



Identity Resistance and Market-based Political Culture at a Small Liberal Arts School

Jesse Mortenson

Macalester College

INTRODUCTION

In this essay, I tell the story of my encounter as a student with the dominant political culture at Macalester College, a small liberal arts undergraduate college in St. Paul, Minnesota. I argue that market strategies employed by the administration significantly contribute to the shape of that political culture by producing and reproducing the student body as a bundle of social locations and collective political self-identities. As a process deeply implicated in identity formation, both prior to and during the experience of arrival, this constitution of political culture through market strategies was susceptible to my efforts at critical interpretation using identity-based resources.

First, my high school decision to identify as a (closeted) gay male while learning how to navigate and wield institutions, and consequent notions of an institutional failure to address homophobia, lent me a skeptical form of institutional agency. Second,

the particular sets of knowledge woven through my parents' working class family network discouraged me from seeing higher education clearly as a market choice. This granted me some distance from the constitutive effects of Macalester's market strategies, especially regarding how I related to campus political culture. In this distance, I fashioned a counter-hegemonic political consciousness. The images that Macalester spokespeople use to identify the school as a particular choice within the "elite liberal arts college" market are received (or not) and interpreted by potential students largely according to their socioeconomic trajectories and prior experiences with academic institutions. The most prominent market strategy is the image of Macalester as a haven for liberal politics, which consequently collapses the range of what is considered to be legitimately a "political issue" to United States and international politics.

A secondary, but equally important image is that of academic excellence, which elevates a market evaluation of academic practices over all other values. These market strategies contributed to a number of limitations in student and administrative institutions that deflected the otherwise visible strands of critical social theory taught in many classrooms from manifestation as concrete campus policies. My "final battle" with a market strategy-infused campus political culture—the failed struggle to retain a social justice policy for College admissions called need-blind admissions—reveals ways in which (especially class) identity stands at the center of campus politics.

A NOTE ON PERSPECTIVE

We all write and identify through our contingent social locations. I speak primarily through the experiences of a white, Minnesota-born, economically-stable working

class boy growing up through the ambiguous process of class advancement by way of access to cultural capital in a wealthy, exurban school district. My theoretical training has equipped me to speak tentatively (but without guilt) of the historical confluences and mutually-constituted dynamics of race, class, gender and sexuality. My most serious blindness is to the specific professional/class concerns and opportunities of international students. This is important because 14% of students come from 80 countries other than the United States, and “internationalism” is viewed as a top institutional principle and selling point for the school. Secretary-General of the United Nations and Macalester graduate Kofi Annan is deemed a semi-official mascot for the school.¹ This essay is not meant to be an adequate survey of all students’ experiences of Macalester’s political culture. I hope to explain the encounter between my developing identity/political consciousness and this political culture from my specifically grounded position and through my experience participating regularly in public spaces of contest around campus.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: THE MIDDLE CLASS AND THE ACADEMY

The interaction between student identities and institutionalized market strategies occurs within a broader context of the reproduction of class by the United States educational system. A large range of literature deals with this context, but specifically I’d like to explore the aspects that inform the expectations of consumers and producers in the liberal arts market. In the case of Macalester College, the consumers are overwhelmingly middle class and up: 44% of the U.S. students in the class of 2008 have an annual custodial family income of

1. Macalester Bulletin, September 2003. Available: <http://www.macalester.edu/bulletin/archives/2003/092603.htm>

\$100,000 or greater, while only 12% are at or below the US median annual household income of \$44,000.^{2 3} Macalester’s financial model is predicated on this large portion of students who can pay the full tuition price or a significant fraction of it in order to sustain its capital-intensive mode of higher education (the cost is estimated by the College at \$42,000 per student), which, in turn, is deemed to be necessary to attract wealthy, academically high-ranking students in the first place.⁴ Thus, the identity politics of the U.S. middle class is the field on which institutional market strategies at Macalester are founded.

The dominant sense of personal identity and ambition within student political culture is strongly bounded by professional ambitions that are woven by family, friends and high school, and only finalized in higher education. In *Women Without Class*, Julie Betty’s ethnographic work around one rural high school in California’s Central Valley reveals the ways in which the institutional practices of secondary school produce and reproduce bifurcated social trajectories.⁵ Bifurcation is a simplification, as intersections of race, class, sexuality and gender entail a number of unique trajectories, but as a concept it captures the flavor of seemingly irreconcilable, separate planes of existence. She found that girls who are less likely to have familial networks set up to transfer knowledge about non-vocational college choices are systematically denied that information and institutional orienta-

2. Macalester College Financial Aid Dept. statistics. Available: <http://www.macalester.edu/admissions/applying/financial/qualifying.html>

3. U.S. Census Bureau, Income 2003 statistics. Available: <http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/income/income03/statemhi.html>

4. Macalester College Financial Aid Dept. statistics. Available: <http://www.macalester.edu/admissions/applying/financial/qualifying.html>

5. Betty, J. (2002). *Women Without Class: Girls, Race, and Identity*. Berkeley: University of California Press

tion in school, despite good intentions by teachers and counselors who are practically powerless in the face of American economic inequality (77-80). The knowledge requisite to effectively manifest professional ambition becomes part of a “prep” social identity, performed largely in white, middle class cultural codes. High school students who are “exceptions” to familial race/class trajectories tend to tenuously perform middle class social identity, and most often seek an older sibling who “made it” to obtain necessary knowledge about required courses, tests, and applications (150-151). Meanwhile, most working class students—and specifically in Betty’s case, working class Latina girls—creatively adopt identity practices that reject the institutionally-approved “prep” codes in favor of alternative value sources. This also contributes to the reification of institutional/economic agency as a cultural status owned by middle class whites. This bifurcation of social trajectories is well in place before entering higher education, with the consequence of reproducing middle class identities as special and directly tied to professional ambition.

A tradition of apprenticeship, in which youth expect and pursue long periods of education and training during which they must identify with educators and employers before gaining desired social and economic status, is deeply embedded in middle class identities. Barbara Ehrenreich describes, in *Fear of Falling*, the historical process through which certain occupations worked to establish the category “professional” alongside the growth of the discourse on the importance of managing workers on the shopfloor, workers seen as unruly, unclean populations in society (79, 136).¹ New professionals established certification programs to restrict access to these

occupations, with the result that:

most would-be holders of middle-class occupations must expect to undergo six or more years of higher education followed by an apprenticeship period, before earning ‘adult’ levels of income or respect. The highest-status professions—medicine, law, and the academic disciplines—require a four-year college degree, followed by several years of graduate education, followed usually by several more years of relatively low-paid apprenticeship ... Lower-status professions, such as dentistry and social work, are only slightly less demanding ... We may be born into the middle class, but we are expected to spend almost thirty years of our lives establishing ourselves as members of that class in good standing. (75-76)

Success as a middle class youth depends on agreement, in exchange for professional status, to defer one’s status fulfillment and to consent to the standards of institutional authorities while pursuing the idealized academic/social toil that legitimizes the professions. These standards often are simply institutionalized barriers to entry dressed up as critical components of academic rigor. Ehrenreich cites as examples the requirements that pre-med students take organic chemistry and calculus classes, which, though practically useless to practicing physicians, “serve ... to screen out students who have not had the benefit of a high-quality, middle-class, secondary education” (81). She uses these issues to discuss the 1960s/70s student movements as both aberration and the result of inherent contradictions.² However, they also indicate how Macalester students are likely to be embedded in social trajectories that necessitate important degrees of identifica-

1. Ehrenreich, B. (1989). *Fear of Falling: the Inner Life of the Middle Class*. New York: Harper-Collins

tion with academic and other professional authorities. Especially when considering whether campus decision-making itself is politicized by students, the question of identification with academic authorities becomes important. Ehrenreich demonstrates that this identification is likely given the socioeconomic centrality of this form of apprenticeship to middle class self-identity.

