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Battling for Hearts and Minds

Administrative culture is becoming ever more dominant, but contingent faculty offer vigorous opposition.

By Marc Bousquet

Please allow me to introduce myself, I'm a man of wealth and taste. I go by many names. Doctor, Boss, Sir, Chairman, Gentleman, Scholar, Dean, Pillar of the Community, Cheap Bastard, but you can call me the Administrator.

—Joe Camhi, *Screw U, A Play in One Act*

There are many ways of understanding the “corporatization” of the university. One valuable approach focuses on how campuses in quest of “revenue enhancement” or “cost containment” actually relate to business and industry: apparel sales; sports marketing; corporate financing of research, curriculum, endowment, and building; job training; direct financial investment; the production and enclosure of intellectual property; the selection of vendors for books, information technology, soda pop, and construction; and the purchase and provision of nonstandard labor.

Those pursuing this line of analysis include diverse bedfellows. On the unabashed right wing are those celebrating commercialization. On the left are those who expose the workings of corporate power and corruption in higher education. Centrists like former Harvard president Derek Bok and public-policy professor David Kirp, while sympathetic to the concerns of the left wing, see no alternative to “making peace with the marketplace.”

An important alternative understanding of the transformation of the university focuses not on commercialization but on organizational culture. This approach avoids the “victim of history” narrative, in which there is no alternative to commercialization. At least since the early 1970s, when labor economist Clark Kerr theorized the “multiversity” and sociologist

David Reisman chronicled the rise of “student power” over “faculty dominance,” it has been useful to view the academy as a complex organization hosting multiple, generally competing institutional groups, each with its own evolving culture, and, further, to see cultural change as related to the struggle between the groups.

Management’s Kulturkampf

Most studies of organizational culture in higher education consider the rise, through the 1960s, of three increasingly distinct cultures—faculty, student, and administration. These studies have focused primarily on student and faculty cultures. However, the conditions that supported the flourishing of those cultures no longer exist. The increasing economic segmentation of higher education, and the long period of political reaction that began around 1980, have diminished any sense of a vital “student culture” (with the exception of the graduate-employee labor movement, of which more below). Since the 1960s, the faculty have certainly organized—with greater and lesser success, depending on numerous variables—but the sense of a “faculty culture” has also been undermined as the instructional workforce has fragmented, with only a minority remaining on the tenure track.

The culture of campus administrations, on the other hand, has moved in the opposite direction—becoming ever more internally consistent and cohesive. The increased dominance of administration has much to do with its capacity to transmit its values and norms to other campus groups. Management is often aligned against the faculty (say, when the faculty seeks to bargain collectively or to make shared governance meaningful). But even when not aimed at defeating a particular initiative, management culture is pitched toward continuous struggle with faculty culture. Informed by trends in corporate management, administration has turned away from the human-resources model of developing individual potential and

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taken as its goal instead the transformation of institutional culture. Administrative solidarity is continuously shored up in opposition to the attitudes, behaviors, and norms believed to describe traditional faculty culture. Faculty values and practices targeted for “change” generally include those associated with relative autonomy over the direction of research and the conduct of teaching.

To a certain extent, the cultural approach to studying the corporatization of the university simply provides an assessment of the extent to which administration has accomplished its overt agenda. A significant fraction of tenure-stream faculty readily engage in the commercialization of research, the enclosure of intellectual property, and market behavior such as competition for scraps of “merit pay”; they also take an increasingly managerial role over other campus workers. With the spread of acceptance among the tenured faculty of academic-capitalist values, there is little evidence of anything that resembles an “oppositional culture.” Indeed, it has become increasingly difficult to speak of anything resembling “faculty culture.” Of course, there are exceptions, and self-consciously militant faculties have made their mark in California, New York, Vermont, and elsewhere. But even

most unionized faculties have not addressed such core issues as the creation, over the past twenty years, of a majority contingent workforce.

Contingent Faculty Rise Up

Nonetheless, an emergent and vigorous culture of faculty opposition exists—just not in the tenured and tenurable minority. Instead, the rising faculty culture belongs to the unionization movements of contingent faculty and graduate employees, who together comprise what the AAUP accurately terms the “new majority faculty.” As little as one-third of all faculty are in the tenure stream—perhaps less than a quarter if graduate students working as instructors of record are included.

It might at first seem difficult to speak of a culture of the contingent workforce. The precarious position of this group is designed to disable solidarity, face-to-face encounters, and the emergence of a sense of common culture and communal interest. Graduate student employees and contingent faculty are challenged not only by the employer when organizing, but also by other workers, some of them tenure-stream faculty (who may use their control of senates, departments, and disciplinary associations to maintain their dominance). Sometimes the tenured use their unions to advantage themselves while bargaining the multitier system of academic labor into existence. The purchase of contingent faculty on the term “faculty” itself is precarious, as activist Joe Berry has underlined: “Every time a [tenure-track faculty member] or administrator uses the word ‘faculty’ to refer only to the full-time tenure-track faculty, one more piece of grit is ground into the eye of any contingent within earshot.”

