6.

A Voice in the Workplace

In this thesis I often use the words "democracy" and "power," but in interviews, when people spoke to me about how different constituencies related to various kinds of decision-making at the college, the most common word I heard was "voice."   The idea of a voice in the workplace is an evocative metaphor, and perhaps clearer, more concrete, than the abstract concepts mentioned above. As I combed through my interview texts, however, I came to see the references to voice clustering around three different aspects of meaning, which I would sum up as being at the table, feeling free to speak, and having one's voice count. It is worth distinguishing among these significances, even as they overlap and interconnect, because it takes different tools to solve different kinds of problems—and because eliding the distinctions among these meanings of voice can be one way of perpetuating anti-democratic situations.

Being at the table

And she [Jane Oldpresident] agreed to have a [Fair Labor] task force, made up of faculty and staff. And students. You know, in hindsight, though, there was an absence of any Unnamed Contractor. I wonder why. Why wasn't someone from Unnamed Contractor at the table? An employee, versus, you know, their management.

-senior administrator

So I think, if, in fact, the Community Council happens—which is that next step after Staff Council, where you get people from all walks of life on the campus [laughs] come together to hear each other—that will go a long way, because it will add some legitimacy and power to the other voices. Because if you're all sitting at the table and the voices are equal—that's the understanding, that all voices are equal, around that table—then it automatically adds some power and legitimacy to those typically un-empowered voices. And at this point the Faculty Executive Committee is completely unresponsive to requests, anything, that come from outside.

-exempt staff member

We've integrated most events on the campus, so that what used to be a faculty luncheon is now a faculty-led luncheon, but it's open to anyone on campus who wants to sign up. And we've initiated a series of presidential luncheons where we have interesting people talking, we provide free lunch to people, but the deal is in order to get a ticket, you have to put together a table that involves students, staff, and faculty.
<div align="right">*-senior administrator*</div>

In his book *Power/Knowledge*, Foucault analyzes how the traditional spatial arrangement of Western courts—and the orientation of the subjects with respect to a table, in particular—reflects and reproduces a particular ideology about neutrality and justice. Foucault says that the judge's position behind the table renders them neutral and distant from the parties in the case, and further that the table imputes an authority to their decisions. (8) I was reminded of these insights when I began to notice how often the trope of the table—sometimes metaphorical, sometimes literal—occurs in these interview transcripts.

Of course, the most immediately notable difference between Foucault's court table and the various tables invoked in the epigraphs to this section is that the judicial table imputes unequal authority, whereas the college tables seem to represent equal participation: "that all voices are equal, around that table." As though to drive the point home even further, some people even spoke to me of "round table" events; others referred to different groups coming together at "the same table," and people often used words like "all" and "together" in talking about the table. The symbolism of the table is about even-handed communication among people of different, perhaps unequal, positions.

Like Foucault's table, the college table is often a space of decision-making, a space where work is to be done, and in that sense being "at the table" may be seen as the first

step to having influence in decision processes—a necessary but not a sufficient condition. The clearest example of this is the fact that no Unnamed Contractor workers were present at decision-making table of the Fair Labor Committee, as a senior administrator notes in the first quotation above.   Mere membership on the committee would not have guaranteed the contract workers a voice—in the other senses of the word—in the Fair Labor decision; their absence from the table, however, structurally excluded them from the process. Even if the table lives up to its promise as a space of interaction on equal terms, this will only be meaningful for those who have a place at it. I use the table here, then, not only in the same literal, spatial sense as Foucault, but also as a signifier for a broader category of structures of differential access to decision-making processes. Official college committees place people at a table of some level of decision-making; so do governance organizations, like the staff and faculty representative bodies; on some level, so do activist organizations like the Fair Labor effort, insofar as they produce meetings between activists and decision-makers; and, in the strongest sense, so would a union, which places people at what is generally known as a "bargaining table." As these examples highlight, not all tables confer the same degree of decision-making influence upon those who sit at them; a great deal depends on the agreed-upon context of the table, its rules and the scope of authority granted to its decisions.

