For at least the past decade we have recognized these kinds of actions as part of a conservative campaign to undermine what is seen as a sphere of progressive influence in the academy and especially in English departments. You have long been active in both local and national resistance to this conservative agenda; what is your analysis of the current crisis? What are the most pressing dangers?

Barbara Foley:
I think the most pressing danger facing leftists—members of MLG, readers of Mediations—is that we fail to frame the current situation (which is indeed full of “pressing dangers”) in a left as opposed to a liberal way. There are three key aspects of this “sneaking liberalism” that we need to be alert to.

First, you point to key components of the attack on higher education—specifically, working-class higher education. What we need to see is that this attack can’t just be countered by adjusting the carburetor—as is advised not only by the MLA’s CPE (Committee on Professional Employment) report, but also by various people further to the left. The current crisis in higher education points to contradictions in contemporary capitalism that, in my view, can’t be “resolved”—at least to the satisfaction of the working class—“under capitalism.”

Back in 1971 the Committee on Economic Development (CED), at the behest of the Trilateral Commission, came out with a report proclaiming that the US was suffering from a “crisis in democracy.” Workers were developing unrealistic expectations of advancement; it was necessary either to allow fewer people to go to college or else to lessen the value of a college degree. This is what we see happening now. But is it happening not just because university administrators have gotten hooked on the corporate model, or because reactionary state legislators are engaged in a war against multiculturalism, feminism, and “relativistic deconstructionism,” but because of the imperatives facing the US capitalist economy. The downsizing of universities—often hidden behind attacks on affirmative action—the attack on tenure, the increasing reliance on a “reserve army” of superexploited academic laborers: all these developments reflect the reality that, in order to stay internationally competitive, the US has to drive down the cost of labor. And while, given the recent crises in Asian financial markets and the doldrums in which some European economies find themselves as they try to eliminate what is left of their safety nets, the US economy looks comparatively healthy, this impression is largely chimerical. As William Greider has recently demonstrated, US corporations are experiencing a serious loss of market share and long-term falling rate of profit which are not offset by the weirdly booming stock market. So the current attack on the working class—of which
the downsizing of higher education is just one component—is a function not of greed but of necessity.

A second “danger” facing people on the left is to propose that there was some kind of golden age in US higher education. Colleges and universities may be unabashedly modeling themselves on corporate America these days, but we can’t afford to be formalistic in our understanding of this phenomenon. US colleges and universities—albeit along different “tracks” for different segments of the population—have always served ruling-class interests. To join the liberal outcry that the universities are abandoning their “mission” of educating the huddled masses yearning to be free entails a profound distortion of the function of higher education, which is to serve as providers of labor and above all as ideology factories.

In the 1950s and 1960s, the US’s global role was expanding, and it made sense to use institutions of higher ed to train a larger number of people from the working class for a broader range of roles in production. But there was no past moment of “democracy”; as people in English departments know full well, colleges and universities promoted a “humanism” that had nothing to do with—indeed, militated against—working-class emancipation. And the racism, anti-Semitism, and sexism in higher education were egregious.

Finally, and in line with my last point, I think the third main “danger” facing those of us who wish to counter the present trend would be to undercapitalize the extent to which it is profoundly racist. At the same time that the California system has eliminated affirmative action it has engaged in an across-the-board downsizing that has been almost precisely matched by expanded expenditures on prisons. Millions of young working-class people—overwhelmingly men, and disproportionately African-American, Latino, and Native American—are being turned into incarcerated slave laborers. They are the most obvious victims of the entire process described above. Yet a fascist rhetoric that brands them as “predators” and that calls for “community policing” is serving to pit one sector of the working class against another...In the context of these developments, it is easier for the ruling class to get away with the overall attack on higher education.

Ron Strickland:
In your recent scholarship—in your book Radical Representations and in your recent College English article on “Anticommunist Rhetoric in Invisible Man”, for example—you work painstakingly to recover the legacy of communist and proletarian writing that has been suppressed under cold war American literary studies. Why is the recovery of American communist and proletarian writing of the early 20th century so important for the current struggle?

Barbara Foley:
It is crucial to recover and study proletarian literature—especially of the 1930s—for several reasons. First, it is important for people to realize that many very positive things occurred under the aegis of the old socialist and communist movements. There is an irritating tendency among many self-proclaimed leftists today to throw out the entire practice of the 20th-century left. The fact that they ultimately derailed in their attempt to build egalitarian societies does not mean that everything they did was wrong. Indeed, we can critique their errors because we have learned from them. Second, and following from this point, it is important not just for undergraduate students but also their presumably wiser teachers (smile) to counter the notion that “human nature is intrinsically greedy”—a premise that forms the bedrock of so much bourgeois ideology. Reading Myra Page’s Moscow Yankee or Richard Wright’s Uncle Tom’s Children or Jack Conroy’s The Disinherited is enormously important—not because these texts are “inspiring,” in some sentimental sense, but because they demonstrate a range of human potentiality that many these days think impossible—or, to use the favored term in current left academic discourse, “utopian.”