There are strong reasons to expect that professional ambition and a consequent commitment to apprenticeship as a social trajectory are important in the identity-building processes of Macalester students in particular. As a self-styled “elite” liberal arts college, the institution is especially invested in putting together a student body, programs and curricula that demonstrate extraordinary success in moving students higher along the professional path. Over half—higher than the liberal arts average—of graduates go on to further graduate study.¹ Of the class of 2003 graduates who gave permission to use their exit survey data for school statistics, 22% were headed directly to graduate school and 45% intended to travel (indicating a likely command of the necessary financial resources and cultural expectation that travel is an important component of self-development).² Of the 126 who listed current or pending employment, 87% held jobs, internships or fellowships on a professional career track. About 20% listed no information on plans at all.

Student demographics and post-graduate

2. Ehrenreich’s argument here is that the apprenticeship structure’s inherent contradiction is the high price required of students, which established fertile ground for middle class youth angst. This fueled the student movement (which had been initiated by years of steady organizing by more self-consciously politicized radical students, which appalled many middle class parents. Ehrenreich explains how this moment also existed as an aberration, a possibility sealed up by the conservative backlash which began in the late 1970s.

1. Andrea Dine, Associate Director of the Career Development Center at Macalester, interview, 5/16/05

2. Ibid

activities demonstrate a general commitment to professional ambition.

This context is where my own story of social identity and political consciousness passes through. I should acknowledge that these aspects of class reproduction are not unique to this school, though a general survey of social class and higher education is not my focus here. The political culture at the college involves all students at a crucial moment when we finalize our “adult” orientations to relationships with authority, privilege, and profession. In many ways, key elements of the student-school relationship will continue to dominate formal relationships we enter into for the next decade of our lives, especially a sense of obligation to a hierarchy which provides economic opportunity. In other words, personal and economic investment in four-year college education is the down payment on a larger contract with the institutions of social life. As these consequences become increasingly clear, campus political culture and questions of political consciousness become very important to understanding the options that middle class youth—and those like myself who find themselves class-advancing—have or lack for creating new possibilities within the moving structures of class/identity reproduction. What is specific about my encounter with Macalester is the interaction between my class/sexuality positions and experiences with institutional agency, and the particular mix of market strategies employed by Macalester administrators in order to occupy a niche in a market dominated by schools that have more money.

INSTITUTIONAL AGENCY AND SOCIAL TRAJECTORY

I got fired up about changing the institutions around me late in high school. I developed a politicized consciousness through four exciting points of agency, and

saw—was taught to see—higher education as a proper and expected outlet for that agency. First, I was smart, and was afforded the privilege to attend a school where nothing prevented me from acquiring a college-oriented education or occupying a position that I perceived to be more critically reformist and aware than my peers. Second, I took a class each of my three years at high school (Stillwater Area High School encompasses grades 10-12) with a teacher, Jan Spreeman, who used classroom practices and a curriculum that cut sharply against the grain of most of my other experiences with public education. Third, I was invited to spend a year on my school district's committee on religion in the schools, thus becoming comfortable with reviewing and creating controversial policy. Fourth, I got deeply involved with the student newspaper, becoming co-editor-in-chief as a senior, and thus invested myself in a persistent (if possibly superficial) identification with organized social criticism. Crucially, my decision to identify as a closeted gay male early in high school colored my experience of developing institutional agency, granting me distance from identifying with the values and ambitions of the institutions I interacted with. Finally, my working class cultural/economic background set me up for new layers of self-conscious distance from College peers and the cultural capital component of their dominant definition of liberal/progressive politics.

The dynamics of social identity deeply shaped this process for me. Though I didn't think about it in these terms at the time, a historical investment in white privilege most likely paved the way for my parents (who both worked blue collar jobs) to move with relative ease out of East St. Paul and into Baytown Township, an exurban locale with a "good" school district sitting in the 29th richest county in the United States (by median household income).¹ My dad is a millwright, and was able to gain easier entrance to the union's apprenticeship pro-

gram—at scale wages to boot—because his dad was a union carpenter. Though I have not researched this, it is likely that my grandfather had a much better shot at gaining trade union membership as a white person due to legacies of trade union racism; my dad reports that union was always very white. He was able to take advantage of this persistent privilege, securing a well-paying job with benefits and raises on two years of vocational school, despite growing up on public assistance. By moving to Baytown, my dad class-advanced into a "settled living" working class position, including "relative security, higher pay" and a life more or less "orderly and predictable."² In contrast, my mother fell into conflict with her middle class family early on over their conservative religious attitudes, and lost out on the financial support that carried her siblings into chemistry, medicine, and business management. Spending years at income levels qualifying for state assistance was an unlikely outcome for her, which I think fueled her narratives of how hard work (as a hospital unit coordinator), thrift, and family/friends support networks paid off with 2.5 semi-rural acres, a house and no mortgage.

This combination of racial/class dynamics—the privilege to access resources necessary for class-advancement, yet a white-working class cultural background and lower-than-average household income compared to peers—positioned me as likely to develop institutional agency but an ambiguous relationship to institutions. This is, perhaps, the most obvious formula for the sort of political identity I wish to encourage, which might be summarized as the sense of desire and ability to change the institutions that order life through collec-

1.U.S. Census Bureau, as cited in "Richest Places in the United States," *Wikipedia*. Available at: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Richest_places_in_the_United_States#Richest_counties

2.Joseph Howell (1973), as interpreted by Betty (2002).

tive, organized action. At important points through childhood and adolescence as an overachiever, I thanked institutions of authority for granting me self-meaning and agency in the face of an antagonistic, competitive peer culture focused on social status and popularity battles I could not win. Simultaneously, I came to recognize that wealthier students tended to benefit most easily within that culture, and that school institutions were often complicit in rendering others marginal.

Despite the importance of my race/class location in how I have received the world, my first self-conscious development of identity in an oppositional mode was not particularly class-based. Near the end of ninth grade I fell into intense love with a boy, and soon identified as gay (an identity that I maintained through high school, until I decided that my desires are too complicated for binary sexual identities, otherwise titled “started going out with a girl”). I was already in a state of nascent political development that justified my identity and recognized homophobia as an oppressive cultural practice. Like most gay teens, I was surrounded by ubiquitous expressions of homophobia. Though it was unlikely that I would have faced violence, I remained in the closet to all but a small group of friends. This experience greatly magnified strands of typical teenage alienation into an intense—for a school that presented me with little obvious identificatory challenge (being 95% white and fairly class homogeneous)—sense of otherness. I am surprised in retrospect at this intensity, which I can recover in some leftover writings and barely-remembered actions from the time. For instance, in February of my senior year, I wrote a school newspaper article condemning homophobia that included anonymized quotes from myself written in the third person (something I did not remember until I looked up the old article). This is embarrassing to me today, but it indicates the degree to which I felt betrayed by peers,

mainstream culture and institutions that failed to intervene. In a different article, published a year prior, I wrote:

I challenge the student council, the new president-elect, the peer counselors, STAND, anyone who deems him- or herself a leader to make this an issue not just from the podium but everyday. Is this not more important than organizing dances? I challenge teachers and the administration to stop ignoring this. A teacher would jump on ‘n----r’ or the f-word but too often pretends not to hear ‘that’s so gay.’ As role models and mentors, it is a high duty to refuse the talk that fuels hatred. Do not hide behind the excuse, ‘I can’t change anything.’ At least you owe it to that gay kid in your class to show somebody cares.

My anger at school institutions and authorities arising out of my experience as gay-identified facilitated my development of a critique that went beyond a single issue. In a similar vein, from an article about corporate soda and vending machines, I critically evaluate institutional motivations:

The school system ignores the teenage biological demand for more sleep because of the costs in restructuring the bus system. Similarly, it ignores our health in favor of easy money. This compromise of ideals for the sake of convenience is a strange contrast to what students are taught in health class.

Thus, I was able to refine my criticism of institutions through student newspaper opinion columns. When I became co-editor-in-chief, I gained regular access to this space to manifest my hurt and hopes as or-

ganized communication. I developed a sense of practice, how to use an organized collective to attempt social change. This learning process was constantly framed by my closeted gay identity.

