

MEDIA TACTICS AND TASTE: ORGANISING THE SOUTHERN LABOUR MOVEMENT AT HIGHLANDER FOLK SCHOOL, 1938-1946

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Abstract

Between 1938-1946, the Highlander Folk School's socialist faculty fostered a collective identity formation process among union workers and officials by teaching these students to write autobiographical statements of purpose, dramatics, music, and journalism.

This historical essay considers the role of media education at Highlander in the labour movement that emerged in the American South just prior to World War II.

Based on archival materials, it asks why the interpersonal media of labour theater and music were more popular and effective as organizing tactics among the labour students at Highlander than the mass medium of journalism. Within a discussion of social movement theories that considers how and why social movement participants act as they do, the argument presented here suggests that American labour movement activists acted on the basis of their prior experiences and affective connections to those contexts.

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Beginning in 1932 in the Appalachian mountains of south central Tennessee, the Highlander Folk School served as the organizing site for the American southern labour movement. Operating on the pragmatic philosophy of “connected learning,” which held that collective identity formation depended on participants’ shared recognition of a common stake in otherwise individual problems, the Highlander faculty organized and led classes to train labour activists to organize union shops around the South (Adams 1975; Glen 1988; Horton 1989).¹ This essay considers how Highlander used various forms of media to organize the southern labour movement. Recognizing that the movement participants’ choices about organizing tactics were central to the development of a collective identity for the labour movement, a key question here asks how and why the labour students who attended workshops at Highlander chose to use certain media over others through their education at Highlander.

Highlander founder Myles Horton had developed the concept of connected learning while working as a missionary for the Presbyterian Church through the YMCA in tiny Ozone, TN, during the summer of 1927. Then, as later, his pragmatic philosophy of social education held that individuals could and should solve their own problems by sharing their collective expertise with those problems, rather than by accepting abstract solutions from beyond their spheres of experience and control. Instead of presenting expert solutions to his students’ problems, Horton listened to the attendees discuss issues such as crop failure in order to define them. Their strong response to this collaborative educational model encouraged him to think that other Appalachians, including local labourers in disputes with their employers, could also develop solutions to their problems out of their own common experiences. With this early approach to connected learning, the folk school’s curriculum helped movement participants to bridge the gap between individual agency and collective action.²

The four types of media taught at Highlander included written autobiographical statements of purpose, dramatics, music, and journalism. In the following analysis these media practices are interpreted in terms of how well the students at Highlander adapted to them and why. When successful, they fueled the action of the American southern labour movement at Highlander prior to and during World War II. Yet, these media skills were presented to Highlander students by the faculty with differing degrees of success (Glen 1988; Horton 1989).

In this moment when World War II was ending and the Cold War was beginning, the Highlander educational program was adapted to support the war effort within the labour movement. At the same time, these contingencies diminished the value that the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) held for Highlander’s grassroots socialism and organizing methods by 1947 (Glen 1988).³ By 1942, tensions with the CIO were leading the Highlander staff to position itself as more patriotic and, implicitly, less “communistic.”

This shift appears in the school’s recruitment literature. For each session, the Highlander faculty recruited labourers and local and regional union officials through a recruitment letters. A 1942 form letter for recruiting workshop and residential session students prepared for Highlander Education Director Mary Lawrence’s signature underscores Highlander’s awareness of the moment. It stated, “The war has added many difficulties to the job of running a union ... Your men in

the armed forces look to build your union stronger in the next year—otherwise they will have lost some of that democracy they are fighting (sic) for.” The letter continues, “The labor movement is also going to play an important part in the peace that follows the winning of the war. As the students and faculty came together at Highlander, the stakes for the movement grew higher as the war’s end came into sight.”⁴

A June 1946 summary of the history of Highlander prepared for the U.S. Department of Labor tied the school’s mission to the war effort and patriotism. Quoting formal policy developed by the Highlander Executive Council and staff, it read: “The purpose of Highlander Folk School is to assist in the defence an expansion of political and economic democracy. Since unions are basic to the achievement of democracy, the strengthening of unions through education is the union’s primary task.”⁵

On another front, the northern-based CIO’s support for racial integration during this period helped to spark the southern resurgence of anti-communism against Highlander. What had begun as anti-“Bolshevism” against the labour movement during the Wilson Red Scare of World War I became a more distilled version of Cold War anti-Communism during the southern desegregation movement (Glen 1988). Highlander’s publicly socialist stance served as a lightning rod for these attacks as they moved toward the integration of the folk school’s classes beginning in 1944, especially by mainstream white newspapers in Tennessee and around the South. But that did not prevent the movement from producing what Giddens (1984) calls new social “rules” to allow labour unions to exist within dominant society. In that moment as the Left was being harnessed and the labour movement was being shut down, how and why did union activists at Highlander choose certain media over others as tactics for organizing the southern labour movement?

