

The Waste Product of Graduate Education

TOWARD A DICTATORSHIP OF THE FLEXIBLE

Marc Bousquet

Leftist universalism proper does not involve any kind of return to some neutral universal content (a common notion of humanity, etc.): rather, it refers to a universal which comes to exist (which becomes “for itself,” to put it in Hegelese) only in a particular element which is structurally displaced, “out of joint”: within a given social Whole, it is precisely the element which is prevented from actualizing its full particular identity that stands for its universal dimension. The Greek *demos* stood for universality not because it covered the majority of the population, nor because it occupied the lowest place within the social hierarchy, but because *it had no proper place within this hierarchy*, but was a site of conflicting, self-cancelling determinations—or, to put it in contemporary terms, a site of performative contradictions (they were addressed as equals—participating in the community of *logos*—in order to be informed that they were excluded from this community).

—Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject*

Like many scholars of my cohort, I entered graduate school in 1991 informed by a common sense about academic work significantly influenced by the projections of the 1989 Bowen report, which projected what it emphasized would be “a *substantial* excess demand for faculty in the arts and sciences” by the mid-1990s, with the consequence that early in the new millennium we could expect “roughly four candidates for every five positions.” The department administrators who recruited me into the profession were of the thoughtful and concerned variety: they were up on the literature and very glad to inform me that something called the “job market” would radically improve just six years in the future. There had been a cycle of bad times for holders of the Ph.D., they admitted, but prosperity was just around the corner. During the early 1990s, buoyed in part by the election of a Democrat to the White House, liberal newspapers and major disciplinary associations recirculated the Bowen projections with a sense of relief and general optimism: with the certain onset of universal health coverage, could full employment for English faculty be far behind? David Lawrence, MLA’s staffer for its association of chairs of English departments (ADE), wrote with typical emotion when he enthused, “Friends, the future we’ve all been waiting for is about to arrive” (1). As late as 1995, disciplinary associations and scholars on the state of the profession such as David Damrosch gave serious credence to the Bowen

projections of “increased demand” for the academic employment of holders of the doctoral degree. (In fact, as of this writing, the report of the American Philosophical Association on employment issues, republished on many department Web sites, still gives credence to the Bowen projections.) It wasn’t until 1994 that the *Chronicle of Higher Education* finally ran a short item questioning the validity of the report (Magner 1994). Over the next couple of years, most disciplinary associations, somewhat reluctantly, gave up citing the Bowen projections of a rosy future.

It is easy enough to measure the difference between the five jobs for every four candidates projected by Bowen and the reality of .25 or .30 jobs per candidate. The reporters of the *Chronicle* and one or two angry reviewers of Bowen’s subsequent work have made a point of revisiting the rather startling gap between projection and reality (Magner 1994; Rice 1999). But the more important and interesting question is analytical: what was wrong with Bowen’s assumptions that he strayed so outrageously into fantasy? And what was it about these projections that generated such a warm and uncritical welcome? Essentially, Bowen’s “method” was to impose neoliberal market ideology on data that attest, instead, to the unfolding process of casualization. Most egregiously, for instance, when confronted with data that increasing numbers of doctoral degree holders had been taking nonacademic work since the 1970s, Bowen ignores the abundant testimony by graduate students that this dislocation from the academy was involuntary and imposes the ideology of “free choice” on the phenomenon, generating the claim that this ever-upward “trend” shows that even more people will “choose” similarly, with the result that he projects a need to *increase* graduate school admissions (to compensate for the ever-increasing numbers of people who “choose” nonacademic work). This error is only one element in an overall methodological neoliberalism that assumes the academic labor system operates as a “market” that, by unwarranted analogy to other markets in the business cycle, has a “natural” boom-bust pattern. In order to manufacture an empirically existing “job market” out of data that indicate a labor system running on the continual substitution of student and casual labor for faculty, Bowen has to virtually exclude the labor of students, full-time lecturers, and part-time faculty from his model of the labor system. This is like modeling the solar system without the sun: he populates his “universe of faculty” with only twelve thousand part-timers, whereas the National Study of the Post-Secondary Faculty (NSOPF) saw more than a quarter million (and felt its numbers deeply undercounted). Furthermore, Bowen’s projections rest on the counterfactual assumption that “institutions always *want* to have more faculty and will add faculty positions *when they can afford to do so*” (153; Bowen’s emphasis)—when every nook and cranny of the public discourse