I became more familiar with the language of institutions through my position as student representative on the Committee on Religion in the Schools. The Committee was established by the School Board in response to some parent concerns about school programs around Christmas. My on-and-off involvement with the student group STAND (a pro-diversity group, an acronym that I can no longer decipher) somehow earned me the respect of its (school staff) adviser, and she recommended me to the Committee. I spent about a year meeting with a group of mostly teachers and a few community members of different faiths, looking over legal decisions on freedom of speech and freedom of religion in public schools, reading policy recommendations, and co-crafting one section of the final recommended policy for my school district. The policy was passed without too much trouble by the school board, leaving me with a sense of ease with policy-making, with discussion and disagreement within an adult working group, and with success in something closer to the “real world” than my school assignments. I entered these experiences specifically in the mode of otherness (in the limited sense of my immediate surroundings) that came of my self-identification as gay. I felt that a policy aimed at protecting students practicing minority religions/spiritualities (and atheists) was an important act of social fairness. Stillwater is set in a predominantly Christian context, including the election of Michele Bachmann, arguably the most outspoken social conservative in the MN Senate. My work with the Committee developed my confidence working with institutions at a policy level, contributing to my sense of institutional agency.

In retrospect, this seems like an impor-

tant experience that led me to identify with wielding the power of institutions, yet within a particularly personal mode of resistance. Of course, my memory of high school and all that before it is dim, fragmented, frightening, and constantly reinterpretable. Building this narrative is like trying to remember a night’s worth of dreams and deciding which of them foretold the future. Paul Gillis, noted sociologist of class reproduction in schools, writes, “Within any biography there’s the terrific role of sheer accident, what you hear about and when. Happenstance explains a lot. Negative ‘avoidance factors’ also play a role. I just didn’t want a proper job.”¹ Quite possibly I just didn’t want to agree with a social system that shocked me with peer antagonism and official apathy in junior high school. There are earlier strands I could try to gather—such as arguing in favor of socialism in debate class or looking up information on the Zapatista uprising during junior high—but I can’t accurately look back to the fibers from whence they were spun. I certainly remember being depressed as hell for all of seventh grade, getting picked on for being a dork and having long hair. There were few opportunities for anything resembling “political” activity in junior high, and so the glimmers of institutional agency and historical context I gained in high school were crucial.

I was able to contextualize high school institutional encounters in history class with teacher Jan Spreeman. Spreeman taught mostly without the textbook, or used it as a minimal reference. He focused on historical sequences where the institutions of “society” turned against the ideals normally attributed to them: the Native American genocide, the Holocaust, war. He encouraged students to conceptualize history as a project that can be done, and ev-

1. Willis, P. and Gibb, R. (2004). “An Interview with Paul Gillis” in *Learning to Labor in New Times*. Ed. by N. Dolby and G. Dimitriadis. New York: RoutledgeFalmer.

eryday life as a demand for ethical engagement. He was also a popular teacher due to his charisma and constant effort to connect to students on their terms (failing that, on goofy terms). He facilitated a poetry club and informal extracurricular field trips with small groups of students who were interested. I sought historical contexts for the homophobia that I believed to be a pressing and deadly oppression tolerated by peers, authority and institutions. He got me and a few other students on the phone with a fellow on death row named Gary Hart. He encouraged students to take up final projects that would impact the world (helping build a nature path, contributing some minor research to a history center) in return for being flexible and appreciative of varying results. If I got a sense of a grand historical narrative from which to build a more formal political perspective, I can thank the engaged pedagogy of Jan Spreeman. All of this activity seemed to lead naturally to a greater level of fruition as I graduated and went to college. Spreeman told me that, at college, everybody pursued ethical/political questions and enjoyed intense philosophical discussions wherever they went. I was excited to continue this training in the immediate ethical implications of world history.

At the same time, I put little effort into selecting a school. I had few conversations with other students in my AP English and Humanities classes (all college-bound) about school selection. I was baffled by promotional mailings. Being that neither of my parents attended four-year college and that only a couple out of the handful of my BA-holding aunts and uncles went to institutions other than the University of Minnesota, I had no familial network telling me which schools were the “right” ones. One of the application essays I submitted to Macalester started out:

The first time I remember hearing about Macalester College was

when my mother mentioned some article in the *Pioneer Press* written about a survey that was conducted at area private colleges. The survey had to do with how accepting students were of different dress and habits at the surveyed colleges. If I remember correctly, Macalester came out at or near the “most accepting” position. Of course, that was months, if not over a year ago and I wasn’t interested in thinking about college; I was still getting my high school act together. However, the article was enough to plant the name in my head.

That was really about it. In the following years at Macalester, I encountered a litany of small liberal arts college names that I’d never heard of, or at least remembered. Williams? An Ivy, huh? Pomona? I was pretty sure that was a traditional Italian ice cream. I came to Macalester with little to no sense of the national liberal arts college market, and had no corresponding expectations about what Macalester would provide in terms of “academic excellence” or expensive facilities—though I do admit that the food was a cut above what I was used to in cafeterias.

I decided I would just apply to schools in Minnesota, with a preference for ending up in the Twin Cities to enjoy the rock music scene that I had been driving out to for several years. I applied to the University, and two private colleges that had been vaguely regarded as the most challenging in the state: Macalester College and Carleton College. I did spend a night as a prospective student at Macalester and Carleton: I had better food and conversations about the 2000 presidential campaign at Macalester, was confused by classes at both and partied at neither. I didn’t commit myself emotionally, as the issue hung on financial aid. I could only attend either private college if the cost wasn’t out of the

ballpark compared to the University. It turned out that Carleton waitlisted me and Macalester offered me a package just a little more in loans than the University.

I arrived at Macalester expecting to immediately click with political projects, but ended up eschewing the forms of political activity that I was most familiar with. Just before the end of high school, I fell in love with a girl. We continued to go out into my sophomore year at Macalester, leaving me feeling too outwardly marked as a straight guy to comfortably get active with the Queer Union student organization. Macalester was socially friendly to queer identity, leaving me without the antagonism of peer homophobia to get pissed off about. Aggravating these dynamics was my assignment to a dorm room with a roommate who believed that homosexuality is a sin; though he was not one to heave around words of condemnation, it seemed less than worthwhile to assert a bisexual or queer identity outside of a few spaces. What was a sharp and “productive” identity in high school thus deflated in the context of my first year at Macalester. I also fully expected to jump headlong into the student newspaper, the *Mac Weekly*. However, I attended an introductory meeting and was underwhelmed and slightly rebuffed for reasons I can’t remember. I didn’t actually get involved in much of anything that first semester. I was absorbed in managing and enjoying a romantic relationship for the first time. I even made friends with other students living on my floor and spent a lot of time “hanging out.” My encounter with Macalester College moved me to fashion new modes of self-identity and social practice.

I immediately began gathering a new, ambiguous sense of myself as working class, and started reforming my political consciousness through geographic identity and local activities off-campus. Part of my encounter with Macalester was coming up against a dominant cosmopolitan social space interwoven with concepts of liberal

politics and the middle class backgrounds of most students. I ran into a range of new social practices that the white kids seemed to think were natural, assumed parts of collective experience. These were people who responded more clearly to Macalester’s strategy of identifying itself as a “liberal haven,” and they quickly coalesced their individual backgrounds into a collective understanding of what that meant. For me, two obvious markers stood out immediately: hummus and travel. It seemed like everybody liked hummus (except my homophobic roommate, who was from International Falls, MN on the Canada/US border—another reason I didn’t want to antagonize him). I had never heard of it, and I didn’t like it. Hummus is obviously a trivial and benign example that stood in for a broad cultural dissonance I felt, and later identified as a class difference. I was also struck by the naturalized assumption that foreign travel is a good and necessary requisite for a sophisticated understanding of the world, which certainly wasn’t the case in my nuclear family and most of my extended family. Exceptions, like my aunt and uncle living in Switzerland, were regarded as interesting anomalies. About a year and a half into my time at Macalester, I took a class taught by Peter Rachleff (noted for his work on the Hormel strike in Austin, MN) on the history of the US working class. About that time, I was beginning to self-consciously adopt an ambiguous working class identity. For that class I wrote (while reading *Packinghouse Daughter*, by Cheri Register):

When Register writes something like, “We belong to a generation of working-class children propelled into the middle class by postwar prosperity, high education, and our parents’ determination to spare us the spirit-wrenching disappointments they endured as the youth of the Great Depression,” it feels like I

can almost plug the passage into my own history. But I never felt 'working-class' as I imagine Register did (and does). In a sea of accessibly cheap commercialism, I attributed differences to frugality. It wasn't denial, because I haven't felt any sort of unveiling—instead, perhaps, a ripening Perhaps more productively, this haze has reminded me what a shitty job the public school system did in many respects. It really burns me right now that they had us track down the names of our 'ancestors' for genealogy projects and didn't direct us to ask what [work] they did, and, more importantly, didn't help us make sense of that knowledge.

