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How 2 Take an Exam... & Remake the World



Bertell Ollman

HOW TO TAKE AN EXAM...AND REMAKE THE WORLD

BERTELL OLLMAN



Montréal/New York/London

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The honor roll of friends, co-workers and students who have helped to improve this book is now almost as long as the list of villains who have provoked it. While most of the latter will receive their due in the pages that follow, I should like to take this moment to applaud all those who shared their wisdom, experience and expertise with me at a time when I needed it most.

So thank you Bill and Ben Livant (who were there from the start), Jack Barbalet, Mark Roelofs, John Ehrenberg, Michael Brown, Michael Parenti, Vincente Navarro, John McMurtry, Ira Shor, Leah Haus, Mitchell Cohen, Milton Polsky, Izzy Silver, Paul Gullen, Jon Birnbaum, Ed Vernoff, Frances Golden, David Harvey, Joe Murphy, Howard Sherman, Christine Harrington, Marilyn Laporte, Jim O'Connor, Savas Michael, Peter Haymens, John Ahliger, Leo Panitch, Paul Livant, Zack Brown, Joel Cohen, Rick Kuhn, Andrew Ross, Craig Stanley, John Meumaier, and the many others who I am forgetting. (Sorry) And thanks, too, to the 4-500 students in my classes over the last ten years who tested different versions of my test book and helped bring it up to snuff. And a profound thanks to the inspired band of radical cartoonists who have given me permission to use some of their best work: Jennifer Berman, Tulie Kupferberg, Charles Rodriguez, Mike Konopacki, Fred Wright, Carol Simpson, Rick Flores, Clay Bennett, Kirk Anderson and, especially, Gary Huck.

Finally, how can I not mention Paule, my wife, and Raoul, our son, who as always lived and laughed and suffered through it all? While Paule is at work fine-tuning my conscience, sensibility and taste (it's an ongoing job), Raoul enjoys special access to my unconscious from which he lifted the Holy Trinity found on the wonderful cover that he designed for this book. To get a better sense of what they have to put up

with—and why I can never thank them enough (though I shall continue to try)—you might have a glance at the Ollman family portrait that graces the end of this work.

A big bear hug to you all. I only hope that *How to Take an Exam...and Remake the World*—by actually helping young people improve their skills in both—makes you feel that all the time and attention you gave to this oddest of “odd couples” was worthwhile.



For further information on Bertell Ollman, including a complete list of publications, see: www.nyu.edu/projects/ollman

INTRODUCTION

It is every student's dream come true: a test with ten True-False questions, where you know beforehand that the right answer to every question is True. And, if you forget, all the correct answers are written on the back of the sheet. Should you still fail, you can take the exam again and again on the same day until you pass. This is the official test to get a hand gun in the state of Michigan, whose major city, Detroit, has been called the "murder capitol" of the U.S. If all your exams are like this one, you can throw this book away right now. If not, some of the exam hints I've collected in the following pages could prove very useful. There's one problem and one catch.

I've taken hundreds of exams as a student and may have given even more in the thirty-five years that I've been a professor. In the course of all this, I've acquired an enormous exam lore. But, to tell you the truth, I don't feel any strong urge to share it with you. That's the problem. What I really would like to do is to tell you about capitalism, the system by which we produce and distribute the wealth of our society, but I suspect that most of you couldn't care less about what I have to say on this topic. Yet, you'd probably like to hear my exam advice. So: *Let's Make a Deal*. That's the catch.

I'll tell you what you need to know in order to write the best possible exams if you lend an ear to my account of capitalism. This

book will be our “deal.” My pledge: you get advice that is almost certain to raise your grades in virtually any subject area. My price: I get to harangue you—lightly, nothing that draws blood, not yours anyway—about what really concerns me. Okay? Except, since I know that many students cheat if given half the chance, I’ve not been so foolish as to divide the material by chapter. Instead, what you really want to hear is thoroughly mixed with up what I really want to tell you. Exam hints will appear at the start, in the middle and at the end of pages devoted to political exposé, and nothing in the style or size of print will offer a clue as to what’s what. The book is organized rather like a fruit and nut cake, and to get at the fruit you’ve got to eat the nuts.

“Unfair!” you holler. That’s right. The best thing you have going for you is the raw nerve that tells you when something isn’t fair. It’s also the best thing going for us, since we are all part of the same society. Well, what is and isn’t fair, why it isn’t, and what can be done about it is just what I want to talk to you about. And if I have to be a little unfair myself in order to get your attention, so be it.