Highlander Folk School: History of the Curriculum

To understand this question, it is useful to understand the genesis of the grassroots philosophy and related organizing practice that Highlander was offering the CIO in 1939. By 1932 Highlander had opened and its work in support of the labour movement had started. In this project, Horton put into practice the influences of his early teachers, who included Jane Addams, John Dewey, Reinhold Niebuhr, and Robert Park. He had encountered them on an academic tour of Union Theological seminary in New York, and the University of Chicago and Hull House in Chicago during 1929-1930 (Glen 1988). Following this experience and a visit to Denmark to study folk schools there, Horton resolved to “help people learn to solve their own problems in their own way” (Tjerandsen 1980, 139).

Once home in Tennessee, Horton and his friend, Don West, founded the Highlander Folk School at the small village of Monteagle, Tennessee. A year later, they were joined by Jim Dombrowski and John B. Thompson, former classmates of Horton’s at Union Theological Seminary (Adams 1992; Glen 1988; Horton 1989). Describing the school’s subsequent successes with the labour and desegregation movements, Aldon Morris (1984) has called the Highlander Folk School a “movement half-way house,” because it nurtured the participants of these developing social movements through its residential seminars and extension programs at its mountain campus in southern Tennessee (139).

Early on, Highlander's formal relationship with the Congress of Industrial Organizations showed great promise for supporting the school's worker-centered leadership of the labour movement. Beginning in 1937, Highlander was contracted as an official labour school for the CIO and engaged to help in its "Dixie Drive" (Thomas 1964). From 1937 until 1947, the school's staff conducted union-related seminars, residential sessions, and extension work with CIO-related union organizations such as the Textile Workers Organizing Committee (TWOC), the United Rubber Workers of America (URWA), and the United Auto Workers (UAW), as well as for the Southern Conference for Human Welfare (SCHW), and the American Federation of Labor (AFL).

Across the periods of the labour, Farmers' Union, and desegregation movements – the three main organizing programs at the school between 1932-1962⁶ – Highlander's educational program included four general categories: Community-centered activities, special education projects, field workshops, and residential workshops. As early as 1938, the Highlander staff had developed its already existing residential workshop curriculum to include classes on parliamentary law, labour journalism, union problems, labour history, and economics. Other classes were offered on music and labour drama (Horton 1989). Between 1948-1954, Emil Willimetz, a former student and photographer at Highlander, operated a film centre to teach film-making there (Glen 1988). As they variously reflected the folk school's pedagogical framework, these classes provided a template for the content of the later Farmers' Union and desegregation movement residential workshops in the school's major post-labour movement organizing efforts.

Beginning in 1939, the faculty developed a series of summer residential writing workshops to complement their regular schedule of residential sessions. Where the music and dramatics curricula had been designed to "improve organized labor's public image in the South" (Glen 1988, 56) through performances before labour audiences, the writers' workshops were intended to support a mass mediated outreach to prospective union members and other unions. As it developed in 1940, the concept of the Summer Workshop for Writers reflected an effort to train union staffers to relate more closely to other southern labour unions. Its 18 students came mostly from southern mine, rubber, office, and newspaper unions. In spite of curricular and financial problems in 1940, the 1941 and 1942 sessions continued. When low enrolments in 1943 caused the workshops to be merged with the school's general curriculum, the faculty again included labour journalism as a staple of the Highlander curriculum but apart from the workshop schedule.⁷

Race and the Institutionalisation of the Southern Labour Movement

As the war wound down, anti-communism re-emerged as the nation's dominant ideology.⁸ At the national level, the Taft-Hartley Act made unions sign anti-communist affidavits to get access to the National Labor Relations Board. In this tense context, the CIO claimed a place in the mainstream Right as a way to compete with the AFL to recruit returning servicemen. Thus, as part of Operation Dixie, the CIO's main recruiting drive in 1947, the union expelled two million members in eleven unions for alleged communistic leanings. Unions that stayed in the CIO were forced to expel communist members.

One effect of these expulsions was the destruction of the more racially integrated unions, namely the Marine Cooks and Stewards, and the International Longshore and Warehouse union. In all, national politics of labour opposition complemented southern politics of race: "The attack on Communist-controlled unions destroyed or neutralized important forces of opposition to white supremacy," according to Fairclough. "Purged of the Communist-led left, the CIO lost its crusading zeal and in 1955 made peace with the more conservative and often blatantly racist AFL unions" (Fairclough 1995, 142). In this transition to the Right, the labour movement effectively stopped being a social movement, becoming instead the contemporary institution of "big labour."