However ambiguous I felt my connection to the working class to be, especially in terms of my access to private higher education, there were clear differences in cultural capital and the dominant sense of collective self-identity between my peers and me. This became intensely clear in discussions around need-blind admissions, but surfaced often in moments like the comment in one classroom by a fellow student that, "Of course there are no working class people in this classroom" (more on this follows in the Shocking Death of Need-Blind section). This aspect to my encounter with Macalester, assisted by class-conscious curricula in many of the classes I chose, facilitated my growth of a working class identity.

Linked to this growing investment in the particular class history of my family, I developed a political practice around geographic identity and decentralist theories espoused by the Green Party. Some of the manifestations of Macalester's partially self-styled position within the elite liberal arts market are high percentages of international (about 14%) and out-of-state domestic (about 64%) students. The geographic was thus also built into the cosmopolitan

collective self-identity I described above, and part of my sense of otherness in reaction to it. This, combined with my initial interest in the Twin Cities as a place to site my schooling, made it easy for me to develop a sense of "local" pride and identity. In actuality, I came to Macalester knowing little about the Twin Cities outside of my occasional forays into Minneapolis to see rock concerts. Nonetheless, I had little sense of barrier between the campus and surrounding communities.

In my second semester I quickly transitioned from participation in the Macalester College Green Party to the Green Party of Minnesota and the Green Party of St. Paul. In the Green Party I found instant opportunities to pursue whatever political projects I wanted, in whatever capacity (from leadership to grunt duties) that I desired, an ideology that complemented the critical social theory I was learning in the classroom, and a high value placed on local, grassroots activity in contrast to the national politics focus of mainstream liberal and conservative politics. Green Party activity in Minnesota, with its focus on democratizing the institutions of everyday life and making decisions based upon an assessment of global inequality/ecological devastation (rather than in the narrow terms of markets and domestic political hegemony), has become my political home. It has been a highly productive space for exploring my identity-based investments in the Twin Cities and suburbs. It has also, in contrast to high-profile organizing struggles at Macalester, served as a crucial alternative source of political esteem in the way described by Paul Gillis,

In the early part of the period I was working in four institutions and selling ice cream; in the second part I was out doing fieldwork, or I was in [my hometown] having a *very* normal life ... all of those were supports for an alternative subjec-

tivity, one which I didn't have to sustain or fight for [in the academy].¹

Like Gillis, I drew from my investment in spaces that allowed for different subjectivities to sustain a contextualized critique of Macalester's political culture. Multi-generational relationships built with folks in the Green Party was a crucial source, along with my family and "distanced" identity background, of insight and hope for a politics that could supersede the limitations of dominant political culture at Macalester.

MARKET STRATEGIES AND POLITICAL CULTURE

As I've discussed so far, my particular social trajectory and relationship to academic institutions granted me some distance from Macalester's market strategies. Nonetheless, I quickly caught up on intense and frequent social references to Macalester as a liberal haven, the strategy that first brought news of Macalester to me in the form of that *Pioneer Press* article. It took me longer to understand the depth to which this strategy is intertwined with a deeper commitment to building and maintaining a position within the liberal arts market as evaluated by a discourse on academic excellence. Though connected, the two strategies are variously contested, and sometimes yield contradictions. In this section I hope to give a brief overview of how these two strategies are articulated and manifested at Macalester and merely point to the ways in which a political-economic analysis of liberal arts colleges can be important to understanding student culture at those institutions.

The market strategy with the greatest

1. Willis, P. and Gibb, R. (2004). "An Interview with Paul Gillis" in *Learning to Labor in New Times*. Ed. by N. Dolby and G. Dimitriadis. New York: RoutledgeFalmer.

impact on Macalester's political culture is the attempt to identify the school as a haven for liberals. Here, "liberal" refers to liberal politics and social values in the United States context of liberal vs. conservative. The liberal haven strategy is written in policy as the College's pillars, alongside academic excellence: "internationalism, multiculturalism, and service to society."² The context and meaning of these terms is provided in official literature through the examples of alumni like Walter Mondale and Kofi Annan.³ The College has attempted to communicate this message directly through, for example, full-page ads in the *New York Times* praising Annan for his Nobel Prize, and a direct mail piece to potential students contrasting Macalester to more high-profile liberal arts college choices by adopting the label "not an ivy."⁴

The goal of the liberal haven strategy is to leverage a commodity—political environment—against ivy league institutions that will always have more resources to compete in other areas—professorial salaries, student SAT scores, facilities—in order to create a lifestyle niche in the elite liberal arts market. This strategy has paid off with responsive descriptions being used by major higher education consumers' guides like the *US News and World Report*, which is featured prominently on the College's admissions website. *US News* catches the two main components of the liberal haven image: liberal social values embodied by "the cultural hippie look" and "eating from all four corners of the earth;" and a visible and consistent interest in politics and "saving the world."⁵ It also catches the recurrently

2. Macalester College Course Catalog, 2004-2005. <http://www.macalester.edu/academic/catalog/>

3. Ibid. <http://www.macalester.edu/academic/catalog/mhra3.html>

4. For a student's reception of this piece of marketing material, see Coleman, P. (April 27, 2001). "Zero in on Zapata: amazing Anthro major" in the *Mac Weekly*. Available: <http://www.macalester.edu/~weekly/2400feat.html>

trailing contradiction between a purported “open mind” and the low visibility of conservative students, professors and ideas on campus.¹

A measure of how successful this strategy has been in creating a feedback loop between actual student political desires and projected marketing image is the degree to which liberal collective self-identity has been naturalized in public student spaces, with the conservative contradiction repeatedly mulled over as the only remaining problem. A sampling of student newspaper considerations of Macalester’s political identity:

Is it really so liberal that it silences people like Joe sometimes, so students can come all out of left field with (relatively, intentionally) offensive comments?²

There is a distinct culture at Macalester, the kind that makes people ambivalently murmur “Oh...” when you tell them that you go here Above all, our politics are so far to the left, the main discourse on campus seems to center around reformism vs. radicalism, the Democrats vs. the Nader types.³

To people who complain that Macalester is too liberal my reply is that the rest of the world is too conservative.⁴

5. Stainburn, S. (Aug., 2004). “The World, in St. Paul” in *US News and World Report*. Reprinted: <http://www.macalester.edu/whats happening/press/2004/usnews/index.html>

1. Ibid.

2. Carrington, A. (11/30/2001). “Quietly and Mostly to Myself” in the *Mac Weekly*. Available: <http://www.macalester.edu/weekly/113001/quietly.html>

3. Ravdin, G. (2/20/2004). “Political ideologies, finger-pointing and granola stifle innovation” in the *Mac Weekly*. Available: <http://www.macalester.edu/weekly/022004/opinion04.html>

Although sometimes forgotten by Macalester students, the Presidential election proved that Republicans do, in fact, exist. This week, I tracked down Kramer Lawson ‘05 to find out first-hand what life is like for a Republican Mac student. I felt a bit sheepish about choosing a Spotlight subject based solely on his voting persuasion, but as I quickly learned, Kramer is a very good sport about being constructed as the Political Other.⁵

