

THE UNIVERSITY

Class Warfare

By Geoff Henley

Last spring a handful of English faculty fired the first shot in an ongoing war that would utterly transform academic discourse on this campus. As in any war, different sides tell different stories, and the battle of E306 generated conflicting tales and outright distortions as academic activists began to stretch the truth about the whole enterprise of E306.

This deviation from standard composition instruction generated fights among students and faculty and good copy for local, state and national media. The battles produced rhetoric but few comprehensive accounts of the course's controversy, analyses of its content or examinations of its proponents' motives for the class.

From the beginning, the handling of E306 raises questions about its proponents' intentions. Chairwoman Linda Brodkey wrote to the Lower Division English Policy Committee, in a memo dated March 20, 1990, about her plans to revise E306. Mentioning discussions in the Faculty Senate and the University Council about diversity, Brodkey felt it necessary and possible for the LDEPC to "make a substantial contribution to the university's efforts by making 'Writing about Difference' the topic in all E306 classes."

She wrote that Dean Standish Meacham and department chair Joe Kruppa were receptive and that she had begun talking to other colleagues about how to organize the course. "More recently," she continued, "I've talked with Jim Kinneavy about how to prepare assistant instructors, since we'll need to 'reorient' experienced and [sic] as well as 'orient' inexperienced instructors to conduct the kinds of inquiries such a course will require." Clearly students would not be the only ones to have their perspectives changed under Brodkey's plan.

The professors involved with changing E306 revealed their commitment to democracy and openness after their revisions were postponed. A cursory look at the minutes of Feb. 22, 1991 — open to public scrutiny in Parlin 108 — reveals the startling intent of the English faculty.

When the question came up as to what the graduate students and faculty

could do to implement Brodkey's "Writing about Difference" without the administration's approval, defiant faculty provided some entertaining answers on how to circumvent the University's standard procedures.

One assistant instructor suggested open rebellion. "There would be plenty of graduates who would be willing to teach that 306 course and go the wall, with just the verbal agreement of support [from the faculty], that we will do, as a department, the democratic thing, which is to teach the course as it was conceived and take the consequences."

Sharing this spirit of bold collective action, Professor Dolora Wojciehowski asked what the administration could do if the faculty decided to teach E306 as well.

But by far the most ingenious idea was put forth by Professor Wayne Rebhorn, who asked "why we didn't package it so that it looks like the ordinary 306, but still use material from the present syllabus. They won't know unless we tell them that we're doing so." Brodkey told Rebhorn — who just won a \$750 prize for a dissertation on Machiavelli — that they could count on someone else telling the administration.

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The administration was not the committee's only opponent. The revisions faced internal dissent as well. The Lower Division English Policy Committee did not welcome Brodkey's proposals unanimously. Going back to April 3, we find at least one faculty committee member troubled with the revisions. Her new syllabus contained a few appellate and Supreme Court opinions, Paula Rothenberg's *Racism and Sexism* and critical essays on social policies.

The Rothenberg text ignited an immediate response. The text, as Brodkey herself writes, is an "introductory sociology textbook, not a reader." Despite this fact, she thought its format amenable to composition writing. The content of text hardly received public scrutiny. Proponents of the course hardly mentioned it. And opponents only had to quote the book's first definition to win media debates. Among the definitions of *Racism and Sexism*:

- Racism involves the subordination of people of color by white people.
 - Sexism involves the subordination of women by men.
 - Racism and sexism can be either conscious, intentional or unintentional.
- The narrow conclusions Rothenberg drew made the opposition's task easy. The text also comprises short stories, essays and poems from marginalized

groups. One example, *He Defies You Still: The Memoirs of a Sissy*, recounts the problems of a gay youth growing up in a Catholic school. Another story gives a partisan's account of sexual harassment. And a poem titled "is not so gd to be born a girl" asserts that women suffer universally because some Third World cultures infibulate women (a process the poetess tells readers is "sewing our vaginas up with catgut or weeds or nylon threads to ensure our virginity.") Even the chapter heads provide slanted and explosive terms, like Part V: "The Prison of Race and Gender: Stereotypes, Ideology, Language, and Social Control."

The conclusions all flow the same direction. Whether poem, essay or report — be the author black, female, Chinese or American Indian, they all say the same thing: the white male conspiracy jilted them. None of the writings suggest otherwise, and do not provide the necessary balance to provoke the minds of incoming students. Freshmen will be assailed by polemic, and unfortunately will emulate the style, argument and themes of their texts. No longer will their writing reflect uninhibited inquiry. They will be forced to model their prose after combative literary activists.

