Deaf and Able: Resistance and Empowerment at Gallaudet University

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In 1988, students at Gallaudet University galvanized one another, as well as outside groups that were sympathetic to the issue of deaf culture, and formed a movement aimed at effecting social resistance and changing the hearing-centered power structure of their university. The example set by the Gallaudet students serves as a model for organized social resistance, and this essay will provide an analysis of the process as a tool toward change.

The Gallaudet Board of Trustees fell out of touch with students, staff, and faculty at the university so easily because they were elected by, and officially responsive only to, fellow Board members. That is to say, an incoming member of the Board is elected by the current Board. The system in which power and framing belonged almost exclusively to the hearing thus reified itself and hearing people "held the power to define" deaf people's options and identities, "even to the point of controlling their modes of resistance" (Chafe: 65). Chafe claims that the "sense people have of who they are and what they become is tied intimately to the expectations communicated to them by others" (Chafe: 61); furthermore, as was the case in Chafe's discussion of male power over women, the hearing possess the belief that the deaf "cannot defend themselves and that" the hearing "must therefore take charge of their lives" (Chafe: 66). Indeed, the sense that the Gallaudet Board did not understand deaf culture, life, or social status—in addition to the message sent by the Board and other members of the hearing power structure—precipitated the deaf students' exasperation and activation into agents of change. "When decision-makers have grown distant from the real desires and needs of those they rule," Janeway writes, "their judgments may well become … irrelevant" (Janeway: 110). So was the case at Gallaudet, where the administration's attempts to quell student frustrations only empowered the students further.

Although students were "actively campaigning" (Sacks: 127) for a deaf president for the entire year since the previous president resigned, their efforts were not organized during that entire time period. Even at the beginning of the coordinated movement, "initial reactions to Elisabeth Ann Zinser's appointment were furious—and uncoordinated" (Sacks: 135). The students had taken the first step of social resistance: as Janeway might say, "Simply, inside one's head, one says 'No'" (Janeway: 161). Of course, Janeway would also say that "once we do so we are going to take another step" (Janeway: 161), and that is exactly what the students did.

In the early days of the movement, student Greg Hlibok activated and mobilized fellow students to come together in calling for a deaf president. Behind Hlibok and the Gallaudet students "has been the active support of alumni, and of deaf organizations and leaders all around the country" (Sacks: 136). Such support was necessary because "until the numbers willing to resist become great enough, the system of social control remains unaltered" (Chafe: 75). Because the movement had components from many parts of the campus society and deaf society at large, the Gallaudet administration was "threatened by an opposition they could not clearly define" (Janeway: 110).

The aspect of social resistance that the Gallaudet case study largely skips is a clearly defined instance of "shared experience of weakness" (Janeway: 169). Janeway's book makes apparent the importance of "disbelief and mistrust shared with others" (Janeway: 171)—but the case study does not illustrate a single event among deaf students that sparked the movement. Rather, Sacks provides a history of the establishment and evolution of deaf culture, as well as the conflicts therein: the struggle between Sign and signed English as the main form of nonverbal communication for the deaf, the increased role of the deaf in mass media, the Gallaudet Outreach office misunderstanding its true mission. But whereas Janeway offers the examples of women in a domestic support group and agoraphobics in therapy, Sacks does not identify any similar gathering of deaf students to share their experience of weakness. The first gathering recorded by Sacks was a 3,000-person rally. If Janeway is correct in her outline of the social power process, then the "unrest, uncertainty, and hope" that were "brewing" (Sacks: 127) on the Gallaudet campus surely started with smaller assemblies of students working to energize the campus. It is a shame that Sacks does not expose this vital step of social resistance, because Janeway beautifully details its necessity: In the early stages of resistance, when weak people have already "said no" but have not yet amalgamated into a movement, it is the small community discussions that "form positive links between mistrustful individuals" and eventually become a "sisterhood, a brotherhood, a community" (Janeway: 171). During this step of the process, the weak—in this case the deaf—"may be quite unaware of it, but they are already building a new framework of belief, not simply differing from the old" (Janeway: 171).

In the final step of social resistance—large group action, such as the barricading of Gallaudet University and the students' march to Capitol Hill—"the governed are rejecting the value of a … system they don't believe in" but they are also building a "new self-image, validated by others in the same boat" (Janeway: 174).

Certainly, the student movement forced the Board and administration to question the legitimacy of their authority. "What the powerful want," writes Janeway, "is assurance that their power is held rightfully, within a relationship which sanctions its use and validates the right of these rulers to rule" (Janeway: 111). By organizing thousands of students, alumni, faculty, and deaf groups worldwide, and by using their group mobility and activation to appeal to the Congress, they delegitimized the sanction of the Board to govern students and the university campus and forced the Board to renegotiate the "bargain between rulers and ruled" (Janeway: 112).

This case study is important not only because it provides an outline for social resistance and organizing as a tool of power, but also because it shows the need of validation among both the powerful and the weak. Validation for the powerful has already been discussed in this essay, but validation for the weak is an even more interesting aspect of the case study: The deaf, by "asserting [their] own will … and test[ing] the outer world in order to learn how it works, specifically, to learn where the limits of assertion lie" (Janeway: 38), gave themselves the reassurance they needed that they exist, that they are in fact fully human and fully members of society at large, and that their desires and needs indeed count.

This case study is an ideal summation in the study of the process of social power and resistance. It highlights the process itself but also underscores the significance of community and amalgamation with social purpose. As a widespread colony of individual humans, we are simply tools for the machine of process; as a cohesive and collective unit of engaged citizens, we have the power to create a new understanding of society.

References

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