The naturalized status of the liberal haven image extends to student government, where majorities of the legislative body have sometimes found it an important priority to protect conservative students from the political desires of an assumed liberal majority. In the Fall of 2002, the student government refused to pass a resolution against the then-pending invasion of Iraq, or to allow a binding student referendum on the same resolution. Then-President of student government Haris Aqeel justified this action by contrasting the invasion as a political issue with “life of the campus” issues that are allegedly nonpartisan. His implication is that conservative students should not be officially reminded of their minority status: “These are issues Macalester students have united behind. We’re doing everything we can to see that this unity is not broken because students believe in different things.”⁶ This justification was raised again in 2004 against a resolution I put forward as an elected student represen-

4. Berning, N. (5/3/2002). “MCSG President reflects on Macalester community” in the *Mac Weekly*. Available: <http://www.macalester.edu/weekly/050302/opinion1.html>

5. O’Neill, S. (11/5/2004). “Kramer Lawson: College Republican Extraordinaire” in the *Mac Weekly*. Available: <http://www.macalester.edu/weekly/110504/spotlight.html>

6. Aqeel, H. (11/8/2002). “Student President responds to criticisms of MCSG” in the *Mac Weekly*. Available: <http://www.macalester.edu/weekly/110802/opinion4.html>

tative to prevent activity fee funds from being spent at Wal-Mart, as the student vice-president asserted that “we must represent all of the students” and not alienate a likely minority that would support Wal-Mart.

The discourse of liberal hegemony constituted in part by the liberal haven market strategy works to define the campus as outside of the set of legitimate targets for political action based upon liberal politics or critical social theory. The elevated response by members of student government is partially the result of a self-identified liberal majority fully secure in its assumed hegemony. I use “self-identified” and “assumed” not to dismiss evaluations that the political culture is liberal out of hand, rather merely to insist that the important fact is the tight, constitutive relationship between market strategy and campus political culture regardless of its objective content. In this condition, students act as authentic spokespeople for the school’s marketing campaign. Students ourselves reinscribe the shallow, unthinking, or intolerant liberalism we critique by stating it as a social fact, often in the term “the Macalester bubble.” The fact is that a very good web of critical social theory is taught in a variety of classroom contexts at Macalester. As a student, it was easy to select and take classes in the Women’s and Gender Studies, Sociology, Political Science, Humanities/Media/Cultural Studies, Environmental Studies, History and American Studies departments that offered more than sufficient theoretical ammunition for a radical democratic, anti-capitalist perspective sensitive to the intersections of race, class, gender, sexuality and more. Moreover, this web of theory is highly visible in campus political culture as the subject of many joking references about how overused “hegemony” is and even a special section of the student newspaper’s “Disorientation” issue, published at the beginning of each school year.

Yet, the combination of robust, visible

critical social theory with a dominant collective self-image as a liberal haven do not combine to produce broad support for student activist campaigns to—whether politely or confrontationally—make campus policy respond to critical assessment. Significant student resistance has arisen in response to proposals that would expel Coca-Cola from campus for its complicit role in the assassination of unionists on Colombia or institute gender-open/gender-blind student housing options. In most cases, this resistance does not clearly indicate a majority opinion against a proposal, but is sufficient, when combined with inaction by students who might support the proposal, to relieve any potential pressure from the administration to respond in a timely fashion. Dominant campus political culture operates according to the maxim endorsed by College President Brian Rosenberg during this year’s graduation ceremony: the academy should be home to the critic, not the critic itself. Indeed, the dominant attitude restated in many formulations of the liberal haven image is that it is immature or irresponsible (a danger, perhaps, to professional ambitions) to press the advantage of “liberal” consensus into immediate policy changes. The college is to be thanked for allowing us this privilege of existing in a liberal haven, not to be made the object of criticism informed by the range of critical social theory that appears to be dominant on campus; appropriate targets are national/international political issues manifested debates over the decisions of national governments. This deflection of social theory is most evident in the student government decisions mentioned above, but is also true around the classroom. Mark Laffey wrote in 1995 to the Progressive Economists discussion list, after a stint teaching in the Macalester Economics department:

My students were intelligent, well-trained, and inquisitive: they were quite taken—so far as I can tell—

with me and my classes. I gained excellent evaluations (which the college subsequently lost). Anyway, the point of my story is as follows: even given what I think were *very* congenial circumstances, my critical position served merely to confirm my students in their (not-so-nascent) neo-liberalism. I was evidence that 'critical' types were represented in the academy, and that, yes, they were interesting, but ultimately, this *is* college after all—a place where one is allowed to think different thoughts—before going off to Harvard Law and the corporate world.¹

Laffey's observation summarizes the way in which critical social theory is filtered into campus political culture through the lens of class identity and professional ambition. The liberal haven market strategy is crafted in such a way as to mark out a market niche in the idea of a critical political community and also channel much of the potential challenge to College institutions arising from such a community elsewhere, through the use of a national/local dichotomy around the category of legitimate political action.

Student attempts to contest this dichotomy built into the liberal haven image have been successfully marginalized. I helped to form the *Hegemon*, a small radical zine, in part specifically to critique the shallowness of liberal hegemony on campus, and to escape its endless idle restatement. It became a successful project, publishing biweekly about for about a year and a half so far. Articles have challenged the focus on and uncritical acceptance of the central state in campus political culture, the popular atten-

1.Laffey, M. (12/27/1995). E-mail to Progressive Economists' discussion list. Available in public archives: <http://archives.econ.utah.edu/archives/pen-l/1995m12.e/mbox1995m12.e.txt>

tion to presidential elections while ignorance of local elections/campaigns reigns, and more. This project has provoked some students to act the part of sophisticated messengers from the real world—a "real world" also coded in national politics terms of liberal vs. conservative. One student newspaper piece concludes:

I don't support need-blind admissions, I don't buy into everything cultural relativism preaches and I do not feel compelled to completely forgo shaving to validate my political viewpoints. My point is this and it is one that we at Macalester are all familiar with: we are a dynamic student body that is ridiculously liberal in comparison not only to other colleges, but even more so to the population at large. So don't hate those of us who have somehow wound up as conservatives, because in the real world, once we are outside this four-block radius, we will be re-categorized and relocated according to the local population as moderates at best and liberals at, well, some level anyways ... one day we will be rechristened, unbeknownst to us, into the liberal army to stand and deliver as your allies against the [conservatives] of the world.²

Here the student reacts to bring critical social theory to bear in arguments against fellow students, to argue for changing student political identity in response to theory. This assertion of the liberal haven as the end limit of legitimate self-understanding of collective student identity places into radical critiques into marginality. The liberal haven marketing strategy has very effec-

2.Macgillivray, C. (4/15/2005). "A Former Liberal, Now a Moderate on the Mac Spectrum" in the *Mac Weekly*. <http://www.themacweekly.com/article.php?article=252>

tively saturated images of Macalester in local and national publications and, partially as consequence, the dominant student self-image of collective identity.