As part of their conservative transformation, the CIO also withdrew support from Highlander affiliates, including the Southern Conference for Human Welfare (SCHW) and the Southern Conference Educational Fund (SCEF). They also broke ties with two other labour schools, the Southern School for Workers and the Georgia Workers Education School. By 1950 all of these organisations had closed for lack of union patronage (Glen 1988).

In this important moment between the still vital labour movement and changes to come, the balance was tipping toward institutional control. As a result, Highlander's workshops and the journalism classes its faculty held there during regular sessions represented the last moment of grassroots organisation in the American southern labour movement. With the CIO's push for institutional, rather than worker-based values and practices in its curriculum, Highlander was quickly forced to concede its socialist-inspired pedagogy of connected learning. By 1945, the CIO had begun to distance itself from Highlander. As it sought control of Highlander's educational product, the union also avoided association with the folk school's Leftist – and allegedly communist – values (Durham 2002). In that year, the union imposed its own top-down, institutional philosophy in the form of CIO-developed courses and faculty in place of Highlander's grassroots-driven organizing curriculum. As a result, the CIO's administration assumed positions on the Highlander executive council and changed the curriculum to avoid conflict over courses on "history" and "economics" (Horton 1989). Still, by 1947, the school's relationship with the CIO had soured irretrievably.

The impact of this conservative reaction was felt at Highlander. But, instead of killing the school, losing the CIO's support sent its faculty looking for another movement to foster. In 1953, the folk school reached a transitional point, when its formal relationship with the CIO ended, because the Highlander faculty would not submit to the CIO's definition of anti-Communism as "democratic."

Throughout this time, autobiography, music, drama, and journalism were constant elements of the labour educational process at Highlander. The goal of the following analysis is to understand who the students were in terms of the media they chose to practice. By studying the use of movement organizing tactics in this way, it is possible to understand the process of collective identity formation that Highlander engaged in within a particularly ground-up process. The questions raised within this historical context resonate with established theoretical perspectives. Relating this case to a more general, theoretical framework serves to illuminate the patterns described here; conversely, establishing such a dialectic between theory and evidence can strengthen existing theoretical understanding (Giddens

1984). The following section of this essay reviews concepts of social theory and collective identity formation. The discussion then turns to an interpretation of Highlander's media-based curricula, its students, and the sense they made of their work with media at the folk school.⁹

Theory of Structuration

Highlander's ideological conflict with the CIO reflected a top-down/bottom-up split over the location of power. In the same way, theories of how social movements form and act have traditionally split between privileging either structure or agency. Within the literature on collective identity formation, the question of how individuals become a collectively organised movement has been challenged by this inherent dichotomy.

One exception, Anthony Giddens' (1984) theory of structuration, treats the two as a more fluidly continuous process. As it applies to social processes, including identity formation, this "duality" of structure in interaction with agency accounts for the "both/and," rather than the "either/or," of structure and agency, according to Jasper (1997). Jasper explains, "Rather than being either individual or collective, ...it is both" (48). By more generally treating communicative acts within social movements as parts of Giddens' "dialectic of control," interpreting culture means understanding individuals' uses of media as a way to bridge the divide between the individual and the collective (Giddens 1984, 15-16; Jasper 1997, 48-49). According to Baber (1991), Giddens' "*duality of structure...implies the transcendence of the structure/agency dichotomy. Structure represents the rules and resources, and exists only in the constituting moments of social systems...*" (223-224, italics in original; see also Sewell 1992).¹⁰

In the present case, the reformist process of social "reproduction" becomes more visible by interpreting the Highlander students' uses of media within the existing social context, particularly as the organisational dynamic shifted from one that promoted "connected" learning to the chilled atmosphere of the Cold War-era CIO (Giddens 1979). Within this social dialectic, the uses of media are central to identity formation in social organisation. Giddens defines organisation as "a social system which is able to 'bracket time-space', and which does so via the reflexive monitoring of system reproduction and the articulation of discursive 'history'" (Giddens 1987, 155). More plainly, Jasper (1997) explains that, "Only individuals have thoughts, but they express them in media that make them available to others" (49). The labour students at Highlander did this when they wrote to and for each other to share ideas for action.

They also wrote autobiographically in what can be described as the primary act of collective identity formation at Highlander. The folk school's writers' workshop technique of autobiographical writing was intended to give individual students the experience of "dignifying ... their obscure lives and the struggle in which they were collectively involved" (Horton 1989, 122). Once recorded, these individual experiences could become part of a collective identity through classes in playwriting and music where the writing was shared and the performances could reach others at Highlander and at meetings around the South. In their labour journalism classes, the students were presented with media skills that would allow them to reach

others who were absent, but who might also identify and act with the movement's goals for action.