Yet I am bothered when people think that “recovery” entails celebration. Many of the weaknesses of the old left movement—which ended up in the derailed that has demoralized so many of us—are also replicated in the texts of proletarian literature. The celebration of the “soil” and American nationalism; the frequent hesitancy to name the “way out” as communism and to fall back into trade unionism and reformism; the only partial grasp of the centrality of women’s unpaid labor in the home, and of male supremacist ideology, to bourgeois hegemony; the wavering between racial/ethnic nationalism and multi“racial” unity; the acceptance of “race” as a “real” social category: these and other shortcomings of the old left must be interrogated, not from the stance of an anachronistic “political correctness” but from one of self-critical solidarity. We cannot perform a dialectical negation of the errors and limitations of the old left unless we unsentimentally come to terms with its failure to think and act in fully communist ways. Proletarian literature displays the needed dialectic.

Ron Strickland:
Where do you see potential opportunities for reviving the best elements of the old left and advancing the struggle in the current moment?

Barbara Foley:
The opportunity that is opened up by the current crisis in higher education is that it allows leftists to be leftists once again, if only we dare. Clearly revolution for an egalitarian society run by the producers is not on the immediate horizon. But the fact that the attack on higher ed has to be understood systemically means that it has to be contested systemically. A
problem confronting many leftists in the past couple of decades is that we have become reluctant to acknowledge that we want nothing less than communism (or socialism, as some would put it—an important debate to have). Yet since the present crisis demonstrates that capitalism cannot be its very nature be anything other than detrimental to the welfare of the globe’s billions, the question of revolution, as opposed to piecemeal reformism, is once again on our collective agenda. The prospect is a bit intimidating, and a lot of us are out of practice; but we must seize this opportunity.

Ron Strickland:

When you say that the current crisis allows us to be leftists again do you mean because we are backed into a corner with no room to compromise? Some people might expect that, given the current threat to tenure, academics will be more reluctant than ever to embrace a left agenda. Do you have a different take on the situation?

Barbara Foley:

Well, some will always find room to compromise, but what I mean is that the recent attacks on all that was fought for and won by the working class since the 1930s show that capitalism is really unformable. Or, more precisely, that even when reforms are won and seemingly consolidated, they can be taken away—and quickly! It seems just yesterday that governments were making noises about imposing family caps in the welfare system; now there’s no welfare system left at all. And look at what has happened with open admissions at CUNY—arguably the greatest reform for working-class education when it was first won. Gone. We have to learn from this defeat.

I think we have to give up trying to make capitalism more humane, and to turn our efforts toward hastening its demise. When I say this, I don’t mean that we should not engage in all sorts of fight-backs—local, national, whatever—against this latest round of attacks. But our goal in doing so should be to point up the nature of the system and win others—and ourselves—to a revolutionary—that is, pro-communist—outlook through these struggles. Leftists are smart and wonderful people. But they/we have grown somewhat lazy and cynical. Sometimes they/we take recognition of the limits of the present situation as a rationale for doing essentially nothing at all.

Ron Strickland:

In the early 1990’s you wrote a couple of articles pointing out that the ostensible gains for marxism and oppositional practice from what you called the “new scholarship”—the “theory” revolution and the expansion of the canon—have been highly overrated. You argued, for instance, that the movement to open up the canon to new voices is readily enough assimilable to the myth of American democratic pluralism, and that the oppositional force of the newly recognized texts is ultimately contained by the assumption that emancipatory change can come only from autonomous pockets of resistance—women, blacks, Hispanics, Native Americans, gays, etc. Against the poststructuralist privileging of the marginal you argued that, while distinct categories such as gender and race cannot be collapsed into class, the class struggle is still the main contradiction shaping historical processes, and that the “radical politics of heterogeneity and difference is readily enough absorbed into the conservative pluralism of ‘E Pluribus Unum’ which celebrates the openness and flexibility of American capitalist democracy while guaranteeing the continuing segregation and subjugation of the great number of its citizens” (“Subversion and Oppositionality in the Academy,” 74). How would you assess the state of affairs in literary studies now? Have things changed at all since you wrote those essays?

Barbara Foley:

If anything I’d sharpen my critique of the “new scholarship,” the “theory” revolution, and the “new social movements” to which these correspond. As regards multiculturalism: I think it is clear to lots of people these days that “respecting diversity” has little to do with fighting racism. As regards feminism (at least of the academic variety): discourses about the materiality of the body as the site of resistance have precious little to offer women forced into workfare programs and experiencing more and more difficulty getting abortions.