The second dominant marketing strategy institutionalized at Macalester is the claim to academic excellence. Academic excellence is enshrined as the first pillar of values in Macalester's mission statement. The elite liberal arts market is extremely competitive in terms of academic excellence, which is most crucially measured in students' standardized test scores, the financial resources of a school, and its reputation. As reputation is inevitably a tough evaluation for a lower-rated institution to break into success through, the most manageable way to operationalize academic excellence for schools contesting for a high market niche is to focus on the former two standards. The market operates, to a significant degree, on the standardized, numerical rankings of publications like the *US News and World Report* to evaluate academic excellence. Besides occupying important communications real estate in the market as a major source of consumer information, *US News* and similar publications provide a shortcut for anxious schools to build market strategies around quickly-produced, numerical evaluations of academic excellence in contrast to more nebulous notions of "professor-student relationship" or "learning environment." As most of these numerical evaluations directly flow from the financial resources available to a school—professorial salaries, student:teacher ratio, library/science/technology facilities, etc.—they more or less cohere around an aggregate measure of spending per student. This makes the ability to compete in terms of academic excellence very contingent upon a school's financial resources and the market and sub-market it is attempting to land a niche within. Against ivy league institutions in the elite liberal arts market, competition is very expensive.¹

This sort of thinking is central to Macalester College strategy. Evidence is abundantly available in the document produced by the powerful Resources and Planning Committee in April, 2004: "Tuition Revenue at Macalester."² I have thoroughly analyzed the subordination of other values to academic excellence, and the essentially financial definition of academic excellence present in "Tuition Revenue at Macalester" in pages 32-37 in the student publication, "A Case for Need-Blind Admissions."³ The gist of "Tuition Revenue" is that Macalester's *US News* sub-ranking for academics stood at 15th of all liberal arts schools, but its sub-ranking of 49th in financial resources was depressing its overall ranking to 28th, with the conclusion that the College must sacrifice some degree of accessibility idealism in order to help close the crucial financial gap to score better in academic excellence. The publication of "Tuition Revenue" marked a resurgence in the attempt to use academic excellence as a marketing strategy. The strategy became viable in the early 1990s after a gigantic contribution to the school's endowment launched it into the giddy heights of momentarily holding the largest liberal arts endowment in the country, facilitating a rise in stature as a school of academic excellence. That contribution seriously declined in value (compared to competitors) in 1997 due to particular circumstances, triggering eventual drops in *US News* rankings and challenging the school's use of academic

1. For a list of Macalester's self-identified comparison schools: <http://www.macalester.edu/curricularrenewal/comparison-schools.pdf>

2. Macalester College Resources and Planning Committee (2004). "Tuition Revenue at Macalester." Published internally. Available: http://www.mpkb.net/macunion/system/files?file=rpcTuitionRevenue_comments.pdf

3. Defend Need Blind Admissions at Macalester (2004). "A Case for Need-Blind Admissions." Self-published. Available: http://www.mpkb.net/macunion/system/files?file=needblind_report_final.pdf

excellence as a strategy within the elite liberal arts market.¹ So long as the money is good, the academic excellence strategy is a reliable way to reduce dependence on riskier attempts to mark out a market niche around trendy disciplinary specializations or lifestyle values, both of which may suffer in changing cultural/political contexts. Macalester's relative financial decline around the millennium provoked new contradictions between academic excellence and the image of the liberal haven; "Tuition Revenue" report provided the rationale behind the Board of Trustees's and administration's determination to pursue the former at the cost of modification to the latter.

The success of the academic excellence strategy in propagating through student discourse is more limited and conflicted than that of the liberal haven strategy. Until 2004, it seems that most students perceived the professional advantages of a strong academic excellence reputation and the political trappings of the liberal haven to be compatible. One consistent exception has been the activism of some domestic students of color, who have repeatedly pointed to the antagonistic campus culture, lack of institutional support for institutional aspects organized under the pillar of multiculturalism, and low rates of admitted domestic students of color, especially compared to better conditions for all of the above at Macalester in the 1970s.² Nonetheless, academic excellence is closely wired into the professional context of liberal arts colleges: it posits a layer of pure scholarly skill, evaluated only by previously-credentialed professionals, that makes possible

1. Werner, M. (9/18/97). "Endowment takes loss of millions" in the *Mac Weekly*. Available: <http://www.macalester.edu/weekly/Archive/1997-09-18/news/n3.html>

2. For example: Nilsson, O. (9/14/2001). "Strategic misdirections hiding the dying canary" in the *Mac Weekly*. Available: <http://www.macalester.edu/weekly/archive/9.14.2001/opinion/sm.html>

the conferral of class credentials that forms the basis of the apprenticeship system, according to Ehrenreich. This conferral takes place regardless of any commitment to a political project that intends to do anything about the objects of scholarly investigation.

The need-blind admissions crisis between the two dominant marketing strategies, provoked by financial downturn and administrative maneuvering, exposed instances of the possessive investment by students in the image of academic excellence. The student group working in opposition to the attempts to retreat from need-blind admissions decided early on that arguing for a sacrifice in academic excellence would be too hard of a sell, even if the facts of global inequality certainly justified such a position. Though we argued instead that Macalester can maintain its current program of excellence (while trying to redefine excellence away from strictly financial and exogenous measures) and preserve need-blind, we encountered numerous students who would not tolerate any perception that academic excellence will suffer.³ This was the argument of virtually every student who supported the move away from need-blind. More subtle evidence of student identification with the academic excellence strategy was the frequency of assertions like this one from a student newspaper editorial: "Everyone is interested in upholding the values and principles that define this place. No one is interested in turning Macalester into Amherst."⁴ This assertion of essential community harmony around values and ambitions conceptualized the

3. For example: Riely, A. (10/22/2004). "Money Woes Already Hurting Mac" in the *Mac Weekly*. Available: <http://www.macalester.edu/weekly/102204/opinion02.html>

Or: Ball, N. (11/12/2004). "Considering All Stakeholders in the Need-Blind Debate" in the *Mac Weekly*. Available: <http://www.macalester.edu/weekly/111204/quietly.html>

4. Staff Editorial. (10/15/2005). "Averting Divisiveness in the Need-Blind Debate" in the *Mac Weekly*. Available: <http://www.macalester.edu/weekly/101504/ourpov.html>

policy disagreement as impersonal and framed by a common investment in professional ambition mitigated by a liberal sensibility. Assertions like this flew in the face of the obvious political conflict between a number of distinct actors and institutions, and the conflict “on the face of it” between images of the liberal haven and of academic excellence. Despite some contestation by students, the dominant image of academic excellence remains an important frame for public discussion and community identity.

THE SHOCKING DEATH OF NEED-BLIND ADMISSIONS

The campaign to defend need-blind admissions revealed to me most clearly the stakes of identity harnessed by marketing strategies to constitute dominant Macalester political culture. Conflicts in public spaces demonstrated a vehement resistance by many students to identify class distinctions within the student body as legitimate sources of political speech and pointed to a latent level of support for academic excellence as an ultimate prerogative that prevented sustained student resistance to the changed policy. Despite the experiences I had gathered with the limitations of Macalester’s “liberal” politics before the fall of 2004, the need-blind saga surprised me. I had already witnessed the division in campus political culture between immediate institutional decisions and opinions on national/international governmental politics in student government calls to maintain apolitical student unity around “campus life” issues. I was familiar with the lack of active support for attempts to reformulate campus policy in directions indicated by critical social theory. Nonetheless, need-blind admissions (alongside its companion policy, full-need financial aid awards) seemed deeply embedded in student understandings of Macalester’s liberalism. It was built into some of the

marketing materials which trumpeted Macalester’s generous financial aid policies, and was built into students’ expectations about what a liberal admissions policy was from the beginning. Yet, in the place of easy student solidarity in support of the policy, there was a sizeable core of absolute defenders, an equally sizeable group of moderates who were uncomfortable with using economic justice as a legitimate rationale but could be convinced on the merits of Macalester’s financial situation, and a strong minority who insisted that academic excellence was worth the sacrifice of nearly any social justice policy. Students who supported need-blind admissions found no base for immediate, militant activity to disrupt the proceedings of the administration’s campaign to end the policy, so we instead pursued a hugely time-intensive attempt to win on the grounds of civil discourse; or at least set the stage for militancy once the Board of Trustees made its move. As it turned out, the link between social trajectory/class identity and academic excellence was much more powerful than I expected.

Issues of identity in the College’s dominant notion of liberal politics and professional ambitions featured centrally in the administration’s campaign to retreat from need-blind and the student group Defend Need-Blind Admissions at Macalester’s (DNBAM) efforts at resisting it. The proposed new policy, need-aware admissions, was shrewdly formulated in an attempt to mobilize dominant liberal concerns for multiculturalism in favor of the change. The policy itself was designed to only rescind need-blind admissions to white, domestic applicants in the lowest admissible range of academic ranking (of course, how many to place in this category was left up to the administration to expand and contract). College President Brian Rosenberg opened up the campaign with his letter to the community explaining this, and citing a laundry list of popular suggestions for

increased funding (several of which the administration itself had balked at consistently and recently) that included “additional staff in Multicultural Affairs.”¹ There were unsubstantiated reports that the administration indirectly intimidated already-marginalized institutional spaces identified under the multiculturalism program, but also independent decisions by some racial justice advocates to support ending need-blind as a necessary compromise. In any case, the Multicultural Advisory Board divided sharply over the issue, deciding not to take any position. These developments left open the possibility for white students to feel guilt at supporting a policy that was being painted as wasting money that could go into better domestic student of color recruiting and Department of Multiculturalism staff. Though the most visible aspect of the public conflict over identity was class, racial politics formed a critical frame around what was deemed to be at stake.