In what follows, then, exam hints and political facts and ideas play off one another like contrasting themes in a musical fugue, with numbered intermissions called only when I think you need a break. Still, as in Bach’s fugues, there is a slow build-up, an eventual mingling of themes, and a final crescendo. You may be in for a bumpy beginning, but let yourself go with the rhythm, and you’ll learn how to dance to it soon enough.

‡ A friend once asked the American humorist, James Thurber, "How is your wife?" "As compared to what?" he replied. In Essay and Oral Exams, you will probably be asked to make judgements of various kinds. Most judgements of size, goodness, strength, beauty, etc. make use of a comparison, whether stated or implied. "As compared to what (or whom, or when)?" is a question you should often ask yourself. Making your object of comparison explicit and explaining why it is the relevant one in this case is a crucial though often neglected step in clarifying judgments and convincing others of them.



A young reporter asked a leading businessman how he made his first million. "It was really quite easy," answered the businessman. "I had five cents, and with it I bought an apple. I spend the evening polishing it, and the next day I sold it for ten cents. With that I bought two apples. I spent the evening polishing them, and the next day I sold them for twenty cents. With that I bought four apples. I spent the evening polishing them, and the next day I sold them for forty cents." And he continued in this way until he got to \$12.80, at which point he added: "And it was then that my wife's father died and left us a million dollars."

It was said of George Bush (senior) that he was born on third base and thought he'd hit a triple. Forget the computer nerds who made it big in Silicon Valley; they are the exceptions. George Bush is the rule.

‡ True/False Exams: For those occasions where you don't have a clue as to the right answer, here are some statistics that may help in your guessing. A study by H.E. Hawkes, E.F. Lindquist, and C.R. Mann found that in statements containing the word "all," four out of five were false; in statements containing the word "none," four out of five were false; and in statements containing the word "always," three out of four were false. Whereas, in statements containing the word "some," four out of five were true; and in statements containing the word "generally," three out of four were true. They also found that the longer the statement, the more likely it is to be true.

Assuming that the readers of this book are typical of the mass of students in our capitalist world, there are some among you who in the years to come are going to commit suicide, or become drug addicts and alcoholics, or spend years as derelicts or in prison, and others, the luckier ones, will just lose your jobs and homes, or never get a good job or a decent home, and take your anger and frustration out in bouts of depression or in violence against your spouses and children. I'm going to tell you something that could save you from these horrible fates. Listen closely. *You are not guilty!* The conditions that are responsible for most of your suffering are not your fault; nor is it a matter of God's will,

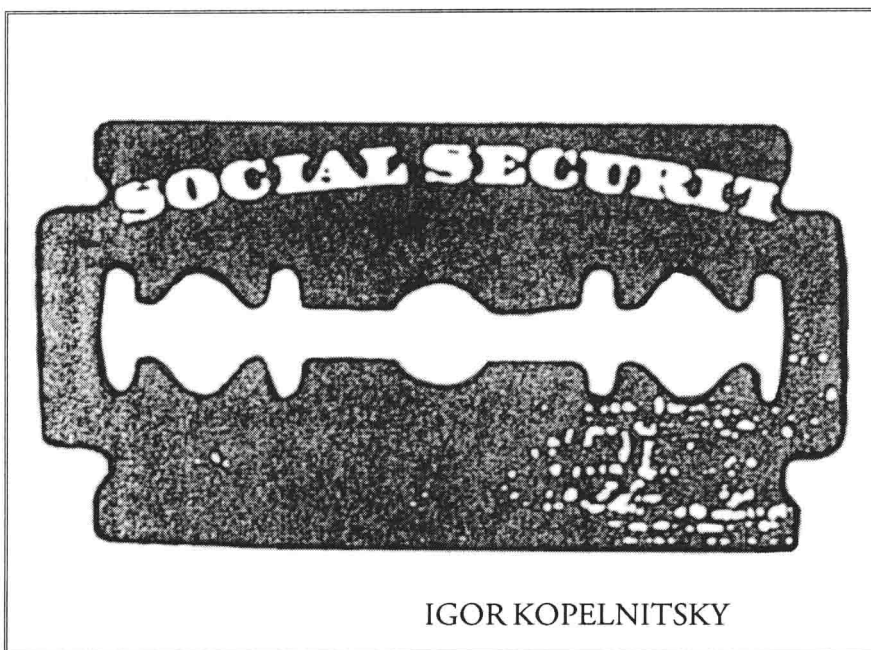
or of bad luck. Instead, most of what may one day drive you over the edge is due to this simple fact: *The Game is Rigged!* You never had a fair, let alone equal, chance, and you won't. "Equality of Opportunity" is only a designer's label on the Emperor's new clothes. This is capitalism's dirty little secret. Once you know this secret and understand where and how it has been hidden, you can stop punishing yourself and your loved ones, and join in the struggle to change the rules of the game.

