power. It is not so much that the rise of fascism was the fault of the intellectuals; the important point is, rather, that their allegedly radical practices were irrelevant to and useless in stopping it.

Like the Weimar avant-garde, many critical and progressive scholars today practice deconstruction of texts and advocate the performance of identity as radical acts.<sup>3</sup> Some argue that we cannot do anything against capitalism because it is so powerful, or that the only place we can make any change is in popular culture (as if *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* is a form of resistance when eleven states just passed constitutional bans on gay marriage).<sup>4</sup> What is missing from this picture is the kind of intellectual who is

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<sup>1</sup> Terry Eagleton, *After Theory* (New York: Basic Books, 2003), p. 7.

<sup>2</sup> David L. R. Kosalka, “A Historiography of the Crisis of Weimar’s Moderist Culture,” <http://www.lemmingland.com/funhouse.html> . This piece provides a useful review and bibliography of debates about the political roles of Weimar intellectuals.

<sup>3</sup> For example, Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

<sup>4</sup> Dana L. Cloud, “The Affirmative Masquerade,” *American Journal of Communication* 4 (2003), online at <http://www.acjournal.org/holdings/vol4/iss3/special/cloud.htm>.

affiliated with social movements and working class struggle.<sup>5</sup> Such an intellectual does not regard his or her scholarly production as a primary site of political intervention. For this intellectual, ideas cannot remain abstract, but rather must be put in the service of historical education, political analysis, and collective action. Criticism of prevailing ideologies and consciousness is part of intellectual work, but critique must happen in conjunction with practical political activity if it is to be relevant at all to the democratic project.

In his eleventh thesis on the German philosopher Feuerbach, Karl Marx chastised philosophy for its abstract and detached gaze on the world of political struggle. “Philosophers have merely interpreted the world,” he wrote. “The point, however, is to change it.”<sup>6</sup> As a longtime socialist activist, I have taken his words to heart. Marx’s challenge raises questions about the proper place of scholars with regard to practical politics and about the relationship of critical interpretation to action.

Marx was a philosopher, economist, critic, and historian—that is, a scholar, as well as an activist. His writings on ideology and philosophy are indispensable to critics who want to locate political discourse (such as the rhetoric of war) in economic contexts (such as how war is motivated by economic and geopolitical aims, for example, the control of oil). His ideas informed his political commitments to international working class solidarity and movement; more importantly, his experience in movements influenced his scholarship. He could not have composed the *Communist Manifesto* in a vacuum-sealed academic office. Rather, all around him revolutions erupted across Europe

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<sup>5</sup> Antonio Gramsci, “The Intellectuals,” in David Forgacs, ed., *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* (New York: Lawrence & Wishart, 1971), pp. 3-23.

<sup>6</sup> Karl Marx, “Theses on Feuerbach” (1845), available at <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/theses/theses.htm>.

in the late 1840s, inspiring him to enter practical politics and to notice how the capitalist system produced upheaval and revolt. The accelerating exploitation of the industrial revolution fueled his theorizing in *Capital*,<sup>7</sup> where he argued that we live in a fundamentally exploitative society that creates the force that can end it: workers whose labor makes the whole system run (and whose refusal to labor, therefore, could bring the whole system to a halt).

Marx's scholarship and scholars following his method often emphasize how such ideologies as the normative ideal nuclear family, the myth of individual upward mobility, the circulation of racist, sexist, and homophobic ideas, and so on operate in a context of unequal power relations, including the economic. At the same time however, he and subsequent revolutionaries noticed that people's consciousness is not completely dominated by reactionary ideas. The lived experience of ordinary people, which often contradicts the official stories, is a resource for criticism and action. Going to work every day is a grim prospect for millions of people around the world, even as politicians, advertisers, and journalists tell us that we can live the dream of upward mobility.

Mobilized by these contradictions and galvanized by the political discourse of the left, masses of people in nations across the world and at times across modern history have risen up to demand justice. Intellectuals and ideas are important in such struggles in both critical and practical contexts. It is in these contexts of demystifying ideology and producing rhetoric (speeches, writings, leaflets, signs, meeting facilitation and intervention, and so on) in movements that my scholarly and activist work intersect.

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<sup>7</sup> Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, "The Manifesto of the Communist Party" (1848), at <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1848/communist-manifesto/index.htm>. *Capital volume I* (1867), available at <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/index.htm>.