Class identity politics, wrapped in discourses of collective self-identity, jumped to the fore of the conflict. Still developing my own sense of working class identity, I was distinctly uncomfortable naming myself as such within the public conflict. Nonetheless, I felt very clearly that working class students, however a minority, were being discursively erased from the collective “we” in letters, reports and articles about the issue. At the table where DN-BAM did petitioning in support of need-blind, I set up a separate sign-up sheet for students who had a great deal of financial need and felt they embodied the sort of access that the status quo policies provided. About fifteen students signed up, and we circulated some e-mails beforehand wherein I suggested we all stand up during the upcoming public debate as a gesture of vis-

ibility. At the debate itself, I was uncharacteristically nervous and trembling, anxious of the moment when I would walk up to the microphone and speak my piece, asking others to stand. In the meantime, Prof. Danny Kaplan, a leading proponent of the retreat from need-blind made the case for me, asserting that nobody can legitimately claim to be a product of the status quo need-blind admissions, because nobody knows where they were in academic rankings. A bit later I stood, hurriedly made a short comment about my father’s sacrifice of his physical health to give me opportunity, and asked those who received a lot of financial aid to stand up. Far more than I expected stood, and some clapping commenced.

I was glad that we pulled off the stunt OK, but it was the student newspaper’s response that galvanized my decision to embrace my limited claims to the working class confidently. At the end of the week, the staff editorial of the *Mac Weekly* proclaimed:

While we all have a stake in the need-blind issue, none of us can legitimately claim to be the product of need-blind admissions. We will never be able to retroactively apply a modified policy or determine which of us would have been left in that last discretionary pile ... Mortenson actually asked students who receive a ‘substantial amount of financial aid’ to stand up. While arguably a more concrete request, it is no less offensive ... it is [bad] to suggest that those students are intrinsically more valuable than students who can pay. One of the things that many of us appreciate about Macalester is its tendency to obscure class distinctions ... We’re supposed to be talking about economic diversity, not exacerbating class divisions.²

1. Rosenberg, B. (2004). “A Letter from President Rosenberg on Macalester’s Commitment to Quality and Access.” Available: <http://www.macalester.edu/qualityaccess/letter/page4.html>

Needless to say, I was floored at being tarred with the brush of class warfare in the very haven of liberalism, and that the student newspaper would so brazenly laud the invisibility of class privilege in obvious contradiction of supposedly hegemonic social theory. Five letters to the editor were printed in the next issue that blasted the *Weekly's* staff editorial, but all were written by people who were working directly with the DNBAM campaign and/or were members of the small core of radical campus activists. Though these letters made important, eloquent points, without knowing what other letters arrived on the *Weekly's* doorstep I hesitate to make any conclusions that the student body rejected outright classism.¹ I formally asked the *Weekly* for an apology and retraction, and despite the show of support in the next issue, no editors responded to my request.

The following issue included two student letters reaffirming the principle that membership at Macalester demands the resignation of working class identity. Joanna Shreve, who identifies her economic position with her mother, a poorly paid adjunct professor at the University of Minnesota, wrote:

No one at Macalester, no matter how poor, can claim to be of the lowest classes, because we are all getting a very good liberal arts education Regardless of how much we might want to flaunt our supposed lower-class status, none of us is justified in doing so. The truth is, most people at Macalester can't tell who is poor and who is not, beyond whether or not they

2. Staff Editorial. (10/15/2004). "Averting Divisiveness in the Need-Blind Debate" in the *Mac Weekly*. Available: <http://www.macalester.edu/weekly/101504/ourpov.html>

1. Various authors. (10/22/04). Letters to the Editor, *Mac Weekly*. Available: <http://www.macalester.edu/weekly/102204/letters.html>

own a Coach purse.²

Claire Flaxman wrote, in response to a letter that expressed experiences of discomfort being working class amongst "a bunch of rich people when you're not":

People of different political opinions (conservatives, Republicans, maybe even moderates) and those who have benefited from a capitalist system (the so-called rich), are not only not tolerated, but treated abysmally here at Mac. ... The goal of Macalester is not tolerance or acceptance to a point; it is tolerance, period I am a student who does not receive financial aid, and probably would be inaccurately dubbed as rich. I belong to a middle class (perhaps upper middle class) family in which both of my parents have worked extremely hard. That being said, on numerous occasions people have tried to make me feel guilty because of my situation But you know what, I don't enjoy the fact that my simple ... presence at Mac is a reason for the class divide I know I'm lucky; nobody here has to tell me that, thanks. But that's not a valid reason to blame me, or to perpetuate the class divides, at least not in my mind.³

These two responses indicate different ways in which class trajectory is embedded within concepts of collective self-identity by market strategies in the context of a higher education system wired to repro-

2. Shreve, J. (11/05/04). Letter to the Editor. The *Mac Weekly*. Available: <http://www.macalester.edu/weekly/110504/letters.html>

3. Flaxman, C. (11/05/04). Letter to the Editor. The *Mac Weekly*. Available: <http://www.macalester.edu/weekly/110504/letters.html>

duce class stratification. That Shreve and Flaxman can both, from different economic backgrounds, identify with a middle class trajectory by virtue of joining this liberal haven in pursuit of professional credentials, is remarkable. Though I know far too little about either writer to make strong conclusions about their social locations or political identities, I think Betty's analysis of race/class intersections around class advancement is useful here. Betty spoke with young Latinas who performed middle class identity as they class advanced through academic performance. Nonetheless, these girls maintained distance in their class identities by drawing resources from their racial identities, manifested in different attitudes and different decisions about what sort of extracurricular activities to take up. That many white students at Macalester, of various class positions, might identify with a class-flattened collective student identity may be a component of white privilege. It certainly harmonized with the official position. In a meeting demanded by students who organized a small sit-in, College President Brian Rosenberg asserted that, "The only working class people here are the staff." Taken together, all of these defenses against "class divisions" represent a profound strand of possessive investment in class advancement as collective self-identity.

I argue that dominant market strategies—certainly within the context of class reproduction, but distinct in the particular circumstance of Macalester College—serve to interpellate potential/incoming students into appropriate subjectivities that smooth over contradictions which might be exploited as political weaknesses in the College's institutional practices. The image of the liberal haven works to channel the "political"—especially the potential politics of critical social theory—into channels of tolerance, civil discourse, and national/international governmental politics. The discourse of academic excellence calls pro-

fessional ambition into the student subjectivity, offering a flattening of class identities and justifying a narrow, market-based evaluation of academic programs. Both processes, reaching most students before they arrive on campus or even decide which school to select, have significant influence in shaping collective self-identity, reducing the legitimate space for alternative political or class subjectivity. To directly criticize the quality of the liberal haven, or suggest that academic excellence be evaluated on a global scale is to risk being perceived as rejecting student subjectivity as a whole. An anonymous student wrote to the school's small radical zine, the *Hegemon*, this year: "There's sometimes a fine line between disliking something about Macalester and disliking Macalester. If you cross it, I don't want to hear about it, and you should leave ... I like it here. I like my friends. I like the things I do. Who wants to hear it if you're only looking for dead ends?" A recognizable, dominant discourse of legitimate political criticism/action/identification is likely present in all locales in the West; at Macalester College, the specific boundaries drawn by that discourse are highly influenced by its particular formulation of market strategies.