As they theorize this collective identity formation process from the individual to the collectivity, Polletta & Jasper (2001) conceptualize "the role of identity in four phases of protest: The creation of collective claims, recruitment into movements, strategic and tactical decision-making, and movement outcomes" (285). As the authors mark the divides between the individual and the social, agency and action, and action and outcome, making distinctions between and among these levels of mediated organisation is important, because such divisions anchor the analysis of identity formation at Highlander as it depended on students' uses of these media tactics.

Accounting for individual agency within the process of movement organisation means understanding how and why the students were likely to have chosen to use various media. As discussed in the following analysis, journalism was much less popular than drama and music (Glen, 1988). In considering why some activists might have adopted certain tactics that others would not, Polletta & Jasper (2001) assert that "strategic choices are not simply neutral decisions about what will be most effective ...; they are statements about identity." Basing their position on a critique of resource mobilization theory, the authors ground concepts of agency and action within Bordieu's concept of "habitus," or implicit cultural routines (Polletta & Jasper 2001, 293-294; Bordieu 1990, 20).¹¹

Jasper (1997) adapts the idea of the self-as-social in terms of movement participants' having "tactical tastes." "Tactical tastes, like most cultural sensibilities, combine morality, emotion, and cognition," he explains. Cognitively, participants already have to know how to make up songs, plays, or write news stories (236-237). This list of media goes as far as Charles Tilly's (1978) structurally determined resource mobilization concept of "repertoires of collective action." Yet, by considering the concepts of morality and emotion – what participants think is right and how they feel about it – Jasper (1997) produces a concept of agency in action that is grounded in social actors' affect.

In effect, as Highlander's movement activists moved to participate in the construction of the movement's collective identity as a social frame (Gamson 1988; Snow & Benford 1988), they were likely to act on the basis of what they have already known and liked, rather than solely on the basis of a rational choice based on which tactics are available or likely to work. As Jasper (1997) suggests, "Protesters do what they are good at, what they can do creatively or freshly" (237). By theorizing agency as both cognitive and emotional, Polletta and Jasper (2001) establish a premise for social movement action as a social dialectic that identifies tactical choices that have been traditionally theorized as rational (Tilly 1978) within a more interpretative context.

The actions and interactions of the labourers and CIO organizers at Highlander were complex, regarding their choices about whether and how to act within the range of resources presented by the Highlander curriculum. With these concepts in mind, the following discussion of the students' participation in Highlander's curriculum of organizing tactics asks what the role of these media was in identity formation and social movement organisation in the labour movement.

Media as Tactics: Choices for Action as a Movement

The students at Highlander's 1938 winter session had much in common, including difficult work experiences, concerns about wage equity, and a belief that organizing unions promised solutions. They "were made up of primarily of local organizers, officers, and members of CIO unions, each with immediate, practical needs and problems," according to historian Aimee Horton (1989).¹² Later, students would come from other unions that Highlander was working with, including the United Construction Workers Organizing Committee or the United Sugar Workers in New Orleans, the United Auto Workers, or the National Maritime Union in Memphis. In that 1938 session, guest speakers were also drawn from industrial unions, such as the American Federation of Hosiery Workers, the Amalgamated Clothing Workers (of) Nashville, the Steel Workers Organizing Committee (SWOC), the CIO, and the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union (Horton 1989, 115).

In this and subsequent sessions, two themes dominated the autobiographical statements that the students produced: The radicalizing experiences that had made each aware of a personal and collective stake in the issue of labour and their various expectations that the Highlander experience would teach them how to spread the word about the movement when they returned to their homes across the South.¹³ In the fall 1940 residential term, for example, 20 students enrolled, including seven women.¹⁴ They came from a range of working backgrounds, as indicated by the unions they represented.

One of the few journalists among the industrial union members, Anne Gibson of the Newspaper Guild, for example, was elected by her union to attend the Highlander session as a way to strengthen their strike fight against the newspaper in Monroe, La. She reported "attacks by the paper in editorials and advertising (and attacks by A.F. of L. unions" because of their affiliation with the CIO.¹⁵

Lloyd Davis of Spartanburg, S.C., represented the Textile Workers Union of America (TWUA). His story reflected his experiences with grinding poverty and an awareness of unjust working conditions at the local textile mill while still a boy. As a self-described "hobo" in the Great Depression, he had ridden trains illegally across the country during the Depression, begging for food in strange neighbourhoods and towns. He credited the first Roosevelt administration in 1932 and the CIO's organizing successes in the North with raising his awareness that social change was possible.¹⁶

Similarly, Thelma Hunter of the Boot and Shoe Makers union in Lynchburg, Virginia, recited a litany of travails, including the deaths of her family members and baby for lack of medical attention, her utter poverty, and, finally, her awakening to the possibilities offered by the CIO at Highlander. In a kind of open-verse poem, repeating the words, "I know..." to reflect her life's hard lessons, she finished with,

I know what it means to have the opportunity of attending Highlander Folk School for two weeks and to meet Southern people who are trying to prepare themselves to teach workers the things they should know in order to solve their problems.¹⁷

Already active in unions, these students were primed for the Highlander Folk School experience. Although they knew why they were at Highlander, they did

still not know how to become more effective organizers. Specifically, they did not express preferences for particular media as tactics. Rather, these were offered to them in Highlander's classrooms.