‡ In Essay Exams, it is generally wise to tackle your second best question first. If you answer the question you know most about first, there is a danger you will write too long and not leave enough time for other questions. Also, it takes a little while to warm up in an essay exam, and leaving the question you know most about for second increases the likelihood of doing your best on it. One of the worst answers I wrote on any exam was on the very question that I had been hoping would be there. I pounced on it immediately, but because I had so much to say it was very hard to finish. Then, noticing how little time I had left for the rest of the exam, I began to panic, and botched up the conclusion. I still have nightmares about this one.

After struggling and sacrificing through four or more years of university, you are ready to start a "career." Welcome to the world of part-time, temporary, "flexible," low paying, no benefit jobs, assuming you're lucky enough to find any job at all. It is estimated that over 30% of the work force is now part-time, and a majority of the new jobs created are now part-time and/or temporary. The owner of one agency that supplies temps and part-timers for businesses unashamedly admits we are creating a "new American sweat shop" made up of "disposable and throw-away workers." (*New York Times*, March 13, 1993) Is this what you've been preparing for?

In Bombay, India recently, the city government decided to do a major clean up and advertised for seventy jobs as rat catcher. There were 40,000 applicants, of whom half were college graduates. Just another

piece of Third World exotica? Or a chilling glimpse of what life in New York (and Toronto, and London) will be like five to ten years down the road?



‡ In Oral Exams, most questions are composed on the spot, which means that they can be very vague and even contradictory. An otherwise brilliant professor with whom I often worked needed two or three verbal whacks at what he was thinking before anyone knew what he was talking about. Yet, again and again, students, who were too respectful of authority, assumed his first words had to make sense, and fell all over themselves trying to respond. The other professors present always felt very sorry for the poor student, whose self-confidence would begin to disintegrate right before our eyes, but there was nothing we could do. So, in an oral exam, don't assume that when a question is unusually difficult the fault is yours. Ask for a clarification. Be sure you know exactly what is being asked before you start to answer.

“Take the bosses of the world’s 1,000 largest companies, accounting for 4/5 of the world’s industrial output, and 33 national leaders, including the president of the United States. Assemble them in a secluded Swiss ski resort, and then surround them with gun toting police. Is it any wonder that the annual meeting of the World Economic Forum in Davos this week has become, to some, a sign that there is a global economic conspiracy perpetuated by the white men in dark suits who run the world’s multi-national corporations? Many people—and not just the folk with ponytails and placards who disrupted last December’s meeting of the World Trade Organization in Seattle—now think of multi-nationals as more powerful than national states, and see them as bent on destroying livelihoods, the environment, left-wing political opposition and anything else that stands in the way of their profits.” (*Economist*, Jan 29, 2000)

The otherwise respectable *Economist* is quick to deny that this is true—chiefly by claiming that multi-nationals are a force for good—but the cat has been let out of the bag.