Though a large majority of students who attended an official student assembly on the topic voted to maintain status quo need-blind admissions policy as proposed by DNBAM, the Board of Trustees voted unanimously, on a rapid schedule, to retreat from need-blind admissions and allow a variable percentage of white, domestic students to be admitted on the basis of their ability to pay full tuition. At the time this seemed like a potential victory: the illusion of student consent was stripped from a decision made by an essentially conservative ownership structure (in which the wealthiest donors make policy while highly-paid administrators take the heat). However, though students clearly had a better chance at reversing this decision than

stopping the invasion of Iraq, fewer students took visible protest action after the Trustees' decision than marched in peace parades or camped out in peace camp the year previous. I became deeply disappointed in student and administrative political culture, especially the seemingly hard-wired inability of the liberal political haven to formulate a practice of local democracy.

THE FUTURE: SUGGESTIONS FOR INTERVENTION

The fundamental problems facing attempts to intervene between student political identity and Macalester's market strategies is the College's deep investment in market competition, its conservative ownership structure, and the workplace-imposed limits on the political activities of professors. So long as Macalester intends to compete on the terms of the elite liberal arts market, the range of available institutional choices will remain extremely narrow: any potential loss of revenue can quickly be construed as disastrous, turning decision-making into essentially an exercise in risk management. A related problem is that the Board of Trustees hold absolute power over College policy, and is constituted chiefly by alumni who have donated the largest sums of money, essentially granting them owner status. Finally, professors operate under a shadowy system of self-censorship in order to keep their jobs; only professors who prove they can avoid making waves are likely to attain tenure. As Prof. David Graeber, under threat for his political beliefs at Yale, stated, "I actually tried to avoid getting involved in campus activism for many years. I figured we all have to make our little compromises, mine would be: I'd be an activist in New York, and a scholar in New Haven."¹ These problems are unlikely to be successfully challenged in the near future.

Nonetheless, the fact that market strategies, which play an important role in con-

stituting student political culture, are dependent on identity-building processes means that they are susceptible to the politicization of those identities. In other words, the structural basis for campus political culture is not enough to simply propel the cycle of its reproduction. I think this leaves space open for intervention, especially as a project to consider identity formation in a local context. Professors, though limited by their unofficial terms of employment, can intervene by setting up the classroom as a model for radicalizing the local and by setting aside curriculum time for analysis of College institutions. Student activists should set up networks of support that militate against our market-constituted identity as students and invest in local decision-making practices (like student government) as if they are national governments.

Teachers can intervene in the dichotomy between critical theoretical perspective and the institution in which it is taught at the classroom level. The dominant transmission model of teaching privileges what is taught (curriculum) without attending to how it is taught or the relationship between curriculum and teaching or between student and teacher. This model ignores the spatial dimensions of the classroom and the embodied social trajectories of people in the classroom as potent aspects of the learning experience. bell hooks writes, "Trained in the philosophical context of Western metaphysics dualism, many of us have accepted the notion that there is a split between the body and mind. Believing this, individuals enter the classroom to teach as though only the mind is present, not the body."² In many Macalester classrooms, the curriculum, narrowly viewed as verbal

1. Frank, J. (5/13/05). "An Interview with David Graeber. Without Cause: Yale Fires An Acclaimed Anarchist Scholar." *Counterpunch Magazine*. Available: <http://www.counterpunch.com/frank05132005.html>

2. As cited in Florence, N. (1998). *bell hooks' Engaged Pedagogy*. Westport, CT: Bergin and Garvey.

content, is good. What can interrupt the collective self-identity of student as apprentice to authority is to acknowledge the independent bodily needs of people in the classroom: stretching, eating, taking breaks, etc. Only one or two professors in my experience have made food a regular part of the classroom space. Another intervention between theory and institution is to take time to politicize social identities in local context. This means granting students space to listen to each others' stories of social trajectories to understand the particularities and contradictions that might pull apart notions of collective self-identity. This sort of a conversation may be especially useful in the context of considering identity formation of youth in other institutions around the College: other schools, workplaces, or prison. Finally, many classes should include a component that analyzes the school's implication in systems of power as an example of the micro-level functioning of social structures. Ehrenreich suggests a curricular program for understanding the academic institution, including, "Topics in University Financing: A four-credit business course tracing the development of the current two-pronged approach to financing institutions of higher learning-tuition increases for the students plus pay decreases for the staff."¹ That sort of activity would run a greater risk of inviting intimidation, but is the ultimate goal: critical social theory that refuses to be channeled towards safe targets.

Risky behavior by professors must be matched with student organizing to establish support networks that operate out of the collective self-identity assumed by market strategies. Such networks should extend beyond campus geographically to work in an institutionalized manner with community and political groups in the im-

1. Ehrenreich, B. "Class Struggle 101." Originally in *the Progressive* magazine. Reprinted online: <http://www.ips-dc.org/nickelanddimed/classtruggle.htm>

mediate community, and temporally back in time to create a multi-generational constituency of students and alumni to counter threats that conservative alumni will withdraw funding. The liberal haven image posits Macalester as a place to learn about the real world before going out into it; the apprenticeship model views undergraduate education as a short interlude before more important stages of professional advancement. Both discourses trap students in four years of isolation with limited incentive to build student institutions that might maintain institutional memory beyond their presence at the school. This severely limits the capacity of students to organize in support of faculty who are threatened because of their political activities or perspective.

A fellow recent graduate, Yongho Kim, has started the Minnesota Public Knowledge Base (www.mpkb.net) as an independent web repository for records of activist campaigns, hosted by the student group ¡Adelante! In collaboration, I initiated the Macalester Student Union (www.mpkb.net/macunion/), which aims at developing a database of current students and alumni in order to support student activism with a broad constituency. College offices (athletics, development) already nurture their own multi-generational constituencies to further the school's interests. Other students and faculty have worked on a progressive student-alumni association. In addition, students should integrate their on-campus activism and schoolwork with that of local community groups and political campaigns. My experience working locally with the Green Party was incredibly important to leaving space open to develop a political identity at a distance from dominant campus political culture, and for developing alternative sources of political success to avoid cynicism and burnout. Encouraging work has been done by a group of students in this area by helping to pull together the Twin Cities Activist Round-

table. All of these projects might work against the grain of the expected student position by creating a broader context for campus political struggle, challenging the dichotomy between classroom and real world.

Finally, student activists need to invest in local decision-making institutions through collective action. At Macalester, the administration has conceptualized fair participation in making campus policy in individualistic terms, appointing one or two students to campus committees as representatives of “the student body” rather than creating spaces wherein policy conflict can be visible as conflict between politicized groups of students. Likewise, students interested in dismantling shallow liberalism have not taken student government seriously. The vast majority of those interested enough to win seats in student government in the last several years have conceptualized democratic representation as an exercise of skilled individuals finding solutions that represent all of their constituents. Electoral districts are assigned to groups of academic majors and residence halls, creating “constituencies” that act as barriers to seeing politicized groups and within the student body, reinforcing the dominant notion that student government operates (or should operate) on supposedly non-political, “campus life” issues. If we accept the premise that one important dynamic of the liberal haven strategy is to constitute a collective self-identity of consensus in opposition to the messy, political world “out there,” then bringing organized political contest into local decision-making makes sense as an intervention strategy. The goal is to create more holistic political identities, that self-consciously incorporate the very local as a legitimate aspect of the political realm.

About a year ago, I participated in starting Common Platform, an attempt to start a student political party around a few common issue positions. We were almost

successful in securing a majority in student government, and the involvement of Common Platform representatives pushed student government to play an important role in certifying the majority student opinion on need-blind admissions by holding a student assembly. However, enthusiasm overall among student activists in tackling student government is low, and no repeat performance was organized in the last semester. One change that would facilitate this strategy would be to institute proportional representation for legislative body elections, thereby electing representatives directly by aggregate political perspectives in the student body, rather than the restrictive districts. Continuing the use of student assemblies also helps by insisting on an active, physical investment in the local as a site of political contest for the common good, in complement to the “interest group” politics of student organizations. Intervening in local, student decision-making processes in a programmatic way would manifest a material challenge to the collective self-identity of liberal consensus.

These suggestions are clearly incomplete and cursory; I invite you to join up at www.mpkb.net/macunion and share your thoughts.