Many tables are spaces of decision-making, but all tables are fundamentally spaces of encounter. When people brought up the Mapping Process that Joe Newpresident initiated—and many people spoke about this—they most often spoke, not about helping to shape the college's future, but about the opportunity to interact with members of other constituencies, and the discovery of issues in common. Many people suggested that it

was partly as a result of those Mapping Process conversations that the idea developed to combine the Support Staff Advisory Council and the Committee on Administrative Issues together into one body—although others pointed out that some leaders in both groups had already begun to initiate that project before the Mapping Process came about. The growth of this new Staff Council, of course, was itself an opportunity for encounter that many described as pivotal in shifting their perceptions of the power relations and the links of commonality or solidarity within the college community.

I think the second quotation, above, illuminates why the table is needed. It is not by happenstance that discourses about tables are often about unequally positioned groups meeting together. When a group with more power exercises its option to ignore those with less power—when, for instance, "the Faculty Executive Committee is completely unresponsive to requests, anything, that come from outside"—a table provides a structural remedy. Perhaps by its neutrality and equalizing structure—or perhaps, most basically, just by acting to authorize everyone who has a seat around it—"it automatically adds some power and legitimacy to those typically un-empowered voices." One way or another, the table is imagined to be structurally equal—and you need that kind of frame for your democratic encounter to be successful, because in the world outside the table, pervasive inequalities will shape and inhibit all inter-group interactions.

It is, of course, important to note that the Community Council this staff member envisions is critically a space of decision-making as well as of encounter. This is the gap between such changes in governance structures and the presidential luncheon initiative that a senior administrator describes in the third quotation. While their content is unspecified, I take the implication to be that the talks by "interesting people" will not

generally focus on issues of contention in the college workplace; instead, the luncheon

talks are designed to create a neutral context for interaction across constituency lines,

leading to community-building. These two projects, the Community Council and the

luncheons, invoke the symbolism of the table for very different goals. Both use the

equalizing potential of the table to facilitate increased understanding across

constituencies, but because only the Community Council involves a table of real

decision-making, it has broader potential for democratizing the institution.[1]

In her book *Inclusion and Democracy*, Iris Marion Young writes, "Where there are

structural inequalities of wealth and power, formally democratic procedures are likely to

reinforce them, because privileged people are able to marginalize the voices and issues of

those less privileged." (34) Structural problems call for structural solutions. In the

second quotation above, the staff member proposes that bringing to bear the weight of the

table idea can help to transform the power relations in college governance. Perhaps it

will indeed do a great deal of democratizing work. But for all its symbolic and discursive

force, the table on its own is not an infallible tool, for getting to the table is only the first

step in exercising one's voice.

Feeling free to speak

So we have to really promote the sense of voice with the staff members that
are on committees. So they can feel like their voice is valuable enough. But
it's intimidating, I know, for a lot of staff members. And I've even been in a
group of mostly faculty, and I was the only staff member I think, and then
there was a few students. And I kept going like this [makes motion of being
about to speak] to speak, and everybody's just speaking over each other, not
listening to each other. And that is frustrating too, in committees—they can't

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[1] The Mapping Process seems to represent an interesting middle ground on this continuum. More so than at the luncheons, real decision-making was on the table—however, the projects at stake, which centered around defining the mission, vision, and values of the college and its long-term plan, may or may not have been framed in ways that would address the most urgent concerns of the institution's least empowered constituencies. Also, as always, Unnamed Contractor workers were not at the table.