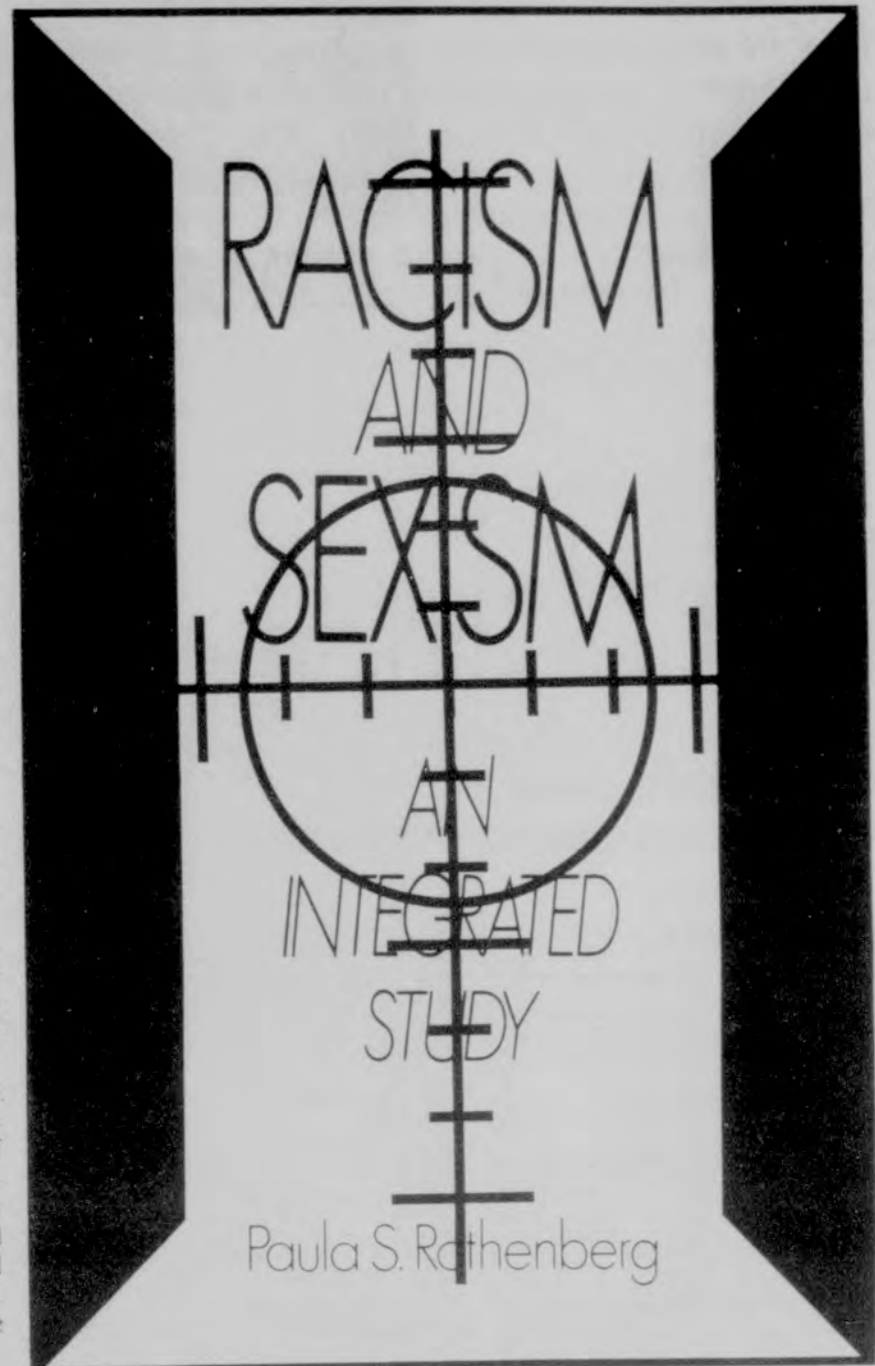
Given the text's focus, LDEPC member James Duban wrote on April 4 that he would like the committee's April 3 minutes to indicate the "serious reservations which I voiced about the potential undermining of pluralism entailed in such a single-text policy."

Duban stood alone and abstained from supporting the text. Having missed the earlier meeting, but equally hesitant to standardize such a text for freshmen, John Ruskiewicz made four different counterproposals on April 17.