In both music and drama, the basis for developing media skills stemmed from the students' lived experiences. Creating labour songs depended on their prior knowledge of hymns, ballads, and popular songs. These served as platforms for their identity formation, or "connected learning," based on their individual experiences. As it supported Highlander's pedagogy, students would offer their own perspectives on issues. As Horton explains, that is when the learning experience became valid:

So pretty soon you get everybody's experiences coming in, centered around the one person's experience, because that's an authentic experience not a synthetic experience. Authentic. And everybody recognizes authenticity.... After everybody had the benefit of hearing everybody's problem discussed, we would ask on the basis of what you've learned that you knew – that you didn't know before that you knew – on the basis of your fellow workers' experiences, now how do you think it'll be best to deal with these problems? (Horton and Friere 1990, 168).

Instead of presenting expert solutions to his "students'" problems, Horton's connected learning method offered students the chance to connect their experiences to collective action through music, dramatics, and journalism.

Music and Dramatics

Early on music was a strong element of the Highlander organizing curriculum. It was easy to engage the students with songs they already knew as a device for getting them to turn personal experiences into shared meanings. From 1935, Zilphia Horton, Myles' wife, led the music program based on revising lyrics of songs already familiar to the union workers attending residential sessions, as well as at conferences, rallies and strikes. In this way, "Old MacDonald had a Farm" became "John L. Lewis had a Plan." "Rock a Bye Baby" became "Workers' Lullabye." And "Dixie" was sung as "Look Ahead, Working Men" (Glen 1988, 54). The weekly music program was listed by song leader Ralph Tefferteller as "recreation," in his 1938 annual report write-up, rather than as a course. In general this was the case.

The music program gained Highlander national connections. Pete Seeger first visited the school's Appalachian campus in 1944, where he led group singing. He later became a regular participant in the music program there (Glen 1988, 94). Before her untimely death in 1956, Zilphia Horton had "collected hundreds of such songs, published at least ten songbooks, and mimeographed thousands of song sheets for residence sessions" (Glen 1988, 54). In leading this program, which Guy and Candy Carawan continued through the 1980s, Horton had felt that learning these songs and making the lyrics fit the union's problems gave the workers a way to share their problems in common (Glen 1988, 219).

Based on the requests for labour songs at movement events, the music program at Highlander was by far the most successful and popular of the school's media programs. By 1938, for example, the CIO often invited Horton and her students to sing at local and state meetings, as well as at workers' education confer-

ences. In 1939, they were invited to the Tennessee TWOC conference in Huntsville, Alabama and in May of the same year, Horton led a group of students in song at the Constitutional Convention of the Textile Workers Union of America in Philadelphia (Horton 1989, 120-121).

The popularity of the music program indicated how strongly singing pro-labour songs appealed to the activists' "tactical tastes." Borrowed as it was from familiar experiences, the music inherently appealed at an emotional level. Similarly, the moral value of the song messages was grounded in the experiences that were being collectivized by the students' singing. These songfests supported the social "cognition" that labourers' problems could be commonly shared and that labour organizing was a solution. This matches the third point of Jasper's definition of "tactical tastes," as the movement's collective identity was re-produced at events around the South as one of action (Jasper 1997, 236-237).

Where labour songs called for made-up lyrics based on work experiences, the drama program presented a more complex set of tasks for labour participants at Highlander. Still, the goal remained the same: In dramatics classes, individual students identified a problem they were experiencing with their local unions to perform for their classes. In one two-week class she taught in August 1942, Zilphia Horton explained to the class, "This is a do course, not a talk course." After some discussion about why they could not find movies they liked at the cinema, she told them that the "movies [are] controlled same as [the] press. Both are controlled by big business." Instead, she said, "We have to make our own kind of drama. We don't bother memorizing lines, because we'll mostly have a worker talking to the boss: Something we've all had experience with."¹⁸ Her introduction encapsulates the identity formation process from the individual to the collective by predicating it on the students' action as dramatists who could connect their experiences to the play as a way to reach others.