While I was not always a Marxist, these uses of rhetoric have been part of my study and my activism since my undergraduate career.

I began my political life as a feminist at Penn State in the mid-1980s. My roommate and friends were involved in the South African divestment movement against apartheid; I was yet unformed politically and committed to my arduous studies. I kept my head down. However, I also found and became part of a community of women and began to study the ways in which culture and political discourse shape women's lives. I attended a national pro-choice march of hundreds of thousands of people in the late 1980s, and the experience began to radicalize me. I entered graduate school at the University of Iowa in 1987. It was a program rich in social theory classes and lessons in the rhetorical criticism of ideology. My first research was on the consequences of the rhetorical separation of public and private spheres for women in the suffrage and anti-slavery movements. I continued to develop feminist consciousness. It seemed to me that doing feminist scholarship was in itself political, and I had little public involvement in movements at this time.

Then came the first Gulf War in 1990 and 1991. It struck me immediately as an irrational set of atrocities clearly motivated by the interest of U.S. corporations in oil profits. As the buildup to war culminated in the bombing of Baghdad in February, 1991, I and many others became increasingly aware of mass mediated government propaganda. With the help of paid public relations firms, the first Bush administration whipped up stories about babies left to die in incubators and other crimes, omitting coverage of events that contradicted the official story. For example, it came to light in alternative news sources that a U.S. ambassador had given Saddam's regime a "green light" to invade

Kuwait; the invasion then served as a pretext for U.S. action. Likewise, many people knew that the U.S. had supported and armed Saddam through the 1980s; suddenly he was no longer “our” dictator.<sup>8</sup>

News of civilian casualties and American losses moved my friends and me to action. I had gotten married in 1988, and had a daughter, Samantha, who was born in the fall of 1990. Despite multiple demands on my time and attention, my husband and I became involved in “Operation U.S. Out” (OUSO), the Iowa City anti-war organization. Through icy streets and snowy skies we marched against war. Samantha marched with us, sometimes bundled in a stroller or in a baby carrier under my winter coat. The topknot of her knit hat would peek up out from under the coat. We were afraid (or hopeful?) that her first words would be “No blood for oil!” (Her first word was “kitty.”)

In OUSO, activists made argument about oil and imperialism, about the hypocritical history of U.S. interventions around the world, about the motives and consequences of war. The people who spoke in the meetings and who made the most sense, most of the time, were socialists. Their key point was that in a system bent on profit by any means necessary, ruthless competition by corporations and nation states always trumps providing for human need. Wars, occupations, and sanctions (that killed hundreds of thousands of civilians in Iraq) are inevitable by products of corporate and then international competition over the world’s labor, resources, and markets. Corporations and politicians are wedded together, so that corporate interests determine both domestic and foreign. Further, racism, sexism, and homophobia prevail in politics and the media (with a few exceptions for rich gay people) and divide us from one another

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<sup>8</sup> Douglas Kellner, *The Persian Gulf TV War* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1992).

so we blame Blacks, or women, or gays for our problems rather than targeting the system. Imperialist wars are about plundering and controlling other nations if they have crucial global resources like oil. Otherwise, the U.S. lets horrible dictators go about their not-so-merry way.

It became clear to me that socialism could explain the war in connection with economic reality, racism, and so on better than many other organizations and individuals I had spoken with. In my academic life as a communication scholar, my colleagues and I discussed the rhetoric of war. We compiled videos of media coverage of the war and taught our students to look at this coverage with critical eyes. In OUSO, my comrades and I talked about the war itself. Then we marched against the war. Activists were and are intellectuals as much as any professor, but at a level with political events, not one step removed. This activism was a manifestation of intellect in the service not of the production of abstract knowledge but rather of action based on knowledge.

By the time the war was over, I had joined the International Socialist Organization.<sup>9</sup> Fourteen years have passed, and as a member of the ISO, I have participated in struggles for abortion rights and workers' rights, against corporate globalization and for affirmative action, against racism, sexism, and homophobia, for gay marriage and against war. I also have been proud to build the ISO, a socialist organization that sustains itself over the long haul with the goal of becoming a mass organization capable of mounting a fundamental challenge to capitalism itself. Movements come and go, sometimes winning reforms, sometimes ending in defeat. Through it all, the ISO has been my political home.

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<sup>9</sup> More info at <http://www.internationalsocialist.org> .