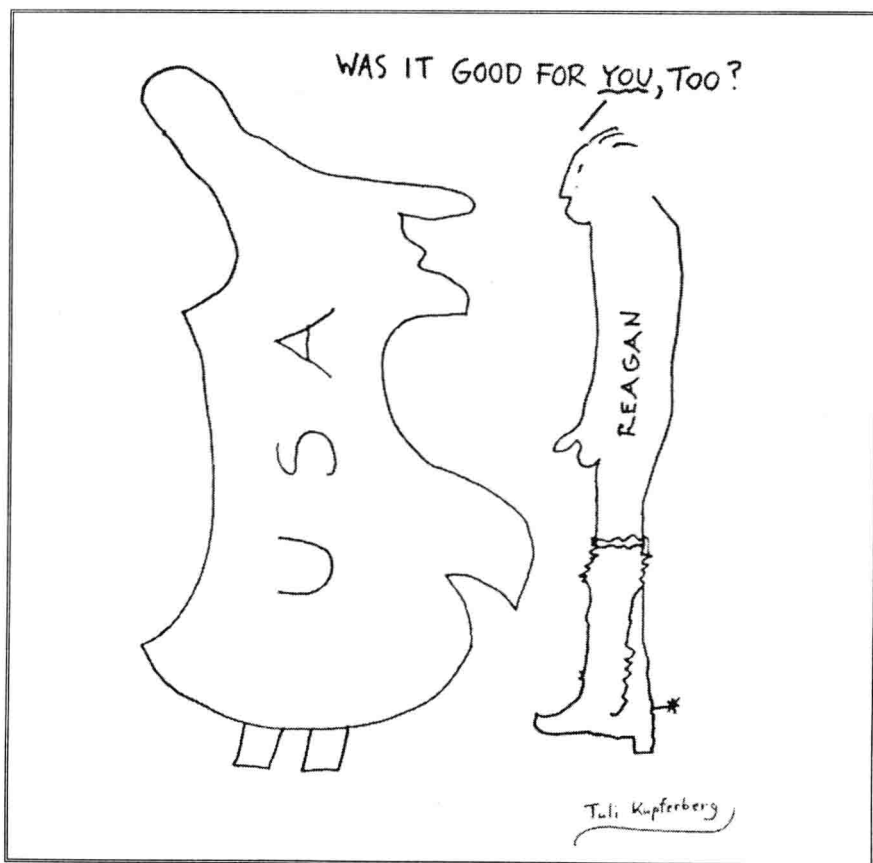
‡ What’s called “education” has taken many different forms over the centuries, just as its content has varied from A to Z, depending not only on what was known at the time but on the skills and personal qualities the rulers of each society wished to inculcate into their subjects. So in ancient Athens, for example, rhetoric occupied the central place on the curriculum. While teachers in Sparta were more likely to give practical instruction in swordsmanship and lectures on military valor. In medieval Europe, it was theology that received most of the attention. Yet, students everywhere probably believed that the kind of education they got is what “learning” is and has to be.

But once education is relativized in this way, two questions arise: 1) why do those who have power in our modern capitalist society want you to learn what you do and in the way(s) you do it? Given our special concern in this book, this translates into: Why so many

exams? And, 2) starting from your own needs and interests, what would you like to learn and how would you like to learn it? Here are a couple of Life-Exam questions worth taking a few days/weeks/years to mull over. Helping you answer them would be my idea of a “good education.”

Between 1983-1997, the productivity of American workers went up 17%, while their share of the wealth they produced went down 3.1%. They made more, but got less. Have you ever wondered what is fueling the rapid rise of values in the stock market? According to the English newspaper, *The Observer*, you need look no further:

“The market is not rising on a bubble of fictions but on the rock-hard foundations of the spoils of class war.” (*Jan 2, 2000*)



Of this new wealth, 85.5% has gone to the richest 1% of the population (268 of whom are billionaires), because they own 88% of all U.S. stocks and bonds. It appears that the well publicized increase in the number of people who own a few shares, either directly or through their pension funds, has had very little effect on the distribution of wealth in the country.

The same thing is happening in other capitalist countries. In England, for example, the wealth of the richest 200 people has doubled in the last ten years. Moving to a still more select circle, according to a U.N. Report, the richest 200 people in the world have doubled their wealth in the last four years. We also learn here that if these super-rich donated only 1% of their wealth, we could provide free primary education to every child in the world.

‡ In Multiple Choice Exams, when forced to guess, you can usually pass up choices that are very much alike, since no teacher wants to face a dozen angry students who can't understand why the answer they gave is wrong if it sounds—to them, at least—just like the answer said to be the correct one. On the other hand, if two answers are exact opposites, it is generally an indication that one of them is right, since few teachers would bother to think up the opposite to a wrong answer that is also wrong.

Despite popular myth, the U.S. does not do anything like as well providing for its ordinary citizens as it does in creating billionaires. Though it still produces far more wealth than any other country, the U.S. has fallen out of the top twenty on the U.N.'s Quality of Life Index, which includes such things as literacy, life expectancy, infant mortality, social services, and average income. A recent World Health Organization study (June, 2000) that graded countries on how well they met the health needs of their populations placed the United States 37th—yes, 37th!