In these workshops, Horton led the students to critique each performance as they developed scripts. The preface to one 1940 play, "South of the Ballot," explains the method: "This play was not recorded until after it had been rehearsed and performed for six different audiences." The students had chosen the topic of southern poll taxes as important enough to be the subject of the play. The note continues:

We planned a series of scenes or episodes, which would portray the problem as we had discussed it. When characters and action had been decided upon, we went into improvisations of the scenes – no written words. It was not as difficult as you might imagine. We were so familiar with the characters, it was a simple matter to say and do what the characters would have done in real life (South of the Ballot, emphasis added).

The plays' manuscripts range from two-to-eight pages long, often including a sketch of stage-blocking directions. Two of the longer pieces, "Gumbo," a play about the efforts of Mississippi sharecroppers to unionize, and "Labor Spy," about efforts by plant owners to undermine unions, were the most often requested by Highlander audiences. "Labor Spy" was produced by Dr. Ruby Norris, a Highlander faculty member. It cast nine actors in the roles of employees and management at the "Southern Textile Corporation." Set in a generically fictitious "Finchburg," a mill company town, the script is far more complicated than the more numerous

short plays. It shows how mill owners and managers would fight union organizing, here by hiring a detective agency to work as spies to turn mill employees against the organizing effort.¹⁹

A more typical play is recorded on a single, type-written page by its student author, Frances Moser. A member of the American Federation of Hosiery Workers (AFHW) in Charlotte, North Carolina, Moser attended classes at Highlander in the fall of 1940.²⁰ Her untitled outline lists the problem as “where the floor lady shows the difference between the union girls and the non-union girls.” The intended audience is her own union the AFHW. Her one-paragraph treatment describes how the boss tried to fire one of the “union girls,” leading all of the “girls” to agree to attend the union meeting on the next Monday night. It is crude – there is no dialogue and the spelling is inconsistent – but it exemplifies the lived connection that most labour students could feel that would have made memorizing lines unnecessary. At the bottom of this piece written in class, Moser completes the idea of action, adding, “P.S. I sure have loved your class and I know that I can go back and help our union.”²¹

By sharing their stakes in the issue, the students could define a collective identity. In the theatre workshops, in particular, this workshop method allowed the student-actors to re-live their experiences in ways that others could identify with. Still, while these media drew on the common culture, or “habitus” (Bourdieu 1990, 20) to build identity as the basis for action, labour journalism failed to take root in the same way.

Labour Journalism

Labour journalism offered a potentially more potent tactic for the movement than performance-based music and drama. Simply, journalism could reach more people with more complex ideas. With this hope, the Highlander faculty taught labour journalism as a formal course in the first Highlander Writer’s Workshops. Students met in two-week residential sessions during the summers of 1939-1942. These workshops were intended to feature writing courses that had been previously offered as part of the standing curriculum. The first two-week residential session in 1939 hosted 14 students and a visiting faculty that included essayists, poets, and editors. That first workshop was sponsored jointly by Highlander and the Communist-led League of American Writers (Glen 1988; Horton 1989).²²

Beginning in 1938, journalism classes at the school had been organized “around a project or a job that had to be done, namely, editing the publication of ‘The Highlander Fling,’ an in-house mimeographed newsletter,” according to Tefferteller. As he noted in a year-end review of the curriculum, “[T]here was very little time for individual attention.” Still, the classes ran in traditional fashion. Students typed assignments, and faculty graded them, using Federated Press copy marks. Grammar, spelling, and punctuation, as well as other points of syntax and content, drew written comments. Many of these classes were accompanied by a handout on the given topic, including examples of the assignment in question.

Still, it seems that the depth of journalistic conventions required presented an overload for many of the labour students. In the same review, Tefferteller describes making “an effort to develop an appreciation for news value,” getting the students to consider editing for conciseness, writing leads, selecting quotations, writing head-

lines, page layout, varying selection of news stories, “writing for shop papers,” “the importance of local and personal news,” “writing letters to newspaper Forum (sic) columns,” “[writing] articles to local papers,” and having an appropriate “attitude toward local newspaper reporters and photographers.”²³ For the students, this was all quite different from labour plays that depended on personal experience, rather than memorization.

Often lacking any journalistic appearance, the tone of their early classroom drafts was informal. A typical page reads, “We learn in labor journalism that we should use short sentences. Why doesn’t CARL (*sic*) practice what he preaches when he spouts the evening discussion group?” Much of their copy ran to the kind of flirtatious gossip that one might expect of younger summer campers.²⁴ This playful tone is true of the mimeographed broadsheet version of “The Highlander Fling” that the students produced on 14-inch construction paper in-house, as well. Beneath a brief item on the “Grundy County Fair,” and above a more formal welcome to two out-of-town visitors ran the note: “Embarrassing moments: Girls, please stay out of the men’s shower room.”²⁵

Beginning in 1939 a different version of “The Highlander Fling” also appeared in a more formal, four-columned, 8 1/2 by 11 inches, typeset edition. It was printed on light magazine stock with the union label on the masthead. The one- to two-page newsletter addressed upcoming sessions, local and national labour issues, and other formal news items. The differences between the two versions suggest that faculty members, rather than students, led the production of these professional documents.