Likewise, my scholarship over the years has congealed into a defense of Marxist discourse theory and an articulation of a range of Marxist critical concepts applied to rhetorical practices. Ideology criticism is based on the Marxist idea of exposing how the dominant ideas in our society (controlled by about 5 multinational media corporations)<sup>10</sup> obscure real inequalities and injustices in society. Using the tools of ideology criticism, I have published essays about racist stereotyping in the mass media; the mythos of the American Dream and family values; and the silencing of race in the culture of labor movements (among other things).<sup>11</sup> I wrote a book about the rhetoric of therapy, or, in other words, about how our cultural and political life is dominated by ideologies that reduce social problems to individual, emotional problems. For example, employers often provide counseling for disgruntled workers, whose complaints are about wages and work conditions, and media coverage of support groups during the first Gulf War convinced people that coping with the war was better than criticizing it.<sup>12</sup> I have critiqued the post-structuralist and post-Marxist turns in discourse theory that reject the idea of capitalism as a real economic system whose discourses serve the power of an actually existing ruling class. These theories rejected also the idea that some people have an interest in and the

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<sup>10</sup> Robert McChesney, *Rich Media, Poor Democracy* (New York: New Press, 2000).

<sup>11</sup> Dana L. Cloud, "The Limits of Interpretation: Ambivalence and the Stereotype in *Spenser: For Hire*," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 9 (1992): 311-324; "Hegemony or Concordance: the Rhetoric of Tokenism in "Oprah" Winfrey's Rags-to-Riches Biography," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 13 (1996): 115-137; "The Rhetoric of Family Values," *Western Journal of Communication* 62 (1994): 141-163; "The Null Persona: Race in the Rhetoric of Silence in the Uprising of '34," *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 2 (1999): 177-209.

<sup>12</sup> Dana L. Cloud, *Control and Consolation in Political and Popular Culture: Rhetorics of Therapy* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1998).

power to change the world.<sup>13</sup> My practical experience in movements taught me that such theory does not make sense except if one had little or no contact with the real world. Too many scholars attempt, in Marx's words, to "fight phrases with phrases," ignoring the real existing world.<sup>14</sup>

For example, during the spring of 2004, I was active in the Austin Coalition for Marriage Equality, an activist group that sprang up after gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender (GLBT) persons in San Francisco and Boston had demanded and won the right to marry. That same summer, I taught a graduate seminar in social movements at the University of Iowa. In my seminar, highly theoretical students challenged the idea of working for gay marriage because the phrases "gay" and "marriage" were ideologically problematic. They argued that we should reject basing any movement on an essentialist notion of gayness or a defense of the nuclear family. Instead of joining activist groups to keep the pressure on society to grant gay marriage rights, they argued that we must do the "hard political work" of deconstructing the categories rather than engaging politics in a way that could improve people's lives (by affording them inheritance rights and health insurance, for example).

Of course, as a longtime socialist, I am skeptical about the nuclear family; the ideal of the family is often used to oppress women and to justify not having any social services, because families are responsible for taking care of their own. Further, I do not

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<sup>13</sup> Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001); Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (London: Verso, 2001). Dana L. Cloud, "Bringing Down Suharto: Globalization, the State, and Social Movement in Indonesia," in Robert Asen and Dan Brouwer, Eds., *Counterpublics and the State* (SUNY Press, 2001).

<sup>14</sup> Karl Marx, *The German Ideology* (1845), at <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/german-ideology/ch01a.htm#a1>.

regard “gayness” as a biological or permanent characteristic, so I understand why embracing the term may be problematic. However, to win full recognition of gay and lesbian families along with the benefits attendant to marriage (including health care, custody of children, inheritance of property and pensions, and so on) would mean real improvement in the living standards of many GLBT people. Further, to erode the foundations for judgment in a practical political world is to disarm the oppressed and exploited who are supposed to study their identities rather than winning real gains. To fight anti-gay bigotry, we need to do the harder political work of organizing as GLBT persons and our allies, because homophobia is really targeted at a real group of people, however complex their identities may be. It was frustrating to try to explain actual existing social movements to scholars who wanted to talk about movements without ever having taken to the streets in a practical fight.