wait to say back to the other person what they want to say, and so they're thinking so hard about what they're going to say next that they don't listen to the other person, and that's frustrating too. The communication that sometimes faculty have with each other, I don't understand it. And so finally I just sit back. I'm just like, "Okay, I'm not going to talk." And I'm a big mouth! So I can imagine somebody who's not, [laughs] how they must feel in those situations. They'd never say anything. Because I couldn't jump in. I couldn't. In this one meeting, this one situation, I just—And it was, um, it wasn't about anything like, it wasn't labor, it wasn't.... [laughs] It was so not relevant to my employment at Pseudonym. And I just couldn't even get a word in.
<div align="right">*-exempt staff member*</div>

People in positions that don't have a lot of power, I think if they felt empowered and they felt like they had a voice without being fearful for their job, I think that would help a lot. I think that's still an issue. Because we can have a voice as a community, but you as an individual in your department, in your office, with an individual problem—you know. You have to feel the support of the community to be able to have a voice.
<div align="right">*-exempt staff member*</div>

Another word I heard over and over again, counterposed to voice, was fear. People spoke to me about others not wanting to speak up about workplace issues for fear of some form of more or less severe social sanction: losing their jobs, getting in trouble with their supervisors, or in some subtler way being perceived as abrasive. One non-exempt staff member told me that combining the staff governance bodies might help alleviate these kinds of fears by creating strategic exempt allies for non-exempt staff members:

AB: Do you think that's a good idea, that combining of the support staff with the [administrative staff]?
—Yeah, I think it is. I think, you know, it's hard for some people to be real vocal about things, and maybe with a little more support from the administration side, it might help.
AB: Why do you think it's hard for people to be vocal?
—They're afraid of the repercussions. You know, if they go to a meeting and say what's on their mind, it might get back to their supervisor or something, and whether it's the supervisor's fault or somebody else's fault, I just think they're afraid to say anything to the general public.

Most people prefaced these remarks with caveats that they themselves felt comfortable speaking, but that they perceived others in slightly different situations to be

more fearful—and this is not altogether surprising, since after all these were the people who agreed to speak with me. People most often attributed explicit fear of losing their jobs to the Unnamed Contractor workers, and indeed these were the workers who expressed by far the most apparent apprehensions and hesitations in agreeing to participate in my project. We conducted many of these interviews in what felt like a somewhat furtive manner during breaks from work, and some—though not all—of these workers said to me that their supervisors would be nonplussed to learn of their participation. Only one person other than a contract worker expressed significant concern about the confidentiality of their involvement in the study itself, and this person was an administrator. However, a number of people suggested, as does the speaker above, that some support staff as well as contract workers fear that speaking up about workplace issues could cost them their jobs.

One key question in the analysis of these statements is how much legitimacy the speakers accord to others' fear. Some, like the person quoted above, take no particular stand, simply claiming that people feel fear, without opining about how justified the fear might or might not be. But others do make some attribution of truth value, and their responses fall at various points on the spectrum of respect for the validity of other people's perceptions. For instance, it is probably more respectful to believe people's fears to be grounded in experience, but now out of date, than to believe them to be altogether irrational. One exempt staff member told me of a recent experience at a meeting with staff members, where those who had been involved in campus politics lately and experienced recent changes in climate firsthand felt much more comfortable

speaking than some who had developed fears in an earlier period when the administration

had been less open:

> And the interesting thing was hearing someone who's been on campus for, I
> think, close to twenty years, and male—and everyone would say, several of us
> would say our piece, you know, speaking freely, and this person said, "I just—
> I'm sorry, I can't. I can't speak." "And why is that?" "Well, I'm afraid that
> my name might be associated with some of these thoughts, and I don't want
> repercussions." [laughs] It's like, "Hello, we don't live there anymore." That's
> not what the environment is about now. And in some ways, I think people in
> the past were actually afraid of being fired for expressing themselves.

Apparently some fear holds over from the past—but the speaker suggests that this fear,

while understandable in the historical context, is simply unnecessary in the current

environment. The question of legitimacy here is critical, because the solution to a

problem of actual employee intimidation is different than the solution to a problem of

unwarranted fear. It is an identification of whether the problem resides with the more

powerful or with the less powerful actors in the relationship.