Ruskiewicz first moved that the Lower Division English Policy Committee director compose a syllabus on "difference" to be "tested in selected sections during the 1990-91 term" by assistant instructors interested in the topic. The LDEPC would then evaluate the new course to determine if it should receive more general implementation. The motion failed 4-2.

The second motion stated that any new E306 syllabus should encourage "diversity of approaches to teaching writing, including process methods that emphasize genres or modes." Again the motion failed 4-2.

Next Ruskiewicz moved that instructors of E306 who wish to use the current syllabus for "Rhetoric and Composition" may continue to do so for the 1990-91 term. Once again the LDEPC



struck the motion down 4-2.

Finally, Ruskiewicz moved that the "LDEPC adopt *Racism and Sexism* among the choice of other texts." The minutes reflect that Ruskiewicz had previously suggested a list of anthologies that "offer a wider spectrum of issues and a more balanced perspective on contemporary issues."

Like the three preceding motions, the LDEPC torpedoed the last by a 4-2 vote. The advocates of diversity were of one mind. Proponents of the Rothenberg text dug in their heels and categorically demanded that the book be required for every single class. They argued that diversity of opinion would be provided by the Supreme Court cases. Linda Brodkey even gave the facile response that the Supreme Court "could hardly be accused of being on the left."

News broke out about the committee's vote, and the battle began in earnest. Then the summer semester came, allowing a more active debate. By the middle of June, state and regional media picked up the story and E306 opponent Alan Gribben, a professor of English, became a national figure for suggesting to an alumna that the English Department be divided in two: one for tradi-

tional composition and English literature, the other for critical and ethnic studies.

Calling the votes to standardize E306 "the most massive attempt at thought control ever attempted on campus," Gribben would later regret his actions, as he became subject to numerous private attacks and hostile memos from colleagues and student activists, some of whom may have frozen his career opportunities by besmirching his name in other English departments.

The administration soon jumped into the fray. In a letter vilified by student publications like *Utmost* and *Polemicist*, President William Cunningham wrote on July 11 that, "After careful considerations, the Department has decided that the course will not be modified this fall."

Later the administration conferred with Kruppa and Meacham, and they agreed to postpone the new E306. Student activists cried foul to what they perceived as administrative meddling in faculty affairs, constituting threats on academic freedom.

Allegations of intervention may be correct. And one can conclude that Meacham did not support the reversal.

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contrary to what Cunningham would assert to the University Council the following September. However — whether Meacham came to this conclusion on his own, or whether the administration leaned on the liberal arts dean — students, faculty and taxpayers should be grateful.

Perhaps the most miserable part of the conflict took place last fall, when an anonymous group called the Ad Hoc Committee on the Right-Wing Subversion of University Autonomy sent a 15-page memorandum to the American Association of University Professors titled "An Interim Report on the Attack on English 306 and the National Association of Scholars." Hoping to draw the the AAUP into the battle on their side, proponents of the course wrote an account of the E306 conflict that escapes reality.

The authors assert that the liberal arts have fallen prey to a right-wing conspiracy, and that local opposition to E306 was a part of a national movement to purge radicals from the academy. According to the authors, the conspirators led by President Reagan, even wielded macroeconomic policy against the "radical enclaves" in the academy.

With such an imaginative account, it is no wonder that the American Association of University Professors acted. AAUP President Barbara Bergman promptly contacted a UT law professor.

The law professor, who had examined the Rothenberg text, wrote her a nine-page memo telling her that she had heard an extreme account of one side of a complex dispute. He then went on to chronicle the E306 debate and the blunders faculty proponents committed.

"On both the competence and the and the indoctrination issues, the proponents forfeited much of their credibility when they adopted the Rothenberg textbook," the professor wrote. Even when Brodkey tried to improve the course by using different authors, who still do not balance issues but rather take account of them while refuting them, the proponents erred again by continuing their support of *Racism and Sexism*.

"By continuing to defend the Rothenberg book, even after they dropped it," he writes, "the proponents of the course imply that they cannot recognize either indoctrination or incompetence when they see it." The law professor made several more pointed criticisms — too many to recount at this time.

It would be comforting if the E306 debacle could be chalked up to incompetence alone. But throughout the debate, advocates showed intellectual dishonesty and contempt for academic inquiry. Future attempts at socializing minds to manufactured models should be met with the same opposition. The rights of academic freedom, broad though they may be, do not include selective representation of truth. ■