The increased quality was important as a public relations tool, as when the February 1943 issue ran a photo of Myles Horton, Mary Lawrence, Highlander director of field programs, and Emil Willimetz, a Highlander alum and Tennessee CIO representative, at that year’s national CIO convention.²⁶

By 1943, the CIO had begun to install its institutional curriculum at Highlander. The hallmark of this approach was its relative regimentation. That year’s one-page, “Outline for labor journalism,” lists topics for each of the six classes within a camp session. The first meeting involved explaining that “labour journalism differs from journalism, because labour papers are owned by the same class that reads them – the working class – while most other papers are owned by one class but read by another.” By now, this rhetoric was being borrowed by the CIO from the movement, as the impetus for action was being shifted up to the CIO’s administration and away from the workers. The class topics continued, including “how to get other labor news for the paper,” “design of page one and other pages,” “use of art,” working with news services, including the Federated Press, and “how to get along with your editorial board and rank and file members.”²⁷

In general, the presentation style of these topics resembles current journalism curricula at American universities. The class periods were of similar length, as well, with a daily class schedule for the labour journalism school in the July of 1943 session from 2:00-3:30 p.m. Although potentially useful, professional training came in a rapid and concentrated form for the students, perhaps too much so. This condition, perhaps as much as any other, may have inhibited a student’s ability to grasp the conventions of journalistic writing in a brief time. Also, student reaction to the CIO teachers, many of whom were teaching for the first time, was negative (Glen 1988, 56-57).

Most likely, though, the journalism courses simply did not resonate with what the students already knew and liked. By contrast with music and drama, the labour journalism curriculum presented a different and more complex set of routines for students to adopt. Because it did not reflect skills and knowledge that they already possessed, except perhaps for a few Newspaper Guild members, journalism was less likely to appeal to their “tactical tastes” (Jasper 1997, 238). It also seems less likely that the sense of “authenticity” of experiences Myles Horton ascribes to face-to-face conversations at Highlander mentioned above would have survived the rigors of news values within the static medium of print (Horton and Friere 1990, 168).

Conclusion

Given the potential of journalism as a mass medium to reach more union members and recruits in a broader geographical area at once and over time, it seems irrational that the students at Highlander would have chosen the less powerful media of live performance music and drama to disseminate their union call. Indeed, it was. Rather, the choices were based on the students’ implicit, lived experiences. Their choices to act reflected their agency, but their choices of *how* to act reflect their ingrained cultural experiences. Instead of Tilly’s (1978) top-down resource model, this organizing effort originated from connections made between and among the activists’ voices as their identities, and the tactics that were both available and appropriate to their experiences.

As they crossed the moment between the potential of agency to the fact of action, these activists’ voices can be seen to have reproduced their own “tastes” by acting on them. In this way, when they gravitated toward music and drama, and away from journalism, they were connecting with each other within a known routine to form a new collective social identity based on action. This cultural notion of action reflects and validates the cultural concept of Bordieu’s “habitus.” Here the grassroots movement fostered at Highlander shows how completely entwined the students’ collectively defined meanings for change and the media that they chose to convey these meanings were. In this ontology, we find a twist on McLuhan’s medium-message aphorism as the unionists’ actions to choose these tactics made them both the medium and the message.

As their work at Highlander led them into a structuring dialogue with dominant, anti-union and, therefore, anti-communist, forces in business, the state, and the mainstream press, the power of this social process emanated from the way that the participants’ actions combined with other, external contingencies. In effect, conflict was the catalyst for change as institutionalized labour unions gained mainstream legitimacy following the war.

As if to underscore the contingent nature of this dynamic, the CIO’s precipitous shift to the Right by 1947 quelled Highlander’s role as a movement incubator (Morris 1984). This effectively ended the grassroots action that had driven the southern labour movement to that point: henceforth, American labour was no longer a “movement,” but an institution entrenched among others. In the end, the point to emphasize is not where these new social ideas went, but where the social actors who produce them came from and how these people engaged dominant culture for change.

Notes:

1. See Mary Field Belenky et al. (1986), and Myles Horton and Paulo Friere (1990) for discussions of this pedagogy.

2. The term, "agency" here refers to potential for action. Giddens (1984) defines "agency" as referring "not to the intentions people have in doing things but to their capability of doing things in the first place (which is why agency implies power: cf. the Oxford English Dictionary definition of an agent, as 'one who exerts power or produces an effect'). Agency concerns events of which an individual is the perpetrator, in the sense that the individual could, at any phase in a given sequence, have acted differently" (9).