But the problem is not just that these are academic movements that don’t deliver the goods in the street as the street becomes more fascist. The larger problem is that the militant rejection of totality—which I take as the philosophical and political premise of the ideological cluster under discussion—disempowers us precisely at the time when capital is more totalizing than ever before. This is of course a point that David Harvey and others have been making for some time. What needs to be stressed, however, is, first, that the antipathy to totality has gone into the groundwater of contemporary literary and cultural criticism to such a degree that people aren’t even aware of it; and, second, that this post-al paradigm (to use the term of Mas’ud Zavzarzadeh, Teresa Ebert, and company) is implicitly anti-Marxist and indeed anticomunist. So it actually poses a barrier to the kind of discourse—and practice—that are in my view so urgently needed these days.

In fact, by an odd turn of the wheel “post-al” theory actually validates the worst of what capital is doing these days. For the celebration of boundarylessness is very much in the spirit of contemporary “globalization,” which is really neo-imperialism... By branding Marxism as “reductionist” and “scientistic” (a word I really detest!), recent developments in theory and cultural analysis reify the totalizing strategies of global capital while
divesting us of the conceptual/political tools we so badly need to analyze and contest those strategies.

Ron Strickland:

I find Zavaraadeh, Ebert and Morton's critique of post-ality a useful antidote to the self-imposed quietism of much postmodern theory, and I also appreciate their very broad conceptualization of revolutionary pedagogy—understanding virtually any kind of an intervention as a pedagogical act. Their theory of revolutionary pedagogy seems to me to be very immediately connected to praxis. Could you say something about the kind of relationship between theory and praxis in teaching, scholarship and professional activism you envision for progressive academics?

Barbara Foley:

Revolutionary pedagogy—that's a tough one. On the one hand, I, like I am sure most MLCers, try to practice it. Yet, on the other hand, I continually wonder whether it may be a contradiction in terms. Even when I'm being my most "red"—perhaps especially then!—I am well aware that the students in the class are themselves aware that the university is paying my salary. So what I tell them is readily incorporated into the smorgasbord of their educational experience. And my being at the front of the room contributes to the illusion that the university really is a "free marketplace of ideas." If all we do is set forth left ideas in the classroom, then, I think we are largely co-opted.

I am not saying we should not put forward these ideas! But we must do more. We should support any and all campus struggles against racism and sexism and war—and try to inject into these as much anticapitalist consciousness as possible. Students are enormously appreciative when radical professors will put their money where their mouth is—speaking at rallies and teach-ins, writing letters to the campus paper, whatever. I know that a few years ago at Rutgers—when there was a student revolt in reaction to some egregiously racist statements by President Francis Lawrence about the "genetic inferiority" of African American students—it was important to the movement as a whole that some faculty took a strong and visible stand alongside the students.

We should try to rock the boat within our professional associations. That's why I belong the the MLA Radical Caucus, which will, I hope, in the coming period play a role comparable to that which it played in the late 1960s and early 1970s, when the MLA was forced to come to terms with the Vietnam War. My experience tells me that the center in the MLA is vast and contradiction-laden, and that the left can ill afford to sequester itself at self-selecting cash bars (smile) and not bring our analysis to the attention of our colleagues.

Finally, I think it is crucial that left academics not confine their political activity to the academy. We need to be active in the streets around various issues. I, for instance, have for many years been a member of the Combatting Racism Task Force of NOW-NJ—hardly a hotbed of radicalism, but a place attracting terrific people who want to change things—police brutality, workplace— and are pretty open to a left analysis. This activity spills over into our campus political work in crucial ways, since students can get involved in such organizations/issues and meet us there on much more egalitarian terms than are possible in the classroom situation. In addition to sharpening the contradictions on our campuses, we should try to rock the boat... etc.

If we want to have a serious left impact on the lives of our students, we need to follow up beyond the classroom with those who are most left-leaning. If we all did this, the ripple effect would be amazing.

It's important to be aware, though, that when we take our radicalism out of the classroom and actually confront our university administrators as the bosses that they are, we sometimes have to pay the piper. When I was at Northwestern University in the years 1980-86, I learned this lesson. For my vocal opposition to a contra leader brought to campus by a right-wing student group, I was denied tenure. (Yes, explicitly so. Even though I'd been approved for tenure through the system—from the English Department to the A and P Committee to the Dean of Arts and Sciences—the Provost denied me tenure on the grounds that "poor citizenship" stemming from this one episode counted under the rubric of "service"—and that "service" should outweigh scholarship and teaching!)

When, in the process of legal discovery, I saw the Administration's correspondence on this matter, it was clear that NU President Arnold Weber—a good buddy of Bud McFarlane and George Schultz—had been in close contact with the Special Advisor to the President on the National Security Council about my case! So, while I am not saying—at all—that we should not confront our administrations, I am noting that we should be under no illusions that universities are liberated zones: their class character emerges pretty dramatically when you really take them on.