


1986-89

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Reflecting upon the Caucus is for me a bit like reflecting upon an event like giving birth. Your work/body is taken over by larger forces. Your biography divides itself into pre and post. You can never again be who you were. And yet what is the Caucus on Social Theory? What's to be learned about it from that short period of "history" during which I worked as Coordinator (1986-89)?

Our name: It was a period in which we spent time discussing our name. That term "social," in our title, how was it understood? Why use a term so ambiguous? Other affiliates were straightforward. For women, the Women's Caucus. For Minorities, Minority Affairs. For ... what, the Social Caucus? For social animals?

Then there was the issue of that "theory" in our name without either "practice" or "praxis" receiving an equal mention. We played out a range of possible changes. They were hopelessly clumsy. Discussion faded. It had only been important to a few of us, it seemed.

A final question was merely skirted: Just which theory or theories were we about? Marxist? Socialist? Critical? Shouldn't we be making clear choices? With any one of those terms in our title, our identity would become much firmer. But the issue was raised only once a propositio the journal. It was little discussed, quickly dismissed. What should this tell us about who we are?

Our history: And our track record? From year one, we had an annual publication, a few-times-a-year newsletter, a slate of Caucus-identified presentations — plus a membership of 65. During 1986-89? An annual publication, newsletters, a slate of presentations. Oh yes, the journal was more professional; the newsletters, most wonderfully visual. The presentations, however, were the same in number and range; some were ambi-
tiously choreographed; others, laid open “audible silences.”
And our membership? It varied between 75 and 90. What should
that tell us about who we are?

Outside perspectives: And outsiders — those NAEA-ers
who make no move to be part of our activities, how did they view
us? A strange question I guess, but I was surprised by how
frequently “outsiders” made reference to us. Always it was with
a certitude far greater than any the Caucus provided. I’d hear:
“socially conscious”, “left of center,” with the suggestion of new
directions, alternative perspectives, critical readiness. It was
good to become? Then I’d worry. Weren’t we being viewed as more than we could
ever become? But I’d listen again, and too often I’d recognize the
speaker as one who, through knowing asides, fancied himself the
“friend” of progress and youth and risk, all while holding steady to the partyline. So what should that tell us about who we were and are? Nothing? What indeed? That the Caucus is
ambivalent, static, a symbol of convenience? A siphon for the
energies of authority resistant liberals, tough-as-nails deconstructionists, sentimental new age-ers, and unnameable others? A protected playground for not-so-big fish in need of a
little-er pond? A romantic alternative without the discipline or
power of coherent direction? Maybe so. Doesn’t sound like
much, does it? But then again, is that really all that inconsequential? Let’s look again.

Something: Where there had been nothing, something was
and is still and its ten years later. If the Caucus is but an
alternative space, that’s still an accomplishment. Many a school
art room plays the same role. Both are much needed. The
ambiguity of just-what-is-art and just-what-is-Caucus only
allows for a richer mixture of members and of debate.

A protected playground? But isn’t that just what NAEA-ers celebrate as the environment essential to “creative process”? An open ended exploration. A freedom of expression. As for
those not-so-big fish, they’re the glue that keeps the group going
from one year to the next.

An alternative without discipline? Yes, we are certainly
that. But collectives that shape themselves towards tightly de­
dined futures, quickly become alternative tyrannies. Their so­
called “cutting edge” research becomes a weapon of authority,
not insight. In our stronger moments, we do so much more: we
reach towards dialogue. We move through ideas to touch psyche;
through biography to engage with concept. In place of “new”
answers, we create a space in which to pose better questions. Or
at least that has happened once or twice for me.

Revolution? And that’s the really important step isn’t it?
Where the questions asked change not just our ideas but the
processes by which we pursue them?

An important change in group process occurred for the
Caucus when affiliates were accepted into the NAEA. It wasn’t
easy. Without Bob Berson’s leadership, Ed Feldman’s support
and the Woman’s Caucus’ forward action, it would have taken
much longer. The major reason we fought for it was to be able to
control our own agenda. The obstacles were deadening. An
NAEA Executive Director answered our requests that while we
might know a lot about education, we could hardly know about
“cross-reference scheduling, horizontal programming, non-con­
flicting time slots, set-up time space, as well as other map­
planning requirements.” An NAEA Program Coordinator re­
 fused us autonomy because, said he, he wanted to contain
“bureaucracy.” However, said he, “in order to not
smother good ideas,” he would create the title of Coordinator of
Special Interest Sessions … and then add it to his title of Program
Coordinator, thus “solving” our problem.

In the language of hegemony, such conflicts are dismissed
as “mere” red tape — as problems of a purely mechanical nature.
The stances of the Program Coordinator and the Executive
Director are tossed off as instances of “administrative style” —
problems purely of personality. Hopefully, we know better.
These were and are issues of social structure: of central control vs
local representation; of instrumental efficiency vs democratic
choice. When the affiliates gained autonomy, it was deeply
important, not just for their individual agendas, but for our
professional association as a whole. And like any such wins by
the less-than-powerful, they have to be continually regained. The notion of an Affiliate's Day was initiated under Feldman's presidency. In the transition to the next NAFA president, the idea got lost. Too much changing leadership among the scattered affiliates; too little history to hold the idea alive in the collective imagination. The concept had to be re-defined, re-rationalized, re-organized anew. And then too, the freedom to generate programs with conceptual depth and collective continuity means little if we fail to exercise it. Always this demands of us an enormous supply of strategy, flexibility and endurance. Maintaining values vivid and formative within a society where bureaucracy is the essential mode for ordering our occupational personae requires nothing less. And it goes to the heart of holding our activities at a National Convention in touch with that larger social purpose. As someone said: “Real revolution is invisible.”

Because this is our tenth anniversary year or because we are prescient or because we are in a perpetual state of healthy doubt, the Caucus began the task of self-definition at the last conference. Our newsletter, published three times this year, has featured a chain of letters in which eight of our 122 members have reflected upon what the term “social” in Social Theory means. Two of the sessions on this year's (conference) program continue that dialogue.

How could I possibly sum up or characterize the contents of that correspondence? The authors are all active and long standing members of the Caucus representing its great diversity of orientation and style. Does this mean the center has fallen away? I think not, for what endures long after the letters have been set aside are the traces and echoes of individuals with familiar faces, gestures, and ideas — friends in art education. These are not polished articles but private musings for an audience of thoughtful, committed, and passionate people — an audience which is also engaged in the struggle to forge personal and social meaning out of the work of art education. It is a mixed audience of teachers, professors, and administrators seeking to broaden the definition of the profession for it seems as if so much has been left out. They adjust easily to the different narrative styles of our correspondents — a good yarn about a violent taxi cab driver and his passengers in NYC, a lengthy monologue woven of feminist theory and Lacanian notions, a passionate utterance putting politics on center stage. The Caucus accommodates them all.