

Retaking Departments

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As students of power relations have known for years, Machiavellian strategies can operate in academic departments just as they do in the larger world. Indeed, with such ideals as objectivity, rationality, and the disinterested pursuit of truth now subject to widespread ridicule by ideological militants and devotees of postmodernism, hardball politics may be more commonplace on campus than off. Unfortunately though, among the torrent of books and articles documenting the rising influence of academic ideologues, there has been little if any attempt to analyze the concrete political strategies by which activist faculty gain and perpetuate their power. This article is intended to rectify this oversight and to propose some acceptable countermeasures for those who wish to resist.

The Ideological Cartel and Departmental Governance

Prof. Holley H. Ulbrich recently coined the term academic cartel to describe a small, closely knit group of professors who seek to enhance their academic standing and vocational benefits by dominating the decision-making machinery of a department.¹ Understanding university life as characterized by fluid coalitions that shift in response to changing issues, events, and personal relationships, Ulbrich believes that “circumstances peculiar to academe virtually guarantee a lifetime for the departmental cartel that is brief.”² Our view, however, is that this fairly benign prognosis seriously underestimates the contemporary power of shared ideology and common political cause to neutralize “circumstances peculiar to academe,” freeze alignments, and extend the existence of departmental cartels indefinitely.

Cartel Strategies

The key goal of an ideological cartel is to capture the departmental chairmanship, for it is the occupant of this position who usually appoints committees, defines and redefines jurisdictions, writes job descriptions and agendas, oversees peer review, and establishes the framework for hiring. As intermediary between dean and department, the chairman also exercises substantial control over the flow of information to higher levels, shaping impressions about the relative merits and contributions of the department's members. This differential evaluation is often accompanied by what Richard Rorty calls “a lot of ad hoc departmental rhetoric” contrived to reeducate the powers that be about “the nature of the discipline.”³ Once an ideologically-

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driven definition of the field has been thus legitimized, other strategies for cartel maintenance become far easier to execute. These are addressed in the following paragraphs.

The incremental transformation of the department's agenda. The composition and orientation of a department are the cumulative result of successive decisions about courses and hiring. Continuity of control over these decisions is maintained by appointing cartel members as chairmen of departmental committees having jurisdiction over course additions, course deletions, the rewriting of course descriptions, and program reviews. Given enough time, the curriculum decisions made by these committees will restructure faculty needs and determine recruiting. When they do, two crucial consequences follow: noncartel faculty are gradually marginalized and rendered vulnerable to pressure to switch departments, seek jobs at other institutions, or take early retirement, and future recruiting focuses on those who share the cartel's ideological vision of the discipline.

The dissolution of fixed structures. This strategy replaces permanent bodies possessing established jurisdictions and elective memberships with ad hoc ones appointed by the chair. These bodies are then empowered to make policy and procedural recommendations directly to the chair, preventing full departmental participation.

The manipulation of information. Even when a departmental vote cannot be avoided, control can still be maintained by withholding information until university deadlines are at hand. Then, cartel members—having already determined their own position—call the required meeting and force votes on policies that others have had little or no time to evaluate.

Cartel members can complement this strategy by reducing the number of departmental meetings (easily done, for few faculty members campaign for more meetings). Infrequent meetings make it harder for noncartel members to pool knowledge from noncartel sources about emergent policy changes, and they prevent dissidents from confronting cartel leaders with potentially embarrassing questions.

The development of flexible evaluation methods so that performance scores of cartel members can be inflated in areas of responsibility they prefer to avoid. There are activities that university administrators respect but do not generously reward. To remain "respectable," cartel members must avoid these burdens without incurring onus. Unfortunately, teaching (especially of undergraduates) is frequently regarded as such a burden. Ulbrich has suggested that noncartel members often teach inordinately heavy loads, thereby subsidizing the minimal teaching responsibilities of those inside the cartel.⁴ In universities where teaching accounts for a sizeable percentage of the annual evaluation, policies must be manipulated to ensure that cartel members receive ratings equal or superior to those carrying the heavier burdens. This can be accomplished by various techniques, including preferentially assigning more lightly enrolled

elective courses to cartel members or allowing them to teach seminars that do not require much preparation. Releasing time from teaching in return for nominal administrative assignments is yet another way to allow the favored to look better than they deserve. Adroit information management and appropriate obfuscation can hide these privileges from any but the most persistent inquiry.

The use of gossip to discredit dissidents. Accusations and rumors of sexual harassment, problem drinking, crankiness, lack of congeniality, or insubordination can irritate institutional sensibilities and identify the accused as "the other."⁵ This transforms legitimate intellectual differences into a question of personal failure, thereby discrediting criticism.

The suppression of academic freedom by equating dissent from departmental policy with defiance of some larger university mandate. This maneuver requires a powerful act of intimidation to deter future debunking. For example, cartel members can seize an argument designed to reaffirm, in the midst of ideological dominance, the legitimacy of a nonideological perspective and reinterpret it as an attack on the moral purposes of the institution. This becomes easier as colleges and universities, often without much reflection, adopt vague mission statements on the importance of diversity, multiculturalism, and a sensitive learning environment. Cartel members can present the "subversive" argument to sympathetic university officials when its author is not on hand to rebut the argument's misconstruction. At appropriate moments, the cartel departmental chair can then state or, even better, merely hint that senior administrators found the dissident position "disturbing."