Another example: One afternoon this semester, I taught a three-hour graduate class where we have been studying Marxist theory. Because Marxist criticism of rhetoric necessarily entails an understanding of the economic system of capitalism as context for discourse, the process of explaining how Marxists criticize communication leads to the question of what we should do to end oppression and exploitation. The Marxist answer is, of course, to build fighting social movements with an eye to eventually challenging the system as a whole. Today half of the world’s population goes hungry while two percent of the world’s population controls more than 90 percent of the world’s wealth. So much food is produced that it is dumped because it cannot be sold; meanwhile 90 billion dollars is spent on a brutal war while people with AIDS suffer and die around the world for lack of affordable medicine. Any compassionate and intelligent person taking a good look

around will likely see that there is something systematically and terribly wrong with this picture.

Yet none of the students in my seminar, with one exception, is involved in regular social movement activity, much less socialist organizing. That same evening, I attended a socialist meeting on the “Revolutionary Ideas of Karl Marx.” This discussion covered some of the same ground as my graduate seminar, but in a practical context that demanded understanding how we can use these ideas today, not just to do academic criticism, but to understand movements and the process of social change so that we can be part of making history rather than standing to one side of it. The discussion at the political meeting was marked by curiosity, critique and debate, and thorough knowledge of the subject matter. In other words, it was intellectual. But because the question of what to do in the real world was central, the discussion was also practical.

To be active in social movements does not mean giving up scholarship and criticism. We must fight the battle of ideas as well as the battles in our workplaces and the streets. Understanding racism, sexism, homophobia, nationalism, and other ideological justifications for oppression is important work. This kind of work can happen both in the university and in the public sphere. In the ISO and among activists more generally, I have found intellectuals whose writing and speaking ability and analytical acumen rival many, if not most, of my academic colleagues. Every year the ISO sponsors a conference in Chicago featuring sessions on activist and socialist history and theory, cultural critique and analysis, and arguments for the way forward.<sup>15</sup> Knowing our history is crucially important. It is especially important to know which strategies have led to

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<sup>15</sup> Much of this analysis also appears in the organization’s award-winning magazine, *International Socialist Review* (<http://www.isreview.org>).

victories in the past and which have failed miserably. Otherwise movements are doomed to repeat a history of defeat and demoralization. One of those mistakes has been the perennial placement of resources and faith by the left in the Democratic Party, which has betrayed us again and again, moving ever farther to the right. Academics do deconstruction and vote for Democrats; neither activity gets us very far.

I know that to change culture one must attack the roots of the problems in unequal material relations of power. So long as it is profitable to objectify women in advertising, it won't do much to rail against the advertising system in academic articles. So long as governments and corporations fearing unified opposition to their rule "divide both to conquer each," to use Frederick Douglass' words, there will be little hope of undoing racism in mass culture. It is the system of exploitation that needs addressing at the point of production, the only place ordinary people have been able to win significant material gains. In those struggles sexism, racism, and other oppressive ideas can evaporate quickly.

For example, in 1997 a number of ISO members and I walked the UPS picket line with the workers during their strike that cost UPS \$1.6 billion dollars and won them real gains against permanent part-time work. On the line, I heard workers making homophobic remarks about replacement workers ("scabs") crossing the picket line. They were hooting at the scabs to "bend over for the boss"; they called scabs "fags." Ironically, a significant number of UPS employees (as in any workforce) on that line were GLBT persons. Many were walking the line that day. Perhaps they would have quit the line out of disgust with their co-workers' homophobia and broken the solidarity that kept the strike strong. As an out lesbian, I was worried about this possibility and spoke to one

strike captain about the homophobic language. Because it was clear to him that he and other heterosexual workers had a material interest maintaining the strength of the strike, and thus in abandoning their homophobia and standing in solidarity with their GLBT brothers and sisters, he spoke to other leaders on the line and soon enough, the equation of scabs with gays no longer held. In labor and movement history there are many stories like this one, and there are others in which oppressive ideas ruined solidarity and led to crushing defeats

This situation is one in which class-based interests in improving the material conditions of daily life clearly form the basis of solidarity. Of course, however, students, intellectuals, and those not so clearly positioned as workers often stand on principle in solidarity with those fighting for economic, racial, gender, and sexual justice. (It should be noted that most scholars share, even materially speaking, more in common with all kinds of workers than we do with their bosses or the ruling class more generally.) As an intellectual who could choose not to face the alienation and exploitation characteristic of most workplaces in our society, I would not know the stories of solidarity without having been there. Interestingly, this month at the annual march and rally honoring Martin Luther King, Jr. in Austin, a woman we had met on the UPS picket line approached the socialist table. She purchased some literature and expressed interest in the group. She said to several of us, “I remember you from the UPS picket line. When we were struggling, you were there.”