There are, of course, many things where the U.S. is Number One in the world. Here's a short list: homicides (among young men, its

twenty times higher than in Western Europe), military expenditures, drug consumption, prison population, financial bailouts for failing capitalists, and national debt. When was the last time you took an exam when one of these facts was the right answer? Yet, there can't be too many things that are more important for students to know, that is if we are to set our social house in order. You might want to keep track of how many of the facts and ideas in this book have ever found their way into your exams on any subject.

‡ In Studying for an exam, you are a little in the position of the cook in a restaurant who is waiting to receive an order from a customer. You can't prepare the order ahead of time because you don't know what it will be (you don't know the exact questions that will be asked). So the best you can do is to stock up on the ingredients required by the dishes that are on the menu, taking special care not to run short of those that are used in several dishes. In Essay and Oral exams, no ingredient is likely to prove more important in developing good answers for a variety of questions than brief, sharp definitions of the key concepts in the field. Like the cook, you must make sure that there is enough of this particular ingredient on hand to meet all requests.

MEMORIAL SERVICE OF AN INDUSTRIALIST

What the Minister Says:

- Not for him the easy way of retirement
- Not everyone had the good fortune to be admitted to his company of friends...
- Never let family ties stand in the way of public duties
- ...a man of strong loyalties

What He Means:

- President of the company long after he became senile
- Everyone hated him
- Even his family hated him
- Prejudiced

What the Minister Says (cont'd):

- He retained the uncompromising blunt honesty of his Northern stock
- He gave special consideration to his women employees needs
- ...by no means oblivious to convivial aspects of life
- He possessed a fund of genial anecdotes
- ...devoted a long career to unostentatious service
- This is neither the time nor place to speak of his accomplishments

What He Means (cont'd):

- Racist
- Notorious for sexual harassment
- Drank like a fish
- Bored everybody with tired jokes
- Even the management forgot he existed
- He's not paying my salary anymore

Paul Buhl, with apologies to Max Shulman

Now you try it. Your newspapers and textbooks—perhaps even your professor's lectures—are full of statements begging for such deconstruction.

‡ In True/False Exams, there are usually more true than false statements if only because it takes extra time and imagination to come up with statements that are both credible and false. Teachers are very rushed, and never more so than when making up and marking exams. Thus, they are prone to take short-cuts. Knowing what these are likely to be puts you one up on the odds.

Idealism, American style (now percolating out to the rest of the globe), is the belief that it is possible to go into a Chinese restaurant, order pizza, and actually get it. For most of our compatriots, it is only a matter of wanting it badly enough, believing you'll succeed, willing it—banging the table, if need be—and refusing to take “no” for an answer. Whatever we get (or don't get), it's all up to us as individuals. Isn't that what we're taught?

Save your breath. You can hang around a Chinese restaurant all week, and be as obnoxious as you like, but they still won't bring you a pizza. Why? Because pizza is not on the menu. Society, too, offers each of us a menu, and the choices we have in any area of life are restricted to what's on that menu. One can never choose what is not there to be chosen. Marxism, at its simplest, can be viewed as the "science of menus," analyzing the different menus available to different social classes (you didn't think they eat what you do?), how these menus get drawn up and how they change, and what we can do—but only together—if we don't like the "diet" to which we have been condemned. Pizza anyone?

‡ If you were studying a military dictatorship, in Myanmar for example, and discovered that almost all of the members of the boards of trustees of their universities were generals, would you be justified in drawing certain conclusions about the nature of education in that country? You'd be dumb not to, right? Well, in the United States, it's businessmen, generally big businessmen and their lawyers, who dominate university boards of trustees.

Are these the most learned people in our society? The most public spirited? Because, in most cases, they aren't even paid for their services. Well, what are they doing there? What's in it for them, and how does that affect your education, even your exams? Perhaps there are students in Myanmar who have never asked themselves this kind of question, but somehow I doubt it.

The Hollywood producer, Samuel Goldwyn, said, "Sincerity is everything. If you can fake that, you've got it made." One of the actors who worked for him learned this lesson so well that he went on to become President of the United States.

"Have we gone beyond the bounds of reasonable dishonesty?"—C.I.A. in a memo made available in General Westmoreland's libel suit relating to the Viet Nam War