Despite the precarious hold that the contingent have on their very identity as faculty, they have succeeded in forging a culture that sustains and promotes a movement to transform policy, standards, knowledge, appropriations, and the law itself. The plays, films, testimony, and propaganda of contingent faculty are active contributions to a culture war with administration, each event an element in the struggle over the meaning of the language that structures our working lives—terms like “faculty,” “fairness,” “part time,” and “quality.” On a Washington State campus, activists sold full- and part-time cookies, with the part-time cookies identical to full-time cookies—except that they cost at least 50 percent less. In California, Coalition of Contingent Academic Labor (COCAL) activists dressed as “freeway flyers” disrupted public spaces and distributed “scholar dollars,” valued illustratively at the 37 cents on the dollar paid contingent faculty for the same work performed by the tenured. For one of the street theater pieces performed at Oregon’s Portland Community College with the intention of “organizing the community” as well as the workforce, adjunct faculty scheduled their office hours at an outdoor trash can (labeled “Ad-Junked Faculty Office”), and some instructors and willing students wore signs identifying them as “Ad-Junked Faculty” and “Students.”

California part-timer Joe Camhi’s play *Screw U*, also scripted for the COCAL series of events, introduces an archetypal administrator, costumed in business suit and horns, employing quotations from the Rolling Stones’ “Sympathy for the Devil.” Camhi’s fiend provides a classic illustration of managerial speed-up of the work process, first demonstrating the administration’s view of the proper (that is, negligible) time investment in preparing for a class or responding to student work, then barking “hurry!” and “shift gears!” at a hapless adjunct faculty member with a moderately slower-paced idea of “quality” in the educational process. The curricular demands that “total-quality” management place on the overstressed faculty member quickly push the meaning of “academic specialty” into the realm of the

absurd, with Camhi's administrator continually interrupting the adjunct's lecture with a sequence of syllabi for a dozen classes with eight different specializations. "How many damned classes am I teaching?" the "part-time" adjunct finally explodes in protest. "How many classes do full-time faculty teach?" The truth of the administrator's answer—that "full-time" faculty often teach just two or three classes—is an extraordinary moment in the skit, one that defamiliarizes the distinction between part- and full-time teaching even for those who "know" why part-time teaching can mean much more than a full-time load. It is an absurd moment in the narrow, technical sense of literary absurdity—the dizzying contingency of the adjunct's existence, structured by language and policy continuously available to radical evacuation by administration, becomes, for a moment, a window into the common condition, capitalism's permanently temporary structure of feeling.

The confrontational dimension of Camhi's skit—naming the administration as the horned devil—is a common thread in the organizing culture of contingent faculty. COCAL activist Julie Ivey's song parody, "We Are Teachers!" rewrites Helen Reddy's "I Am Woman" by way of the Who with an emphasis upon collective defiance: "Hear us roar. . . . No one's ever gonna make us beg or crawl again!" And the image of faculty "begging" and "crawling" before administration has its effect not only on the faculty but also on students, for whom the notion of faculty as authority is a core belief.

Raising Consciousness

In response to administration's war on faculty culture, these faculty activists are building a culture of opposition—of "naming the enemy," of raising the consciousness of those who work and reaching the sensibilities of those potentially in alliance, such as students, parents, legislators, and tenure-stream faculty. A series of successful unionization efforts among contingent faculty, together with increasing legislative support placing limits on the "permatemping" of the faculty, demonstrate that these skits, cartoons, films, Weblogs, moments of witness, and guerilla theater pieces can be effective.

At Portland Community College, faculty testimony at a campus meeting about their working lives abruptly raised student and community consciousness, as the unmistakably shocked tone of the recorded testimony from student Melanie Serrou indicates:

Basically, I just want to say to your president, the board, that the stories I've heard tonight baffle me. I have a personal story, but I'm not going to share it with you because you've heard enough personal stories. I had no idea this problem was an issue. I talked about it with my [student council] president. She had no idea. We students rely on teachers. We rely on them being there. We rely on their service—and they provide it! I've had part-time teachers, many part-time teachers. I'm in a professional/technical program, and they give you service. They put in more hours than they ever get paid for. Twelve—thousand—dollars makes me sick! Oh—my—gosh.

I—I didn't even know how to react to that. Teachers going from one campus to the other? Four and five different colleges? What is this country coming to? Where is this school—I know it's not just at PCC, I know it's across the nation—but it starts at one school. We can, we can start a trend for other schools. We can make a difference. I mean—just think about, think about everything you've heard tonight, because—it made a difference to me.

In the aftermath of this realization Serrou went to work as a legislative assistant for the union.

The history of the relationship between contingent faculty and the unions of tenure-stream faculty serving directly as their bargaining agents is checkered; often enough, the unions of the tenured have collaborated with administration in the creation of multiple tiers of employment. For this reason, some graduate student employees have elected to work with representatives outside of the three organizations that together represent nearly all unionized tenure-stream faculty (the American Federation of Teachers, the National Education Association, and the AAUP), instead working with representation as diverse as the Communications Workers of America; the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees; the Service Employees International Union; and, notably, the United Auto Workers.

But that is changing as the militant strain of contingent faculty culture is having an impact on the culture of the tenure-stream minority and the unions that represent them. Now the major bargaining agents in higher education are increasingly eager to organize the contingent—not least because they are the majority of faculty, and because there are far

fewer legal barriers than is the case with graduate student employees or tenure-stream faculty on private campuses.

This essay is excerpted from *How the University Works: Higher Education and the Low-Wage Nation* (New York University Press, 2008).

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