Challenging Cartel Dominance

Most of those likely to be left out of ideological cartels entered the academy not out of any zest for confrontation but to enjoy the calm, quiet pursuits of scholarship and teaching. But, as Machiavelli says, when "times and affairs change," he is ruined who does not "change his mode of proceeding."⁶ Thus, when confronted by an ideological cartel, professional survival may well require developing a combativeness not originally thought part of the academic job description. For those willing to summon the appropriate resolve and application the following course is recommended.

Document everything. Since the leaders of the cartel have kept files and bestride the official channels of communication, it is necessary to retain memoranda, letters, announcements, and meeting agendas (as well as to take minutes independently) in order to document procedural tricks and double standards. Dissidents need such records to establish their credibility with administrators.

At every opportunity aggressively and openly question cartel policies. The question mark, as Saul Alinsky observed, is an inverted plowshare, a "carrier of the

contagion of curiosity.”⁷ Asking pointed questions at committee and departmental meetings forces cartel members to formulate convincing and internally consistent justifications for salary decisions, teaching assignments, committee appointments, and procedures in general. Forcing them to clarify their requests will either make their double standards explicit or force cartel members to adhere to more evenhanded procedures, thereby weakening the cartel’s effectiveness.

Promote counter-pressure. Ulbrich advises dissidents to “raise the costs of cartel behavior by constant monitoring, by grievances, by complaints filed with the higher administration, and by establishing a reputation for the cartel among other academic departments so as to predispose any grievance hearing toward the grievant and...[to] create alliances within the local academic community that may bear fruit in the future.”⁸ A problem does not exist until people define it as such (to paraphrase Alinsky).⁹ Encouraging colleagues to visit deans and air their complaints, either individually or collectively, alerts administrators that all is not well. A series of memos exposing the cartel, particularly from someone who has both seniority in the profession and tenure in the department, can also be very effective.

Redress intellectual power imbalances by calling in outsiders and create new forums for discussion. To legitimize intellectual alternatives, dissidents can cite respected scholars from other institutions who espouse their position. It is even better to bring these professors to the campus as speakers. Dissidents can also sponsor educational programs, for example, brown-bag luncheons, focusing on such topics as departmental governance or the erosion of academic freedom.

Press colleagues to take a stand. In circumstances of ideological oppression, faculty must be aware of the Machiavellian necessity to choose:

A prince is also esteemed when he is a true friend and a true enemy, that is, when without any hesitation he discloses himself in support of someone against another. This course is always more useful than to remain neutral, because if two powers close to you come to grips, either they are of such quality that if one wins, you have to fear the winner, or not. In either of these two cases, it will always be more useful to you to disclose yourself and to wage open war; for in the first case if you do not disclose yourself, you will always be the prey of whoever wins, to the pleasure and satisfaction of the one who was defeated, and you have no reason, nor anything, to defend you or give you refuge. For whoever wins does not want suspect friends who may not help him in adversity; whoever loses does not give you refuge, since you did not want to share his fortune with arms in hand.¹⁰

Those who prefer others to do their fighting for them forfeit their claims to respect and risk coming to grief however things turn out. Once the campaign against the cartel acquires real momentum, fence-sitters should be reminded of this basic fact of life.

Alert college administrators to the fact that ideological cartels can expose the institution to embarrassment. It is becoming increasingly obvious that administrators who allow ideological cartels to flourish open themselves to embarrassment when the media and public observe the intolerance, zealotry, and abuses of power that these cartels engender. Repeated allusions in appropriate campus forums to conspicuous examples of such embarrassment may eventually penetrate the consciousness of even the most resistant provost or academic dean.

When all else fails, inform the media, the public, and alumni about academically corrupt policies. Although this is a high-risk venture to be considered only in serious situations when there is no further internal recourse, iniquitous policies that for ideological reasons may pass muster within colleges and universities almost always look different when exposed to broader scrutiny. Moreover, savvy administrators may sometimes welcome such exposures as a means of weakening or overthrowing cartels they are otherwise helpless to confront. Needless to say, however, the personal costs of following this course may prove high for the whistle-blower.

Conclusion

In the past, it was believed that the commitment of scholars to the canons of reason and evidence prevented the ideological capture of most academic departments. However, such transformations not only take place but do so through strategies that are likely to render them permanent. In these new circumstances, those holding traditional academic values may find themselves defined or harassed out of professional existence. As unpleasant as it may be, scholars must learn to recognize and respond to these attempts, which are likely to become increasingly common in the 1990s. These days, as Machiavelli might say, hiding from the facts will only hasten one's ruin.

Notes

1. Holley H. Ulbrich, "Departmental Takeover and the Peculiar Property Rights of Academics," *Academe* (January/February 1989).
2. *Ibid.*, 33.
3. Richard Rorty, "Philosophy in America Today," in *Consequences of Pragmatism* (Minneapolis, Minn.: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), 225.
4. Ulbrich, 33.
5. Thomas Szasz, *The Manufacture of Madness* (New York: Dell Publishing Company, 1970), 290.
6. Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*, tr. Harvey C. Mansfield, Jr. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 100.
7. Saul D. Alinsky, *Rules for Radicals* (New York: Random House, 1971), 72.
8. Ulbrich, 35.
9. Alinsky, 78.
10. Machiavelli, 89.