

Power games

When I arrived at Yale three years ago, I thought that I wanted to be more politically active. I didn't know what that meant, but it sounded so exciting, so very *collegiate*.

So what is political at Yale? It seemed

Against the Current

by Neomi Rao

that the answer to this question might be found by joining the Yale Political Union. Anyone familiar with this institution should be amazed that it is still the largest undergraduate organization—large only because so many entering Yalies feel compelled to join. But after a few meetings with semi-important, boring speakers, I realized that the Union has little to do with politics on campus. So I limited my involvement with the Union, took a few political science classes, and kept searching.

By second semester of my freshman year it dawned on me that nearly everything at Yale is politicized. It starts with the political correctness of language and the *freshperson* sensitivity seminars. Many people find the correctness ridiculous and annoying, but the political dangerously underlies this thinking. Who decides what words are appropriate? Who controls what viewpoints will be tolerated?

Politics on campus has nothing to do with organized institutions and everything to do with that oh-so post-modern word—*power*, power to control language, institutions, and eventually the way in which people think. Like much of modern society, people on this campus are constantly searching for who has power and how it is being used. They place interpretations of power over almost any social institution or human relationship.

Thinking in terms of power leads to the politics of identity, in which people separate

Campus politics has everything to do with *power*.

themselves by race, gender, and ethnicity. Many people find the separation of identity disturbing and regressive, but this has important political ramifications. Leaders of the politics of identity smile kindly and argue that the underprivileged (people of a non-white race and ethnicity) need separation from a hostile power structure. Activists try to separate these issues from the political, but they cannot. Their first principles of oppression and marginalization are inherently politicized.

More than a third of registered undergraduate organizations are based on race, ethnicity, or gender. While this is not wrong in itself, it seems that Yalies should have

more creative ways of organizing themselves. This separation is not just to promote cultural awareness, but usually to advance some political agenda.

The real campus politicians do not run for YPU office, nor do they engage in Yale College Council elections. These groups are too mainstream, too much a part of the establishment. Campus politics is about activism. It means being an active member of Black Students at Yale or the Committee

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in Solidarity with the Peoples of El Salvador. From placing pro-choice "This is not a medical instrument" hangers around campus to fasting in a cage for Haitian refugees, the political centers around the latest and trendiest cause *célèbre*.

While college campuses have always been hotbeds of activism, the political now extends far beyond causes like the civil rights movement, which strove for broad social change. It consists of a series of small and intense power struggles which are not motivated by an ideal, but rather some concrete goal.

For example, cultural groups like the Asian-American Students Association do not simply organize dances and ethnic activities to raise awareness and understanding. Instead they now petition for more Asian-American deans or increased Asian-American scholars.

While political activity has always been a legitimate means of causing change, often students become too wrapped up in the political to have any real appreciation or understanding for the group with which they identify. Instead of asking questions about what it means to be a modern woman, an Asian American, or an African American, students are too busy worrying about how to propagate their cause. Ultimately, the cause loses content and becomes meaningless.

Politics has become the perpetual search for some illusive goal. It is no longer motivated by ideals such as equality or liberty, instead it functions through confused interpretations of power struggles. Activists ask if it is fair to have separate Hispanic and Chicano deans and only one Asian-American dean, but do not question the very existence of the ethnic deans.

Living through the political I have learned campus politics involves almost nothing worthwhile. The study of politics can scarcely be found on this campus. Maybe the power struggles have defeated me since my search for the political has ended with dissatisfaction and ennui. I hope there are more interesting things to find.

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