The speaker in the first quotation attributes greater freedom of speech to

administrators than to support staff, and indeed this accords with the general assessment

that administrators occupy a higher position in the hierarchy. Some described this

differentiation in the structural language of contracts, a vocabulary more easily

quantifiable than the ambiguous conversation about fear. One exempt staff member, for

instance, told me:

> I know that I can say a lot and not fear for my job, just because I know what
> my terms of employment are: first I have an implied contract that lasts a year,
> and if the college wants to fire me they gotta buy me out of that contract.
> Hourly staff don't have that.

Again, note that the framing of the problem greatly informs what is to be done. This

staff member went on to suggest that the college consider giving all employees the same

kind of contract that administrators have, to drive out fear by establishing structural

security. This is a very different kind of solution than retraining supervisors to avoid

creating intimidating working environments—a project that some senior administrators

told me was underway. I do not mean to suggest that there is anything mutually

exclusive about these two constructive projects, or, for that matter, about these two

understandings of what prevents people from feeling free to speak. The two problems

might even operate in tandem, as might the two solutions. What I do intend is to

highlight the range of possible understandings and why it is important to make clear

precisely what we mean when we talk about barriers to democracy.

Even in a conversation that takes place in the apparently straightforward language

of contracts, there is room for ambiguity. Recall from Chapter 3 the question of

administrative staff aligning with one or the other side of the binary opposition of power.

Compared to support staff. as the above speaker notes, administrative staff enjoy a

relatively secure employment situation. Another exempt staff member pointed out,

however, that the position of administrative staff is tenuous when opposed to that of

faculty:

> I mean, I've said to the Vice President of Finance over the years—not the
> current one, but past ones—or my faculty colleagues, "Look, you're the only
> folks who have a union around here. Because you're the only folks who get to
> talk about your compensation as a group without concern or fear." I think part
> of that, of course, is just related to tenure. If you're a tenured employee, you
> can say whatever you want to. My first appointment letter said, "While your
> contract is annual and renewable, you serve at the pleasure of the President
> and Board of Trustees."

Note the reference to the idea of unions as a structurally empowering system that would

counteract fear. A union would do this by actually shifting the parameters of the power

relationship between workers and their employer, in kind of the same way that changing

the terms of employee contracts would do—whereas a project of retraining supervisors is different in that it operates solely on the plane of intentions. Another way of thinking about this distinction is that unions and contracts (and tenure) affect the structure of workplace relationships, whereas training affects the content of these relationships.

Interestingly enough, among the staff members I spoke with, administrators were at least as likely as support staff—perhaps more so—to describe personal experiences of feeling uncomfortable speaking up. Theirs was not so much a specific fear of dismissal or concrete reprisal as a general unease with the propriety of complaining, connected to the meaning of their roles as administrators. One said:

> The administrative body is in an awkward position, in some ways. Another example of "We shouldn't complain, but—" We're, you know, we don't have the same kind of respect or status as faculty, and our role really is to be supportive of the institution and to be good advocates for the institution. So there's always this kind of lingering question, how critical can we be or should we be? … [Y]ou don't want to become labeled as less than supportive of the institution as a whole. And for the most part I think this is a pretty good place for that. You know, I think the feedback that I get anecdotally or through the grapevine at times is I'm a very well-respected employee around here, highly valued, seen as competent and reasonable—but I sometimes think that I am way too vocal. Way too outspoken.