3. Report to U.S. Dept of Labor, "The Highlander Folk School, Monteagle, Tennessee," box 82, folder 1; Note: All documents referred to herein are from the Highlander Folk School Collection at the State Historical Society at Madison, Wisc.

4. Recruiting letter, box 62, folder 5.

5. Report to U.S. Dept of Labor, "The Highlander Folk School, Monteagle, Tennessee," box 82, folder 1.

6. In 1962, the folk school lost its state charter, buildings and property, following a long and contentious court fight in Tennessee state courts. Although Highlander reopened in Knoxville, Tenn., as the Highlander Research Center, the break marks the end of an era. For a thorough discussion, see Glen (1988).

7. In a letter from Myles Horton to Carl Haessler of June 24, 1943, Horton wrote, "We have had a very disappointing response from student prospects for the writers workshop. Though we hate to do it, we are going to have to call of the workshop as such." Box 63, folder 7.

8. See Cauter (1978) for a description of the deeper American tradition of social control. He characterises three cycles of the "great fear" in American history, including the Alien and Sedition Acts of July 1798, first Red Scare during Wilson's second term, and, third, the era of McCarthyism under Truman and Eisenhower. In these terms in 1932, the first Red scare was alive and waiting in Tennessee before Highlander began its program of labour education prior to joining the CIO.

9. In this historical sociology, I have employed primary and secondary historical sources on the U.S. Southern labour movements to research this study thoroughly. As such, it has not been my goal to replicate the depth of historical detail of the period of the Southern labour movement that is already available (see Adams 1992, Dunbar 1981, Glen 1988, Graham 1967, and A.I. Horton 1989), but to interpret the sociological meanings represented in these secondary histories with reference to primary archival documents.

The data for the analysis were collected from the Highlander Research and Education Center collection at the Wisconsin State Historical Society in Madison, Wisconsin. It has been important to refer to documents from the Highlander curriculum during this period, including journalism class lesson plans, handouts, and post hoc course evaluations by the faculty. It has also been useful to review examples of work produced by the students, including their autobiographical statements, labour plays, newspapers printed on campus, and promotional materials from HFS about the program.

10. In his thorough critique of the traditional division between materialist and identity-oriented (new social movement, or NSM) theories of social movements, Craig Calhoun conceptualises the organizing process with his description of the context, or "social movement field," that supports identity-based social movements. In this way, he emphasises concepts of dialogue and action that Giddens (1984) otherwise theorises as the basis of the "theory of structuration." See Calhoun 1993.

11. Bourdieu defines "habitus" as the way in which "types of behaviour can be directed to certain ends without being consciously directed to those ends, or defined by them" (1990, 20).

12. Aimee Horton, Ph.D., is Myles Horton's second wife.

13. These autobiographical statements were drafted as part of Highlander's writing curriculum. The following four mimeographed collections offer 63 1-3 page first-person accounts how and why these students became involved in the labour movement: "I know what it means," 1940; "Our Lives," 1940; "We Know The Score," 1941; "The South Tomorrow," spring term 1941, box 62, folder 3.
14. During the 1940-1941 period, 18 of 63 students recorded in these collections of autobiographical statements were women.
15. Anne Gibson, "The Monroe Newspaper Guild Strike," in *I Know What It Means*, 22-24, box 62, folder 3.
16. Lloyd Davis, "How I Became Interested in the Labor Movement" in *I Know What It Means*, 10-13, box 62, folder 3.
17. Thelma Hunter, "I Know What it Means" in *I Know What it Means*, 1, box 62, folder 3.
18. "Notes on Dramatics Class" taught by Zilphia Horton, 1, box 62, folder 5.
19. "Labor Spy," box 57, folder 1.
20. Frances Moser, "What Made Me Join the Union," in *I Know What It Means*, 18, box 62, folder 3.
21. Frances Moser, untitled play manuscript, box 58, folder 3.
22. Letter from Lillian Gilkes, League of American Writers, to Jim Dombrowski, July 28, 1939, box 63, folder 1; Dombrowski did not believe that the League's Communist affiliations violated Highlander's policy of not affiliating with political parties.
23. Tefferteller, "Highlander Folk School Review," 9, box 62, folder 1.
24. Student papers, box 61, folder 2.
25. *The Highlander Fling*, box 62, folder 6.
26. *The Highlander Fling*, vol. 5, no. 1, box 84, folder 7.
27. "Outline for labor journalism," box 62, folder 2.

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