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## A student's plea to professor North: An episode in academic politics and interdisciplinarity in the Reagan years

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A STUDENT'S PLEA TO  
PROFESSOR NORTH: AN EPISODE  
IN ACADEMIC POLITICS AND  
INTERDISCIPLINARITY IN THE  
REAGAN YEARS

RAFAEL GALVÃO DE ALMEIDA

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CENTER FOR THE  
HISTORY OF POLITICAL ECONOMY  
AT DUKE UNIVERSITY

## **A Student's Plea to Professor North: An Episode in Academic Politics and Interdisciplinarity in the Reagan Years**

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Douglass North (1920-2015) was one of the most influential economists working in the boundaries between economics and other social sciences, due to his work in new economic history, new institutional economics, and so on. His archives, however, are under-researched. Located at the Duke University, they provide dozens of documents that enlighten how North developed his ideas and his relationships.

During my research, one document called my attention: an undated letter written by Melissa Tarr, one of his undergraduate students at Washington University in St. Louis (WUStL). The letter is available in Annex 1. Tarr asked professor North for support against the closing of WUStL's sociology department.

In 1989, the WUStL decided to close the sociology department, active since 1906. The episode became infamous due to its apparent arbitrariness and the failed effort of its faculty and students to overturn (“Campus Life...”, 1989). *The American Sociologist* dedicated a special issue to discuss it (Adler, Adler, 1989; Etzkowitz, 1989; Hamblin, 1989; Heydebrand, 1989; Heyl, 1989; Israel, 1989; McCartney, 1989; Pittman, Boden, 1989). The then dean Martin Israel (1989) defended the decision, which was taken after one year of deliberation, because the sociology department consumed too much resources and did not give an acceptable return to its investment. It had no tenured faculty since 1974. Therefore, the department needed to be closed to free resources to more excellent courses and provide a better education to its students.

While Israel saw the decision as a rational choice, the faculty, its students and the community of sociologists received the news negatively. In his introduction to the special issue, McCartney (1989) wrote that it had relevant repercussions for the profession, since it was not the first time it happened and it might not be the last one (see also Coughlin, 1992). Pittman and Boden (1989), Hamblin (1989) and Etzkowitz (1989) wrote on the past controversies around the sociology department, focusing on its radical tradition during the 1970s. King (2014) even wrote that “if Harvard was the seat of *status quo* ideology, Wash. U. was the capital of radical sociology” in the 1960s-early 1970s. After 1974, the appointment of a conservative-leaning staff, such as William Danforth, Merve

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Kling and Martin Israel diminished the resources destined to the sociology department. It should be noted that Danforth increased funding from different organizations, including the grant from the Henry Luce Foundation that would keep Douglass North's Center in Political Economy afloat for years (Almeida, 2019).

Due to its radical leaning, the administration was unhappy with the issues it brought to the university. The attrition between the pragmatic and conservative board and the radical department extended for 15 years (Adler, Adler, 1989). According to a personal recollection from a student there (McIntyre, 2013), the department was being slowly chipped away from resources, and its faculty requests increasingly ignored. The Reagan Era also fostered the social imaginary with ideas of individualism, small government and rejection of anything that resembled leftism (Mollon Neto, 2010). Pittman and Boden (1989, p. 318) noticed that the department's research was not well-received by the local funders of WUSTL. Reagan himself had incentivized a low opinion of sociology, warning that "drugs, thugs and hoodlums to pervade society by placing a bunch of sociology majors on the bench", to justify why he did not include any Democrat amongst his 70 appointees to the Court of Appeals ("Excerpts...", 1987).

In fact, many sociologists were more direct in accusing the university of academic exclusion. Heydebrand (1989) blamed chancellor Danforth for being "more interested in representing the interests of Republicans and social Darwinists" (p. 333), pointing to his connections with the Republican Party, and that creating a liberal arts program without sociology would be absurd; in the end, he called for a boycott of WUSTL (p. 335). Heyl (1989) called it a "pig roast", made to cover administrative failures, since WUSTL had left the top thirty American universities rankings by 1980 (p. 344). Pittman and Boden (1989) warned against the new attitude of universities, of treating their courses like financial portfolios.

As part of the initiative to save the department, Tarr wrote to North – a man who was certainly one of the most influential scholars in WUSTL, who would earn the Nobel memorial prize four years later. From his position, North was comfortable at the Center in Political Economy, being its director from 1983 to 1990. He had appointments with the political science and economics departments, and close cooperation with the Business school (Almeida, 2019). The WUSTL was an important center of diffusion of rational choice political science (Adcock, Bevir, Stimson, 2007). North's arrival would make this tradition stronger.

In spite of it, North was quite open to other social sciences. His Center in Political Economy attracted not only economists and political scientists, but also anthropologists, sociologists, even cognitive researchers, among others (Almeida, 2019). In spite of receiving funding from libertarian and conservative organizations<sup>1</sup>, North argued economists had a lot to learn from Marxism, to the point of including Marxist authors in his discipline programs. For example, the course Economics 220 – Survey of Economic History –, taken by Tarr, had obligatory readings from Marxist historian Perry Anderson.

Maybe this was a reason why Tarr sought North's help. Later, Sociology would return to WUStL in 2015 (Wingfield, 2015). As for North himself, I have not found anything else in his archives about it. But the fact that he chose to preserve this letter, instead of simply discarding it, might indicate it meant something to him.

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<sup>1</sup> The Henry R. Luce Foundation itself is considered a conservative organization, due to the fact Henry Luce's editorship at *Time* magazine helped to defend *laissez-faire* and “traditional American values”, and opposed the New Deal during the 1940s (Kersch, 2019, p. 140). By the end of his life, North was the Spencer T. Olin Professor in Arts and Science in WUStL. The Olin family built its wealth through a Missourian military corporation and funded many neoconservative initiatives (Mollon Neto, 2010, p. 71).

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## Annex 1

Dear Professor North,

I am a student in your Econ 220 class. Like many other student [sic] at Wash. U., I am greatly upset about the decision to close the Sociology department. That is why I am

asking you to consider the impact that the closing of this department will have on the University as a whole, on the liberal arts program, and particularly on the social sciences.

With respect to the reasoning behind the decision, I do not believe that in higher education, especially at a school dedicated to excellent, the profitability of a department should decide whether or not its existence is warranted. In addition, the mere fact that the department has gotten weak over the years is no reason to close it. More logical would be measures to bring its quality up to the standards of the University.

This is why I am asking you to resolve along with the rest of the faculty to oppose the administrative decision. Together, students and faculty, we have the chance to overturn the decision.

Sincerely,

Melissa Tarr

Economics '92