Perhaps this anxious uncertainty reflects, in part, the college's liminal position on a trajectory of corporatization. Whence, after all, comes the ideological grounding for a voice in one's workplace? It comes, on the one hand, from the unique tradition of faculty governance in higher education; and on the other hand, more broadly, from the labor movement. In the logic of business, it makes sense for people to exert influence only over decisions to which they bring relevant professional skills; the fundamental value is efficiency, rather than democracy or justice, and everything must be subordinated to the most efficient delivery of the service. This administrative staff member, who says, "our

role really is to be supportive of the institution…. I sometimes think that I am way too vocal," feels their voice inhibited not by anything so clear-cut as a threat of firing, but rather by a set of hegemonic expectations about the meaning of professionalism. On this kind of subtle level, corporatization is able to do significant covert work to undermine democracy, even while furthering overtly democratizing projects.

But the corporate ethos has no monopoly on this kind of undercover silencing work; the traditions of the academy can act equally insidiously. In the first epigraph to this section, another staff member describes an experience of intimidation in a college committee meeting. Again, as the speaker points out explicitly, it is not a matter of fearing for their job. In this case, it is the hegemony of faculty's aggressive modes of communication that lead them to the point where they give up on asserting their voice in the meeting. Faculty, in numbers and status, dominate the meeting and dictate the norms under which the discussion will take place, acting out the scenario in which, to return to Iris Marion Young's words, even "formally democratic procedures" reinforce existing hierarchies "because privileged people are able to marginalize the voices and issues of those less privileged." (34) It is again easy to see why, in the face of this entrenched traditional inequality of voices, the democratizing potential of corporatization can be very welcome, even though notions of efficiency and professionalism so severely limit its scope. One exempt staff member described to me how their own expertise made a college project successful, and noted:

> If we'd have done that when I first got here with the faculty that were
> involved, I would have had virtually no say in the whole process. I would
> have been um, just been like you know a gopher. Now we have a different
> group of faculty involved who respect the professionalism that I and others on
> our staff here bring to the table.

A discourse of professionalism, unlike a discourse of academic erudition, is one to which not only faculty members but many staff members also have access.

To return once more to that first epigraphic story, about the meeting: It is notable that, in setting up the narrative, the speaker recollects being the only staff member in the room. Although they then qualify this statement with "I think," the fact that they bring it up in describing the situation reveals that a feeling of being alone was important to their experience of frustration and intimidation, whether or not another staff member was actually present. As the speaker in the other epigraphic quotation points out, "You have to feel the support of the community to be able to have a voice." A sense of isolation is silencing.

Having your voice count

> *—Staff and administrators sit on the Compensation Committee as well. There's always been representation, as long as I've known it, on the Compensation Committee. And, staff and administrators are able to attend the faculty, the general faculty meetings that occur once a block. Quite a few of them do. They can't vote—only faculty vote on issues that come before the faculty meetings—but they certainly can sit, and they speak, as well.*
> AB: Does the Compensation Committee—does it make decisions about compensation, or recommendations?
> *—They make recommendations.*
> AB: Okay. To...?
> *—I believe the FEC [Faculty Executive Committee].*
> AB: Okay. And then does the FEC make compensation decisions?
> *—No, they only make recommendations to the President, who makes recommendations to the Board of Trustees.*
> <div align="right">*-senior administrator*</div>

If the first step is getting to the table and the second step is feeling free to speak, the third step in exercising a voice in your workplace is having your voice count in decision-making. Senior administrators I spoke with tended to speak about their commitment to openness and listening to voices from all constituencies, but there is an important

difference between having the decision-makers listen to you and having, yourself, power

to influence the decision. To be fair, these administrators in fact seemed happy to

concede actual hard power to the organized staff on some issues. Several people

recounted to me the story of how Joe Newpresident, when representatives of the staff

brought to him their list of proposals after the staff retreat, responded—like the good

witch enlightening Dorothy at the end of *The Wizard of Oz*—that the staff need not have

asked his permission, that they had had the power to make most of these changes on their

own all along. To their proposal of reordering the senior administration so that the

Human Resources director would report to him rather than to the Business Office,

however, he gave a flat no. And on the issues that marxists and businesspeople agree are

basically most real—the issues of money, and specifically of how money is exchanged

for labor—the model remains that of the senior administration listening, but yielding no

hard power to its constituencies.