Thus, activism has been one of my classrooms, perhaps the most important one. Activism and activists have educated me about social movements. It is harder to figure out what my scholarship has to teach movements. I am not of the mind that I have some

special technical knowledge that, out of academic noblesse oblige, I will bestow upon movement actors. I have no desire to be a movement “star” or “guru.” Collective organizing, democratic process, and collective action are much better than individual self-promotion at getting social change done. Although I am a fine communicator attuned to contemporary politics, many people I have known in movements (untrained, in the academic sense) have been better public speakers, better facilitators of meetings, and more accurate readers of political opportunities and constraints than I or many of my scholarly colleagues.

In many ways, my academic career is my “day job” supporting my commitment to political engagement. Academia, for all its politics and burdens, is still a space of freedom in comparison to many forms of labor in today’s world. I am privileged to have flexible work hours, access to public spaces for meetings and demonstrations, access to information and people, adequate pay, the use of cutting-edge communication technologies, and many other resources. As a tenured faculty member, I am especially in a place to take political risks. In 2000, I was part of the anti-death penalty movement (as a member of the Campaign to End the Death Penalty<sup>16</sup>) when the state of Texas put Gary Graham (a.k.a. Shaka Sankofa) to death. He had a strong case for innocence, and his situation as a poor black man highlighted the racial and economic bias in the application of the death penalty across the United States. His case raised the profile of the anti-death penalty cause and galvanized thousands of people nationally and internationally, and here in Austin (the belly of the beast), we built some large demonstrations. At one of them, activists, including myself, engaged in civil disobedience, blocking the gates of the

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<sup>16</sup> <http://www.nodeathpenalty.org>

Governor's mansion. The Austin police and state troopers arrived on the scene and eventually rushed in to haul us away.

People in the hundreds-strong rally chanted "The Whole World is Watching!" echoing a slogan from the 1960s anti-war movement. The troopers cuffed us with plastic cuffs that cut into our wrists. They kicked one protester in the head. They pulled my partner from the ground by her head, injuring her neck. They pushed me on my face, sending my glasses across the pavement and bruising my arms and legs. As she was dragged away, my friend Amanda shouted at the top of her voice, which cut through the crowd, "It's not justice, it's a lie! Gary Graham must not die!" Her voice disappeared into the paddy wagon. As we faced the police, a reporter got in my face with a microphone and asked me whether I was afraid for my job, if the publicity and arrests would have repercussions at the university. In the heat of the moment, I said that I wasn't worried: "I have tenure, and this is how to use it." Of course this was the clip that was in the paper and on television.

My Dean called me in and told me that she had gotten some mail. My actions had made the College controversial among potential donors and alumni. She said that having tenure was not license to say and do anything political in public. I told her that according to what I knew, short of committing a felony, tenure did protect faculty from censure of their political views and actions. I asked her to defend my freedom of thought, assembly, and speech should it be questioned by her constituents. She had very little else to say. Alongside my comrades, I have done other controversial and sometimes unruly things on and off campus, and would not have done anything differently. Risk is inherent in political life.

I feel that it is my obligation and that of other academics to employ that privilege in the construction and support of activist and deliberative movement spaces and activities. These groups cannot be mere spaces of education, cultural expression, survival, or play; if our goal is material social change, the public life we try to build must have an instrumental dimension. In other words, we must conduct education, consciousness-raising, and direct action of the sort that has always been necessary to pressure the system from below.

Today's intellectual climate encourages academics to abstain from such practical activity, and many of my friends, colleagues, and students are pessimistic about our prospects for making significant change. However, world events over the past several years are quite hopeful. For example, a mass uprising in Argentina deposed two successive presidents in early 2002. In Brazil, the working class lifted the reformer Luíz Ignacio "Lula" daSilva to power; in Venezuela, likewise, Hugo Chavez rose to power in 2002 on a tide of massive working class anger at the terms of globalization: privatization and the austerity born of IMF and World Bank debt. Hundreds of thousand of people defended him against two coup attempts, not because he was an individual hero but because he spoke people's real needs. In Uruguay in November 2004 (just as the U.S. Left caved in to conservatism), masses of voters shunned their two traditional parties and voted in a socialist President and an array of progressive governors. The new Uruguayan President Tabare Vazquez immediately announced plans for food and health care for the

country's population. "We have to stop being a rich country with a poor population," he commented.<sup>17</sup>