This is the difference between a union and the Staff Council or even the Faculty

Executive Committee. As a senior administrator acknowledges in the above quotation,

the FEC is one level closer to the decision than the staff are, but the actual hard power of

the decision remains in the hands of, technically, the Board of Trustees.[2] If this account

is true, then despite an opinion I cited earlier, the faculty cannot in fact be said to really

have a union—for even they make recommendations rather than actually negotiating with

the administration, relying on the latter's good will and willingness to listen rather than

bargaining with the threat of withholding their labor power.

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[2] This is where the notion of hard and soft power becomes, I think, a little cut and dried for the situation—because while technically the President makes recommendations to the Board and the latter makes the final call, if Pseudonym is anything like Swarthmore then in ordinary cases the President can be said practically

Sometimes people are reluctant to talk about institutional dynamics in the blunt language of power because it seems to undermine the discourses of civility and familial community with which some characterize the college dynamic. One senior administrator bristled in response to my question:

> *AB: Do you think—beyond the policy change in the wages—do you think the process has had any lasting effect on the way workplace issues are talked about or the balance of power in the institution?*
> —Well. Unnamed Contractor's gone through some management changes recently, and I think with the Unnamed Contractor workers, what affects them more than anything else is just who their supervisors are. And I don't know the new people very well. I don't know that the, quote unquote, "balance of power" is an issue. I don't know that it ever was. I think there is awareness that we want to compensate workers fairly.

I think that the speaker is right that for many subcontracted workers events in the world of the workplace are more salient than events on the scale of the institution—and as I argued in Chapter 3, this may be in part a function of the way that contracting seems to distance its workers from the sense of campus-wide community shared by other college constituents. Nonetheless, power operates on scales both large and small, within the workplace as well as around it. Indeed the two can be linked together, as the staff member I quoted earlier in this chapter noted:

> Because we can have a voice as a community, but you as an individual in your department, in your office, with an individual problem—you know. You have to feel the support of the community to be able to have a voice.

Who your supervisor is certainly has a major effect on your experience of the workplace, but it is not the only factor that has an effect. It is also important what recourse you think you have, if any, when things do not go well with the supervisor, how you interact with your co-workers, how much leverage your supervisor is able to bring to bear on your

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to wield some of the hard power, for it takes a rare and extreme situation for the Board to actually vote counter to the immense authority of the President.

behalf when you need it, and what kinds of pressures bear on your supervisor as well. Furthermore, it is not only for contract workers that these balances of power might be relevant. Power operates in every workplace, for everyone, all the time.

Democracy scholar Iris Marion Young draws a distinction between external and internal processes of exclusion. The external processes of exclusion are those that might prevent someone from, in my terminology, getting to the table—including such prosaic facts as the places and times at which meetings are held. (54) Internal processes of exclusion are those which operate once someone has gotten to the table, to nonetheless exclude them from decision-making—such as having people "dismiss or patronize their statements and expressions." (55) I have chosen to use two distinct categories—feeling free to speak and having one's voice count—in lieu of this one because I want to draw a distinction between gaining access to processes and gaining access to actual decisions. Perhaps this is an issue particularly salient to the realm of academic politics, where extensive committee processes are the cultural norm but are often widely understood to be ineffective or merely advisory to the actual decision-makers, and where administrators may invest strongly in a self-presentation as open and benevolent but yield no actual hard power. I wanted to represent voice in three distinct aspects because I believe that each represents a separate way in which staff members' voices may be disenfranchised in the institution—by being excluded from democratic processes altogether, by being intimidated into silence, or by having their voices finally discounted by decision-makers—and so campaigners for campus democracy must take action on all three fronts. Note that a union, because it deploys the hard power of workers, can be a powerful strategy for overcoming all three kinds of obstacles to a voice in one's workplace.