Meanwhile, a war for oil rages in Iraq. At the time of this writing, the U.S. attack on Fallujah has resulted in more than 800 civilian casualties. Between 15 and 16 thousand civilians have been killed in Iraq since the beginning of the war, and more thousands more have died as an indirect result of the total U.S. war and occupation.<sup>18</sup> As of December, 2004, more than twelve hundred U.S. troops have died in combat. Sometimes it feels surreal to review academic articles for publication in scholarly journals about whether sexy television programs are a form of resistance or about whether hip hop can liberate Black Americans, while around the world, the gap between rich and poor grows wider and millions go without food each day. As of December 3, 2004, the war has cost the U.S. at least 200 billion dollars, enough to fully fund world hunger efforts for six years.<sup>19</sup> Feeding them is not profitable. War is. These are the priorities of a sick system that cannot be undone by making a blog, building a radical website, staging an anti-war play, or writing interpretations of television shows.

The movement front right now in the U.S. is quiet. But this situation cannot last. In U.S. history, periods of quiescence have been followed by massive social explosions. The 1960s followed the 1950s. And the 1930s followed the 1920s. To wit, in 1928 Americans elected the very conservative Herbert Hoover as President. Progressives could have put their heads in the sand or collapsed weeping with despair. They could have

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<sup>17</sup> Mary Jordon, "Latin America's Ascendant Left Has Social-Democratic Cast," *Washington Post*, Nov. 3, 2004, p. A10.

<sup>18</sup> <http://www.iraqbodycount.net>; <http://icasualties.org/oif/>; these counters are updated continuously and I advise you to check them for current numbers.

<sup>19</sup> <http://www.costofwar.com/index-world-hunger.html>.

decided that broad political organization at the grassroots level was futile, and retreated to the academy. But they did not mourn; they organized. Four years later, our nation witnessed a near-revolution of ordinary people, who came together to challenge their employers and the state for a better deal. They also challenged racism and sexism, for example in the Communist-Party-led victorious struggle to free the Scottsboro Boys, nine Black youth framed for rape and targeted for execution. The entire culture shifted in a progressive direction.<sup>20</sup> Organized radicals, among them thousands of intellectuals, played a decisive role during this period.

In Weimar, talking the talk was not enough. The radicalism of the critic, the artist, and the scholar, evaporated into the ether as fascism trumped cultural play with material force. We could take as a counterexample the roles played by intellectuals in the Spanish Civil War, when many thousands of workers, scholars, writers (including George Orwell), artists, and so on joined radical organizations and the Spanish people to challenge Franco's fascism. Although the battle was lost (because of internal disarray in the movement), mass organizing from below was the only way it might have been won. I am reminded of what Orwell wrote about his experience as a soldier in the Spanish Civil War, recounted in *Homage to Catalonia*. Moved by the experience of walking through a Barcelona controlled by workers, where workers and shopkeepers addressed each other and anyone else as equals, where revolutionary posters hung from every doorway, where every workplace had been collectivized, he recognized the situation as "a state of affairs worth fighting for." He also wrote, "I had come to Spain with some notion of writing

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<sup>20</sup> Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front* (London: Verso, 1997).

newspaper articles, but I had joined the militia almost immediately, because at that time and in that atmosphere it seemed the only conceivable thing to do.”<sup>21</sup>

In an instant, Orwell was moved from a position of intellectual distance to one of immediate engagement among others, as equals. He was a maker of words, become a maker of deeds. His writing did not lose importance, but rather gained meaning for history from his shift in stance from intellectual to activist. And so, I ask you, students and makers of words, where will you be when the next crisis comes? I encourage you to join and build social movements, to see the value in long-term organization for social change, to exhort others to become involved, and to create and use spaces for education, deliberation, and action in the community around you. If you are a critic of our system, its horrors, and the ideologies that sustain it, putting ideas into action is the only conceivable thing to do.

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<sup>21</sup> George Orwell, *Homage to Catalonia* (1938), <http://etext.library.adelaide.edu.au/o/orwell/george/o79h/chap1.html> .