on the question holds reams of evidence attesting that what institutions “want” is to accumulate capital and conserve labor costs by casualizing faculty positions by any means available: early retirement, expanded graduate programs, outsourcing, distance education, deskilling, and the like. Bowen’s response to the “bear market” in academic hiring 1970–89 was, in a sense, predetermined: he started out looking for the complementary swing of the pendulum, what he viewed as the inevitable bull market in academic hiring, and he found it.

But Bowen is hardly alone in erroneously imposing market ideology on data about the structure and relations of academic labor. The interpretive engine driving Bowen’s projections—the notion that there is a “job market” in academic labor (a notion that has to be held distinct from true “labor market” analyses) is nearly universal throughout the academy. *Prospects for the Faculty in the Arts and Sciences* is merely the high-water mark in what I call the second wave of thinking about academic work as labor. (The first wave springs out of the movement for unionization of the faculty in the sixties and seventies.) Inextricable from the advances of neoliberalism more generally and the specific contingencies of the expansion of graduate programs in service of casualization, second-wave knowledge about higher education working conditions takes aim at the right juncture (the linkages between graduate education and academic employment more generally) but does so with an astonishingly wrong-headed set of ideas that gained currency steadily through the 1970s, achieved dominance through the 1980s and, while contested by a third wave of knowledge produced by the graduate employee union movement, remains dominant at this writing. This second-wave ideology is more of a “vulgar liberalism” than a committed neoliberalism, a kind of accidental neoliberalism produced by the wildly inaccurate application to higher education working conditions of dimly remembered chestnuts from Econ 101.

The central tenet of second-wave ideology is our tendency to talk about tenure-track job advertisements as the “demand” and recent degree holders as the “supply” for an annual job “market” overseen by professional associations such as the MLA. While this language originally served as analogy, the terms hardened under neoliberalism into a positive heuristic, serving as a kind of half-baked approximation of labor-market analysis, with the ideological force of separating thinking about graduate education from the labor consciousness of the faculty. Whereas faculty might bargain collectively on their own behalf, the theory of the job market prescribed that concerned academic citizens (that is, not graduate employee labor itself) could resolve the “problem of the graduate student” by balancing “supply” and “demand.” Job market theory separates the work-

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place issues of the graduate employee from the workplace issues of the faculty and sweepingly defines the workplace relation of faculty to students in paternal, administrative, and managerial terms. Whatever actions faculty might take to secure “their own” working conditions, job market theory defines their responsibility toward graduate students and former graduate students as participating in the administration of the “market.” From a labor perspective, job market theory disables the practice of solidarity and helps to legitimate the tiering of the workforce.

The dominant heuristic of market sustains the general conviction that the system of graduate education produces more degree holders than necessary, and that this “overproduction” can be controlled “from the demand side” by encouraging early retirements and “from the supply side” by shrinking graduate programs. In the reality of structural casualization, however, the jobs of professors taking early retirement are eliminated, not filled with new degree holders. In the same context, reducing graduate school admissions does not magically create tenure-track jobs. While most graduate schools admit students to fill specific labor needs—always producing just enough labor, just in time—and so cannot reduce admissions without making other arrangements for the work that graduate employees would otherwise have performed, universities that have cut their graduate employee rolls have consistently preferred to make other flexible arrangements, hiring part-timers or nontenurable lecturers and not new faculty. Insofar as these new flex workers are themselves inevitably former graduate employees, there can hardly be said to be any net improvement. In this context, the idea of a “job market” operates rhetorically and not descriptively, serving largely to legitimate and produce faculty passivity and union complicity in the face of this wholesale restructuring of the academic workplace by activist legislatures and administrations. By offering faculty the fantasy of supply-side control from the desktop, the “job market” fiction has kept most faculty—even unionized faculty—as well as many but not all graduate students from a simple yet vital understanding: to address a political, social, and workplace transformation, it is necessary to take political, social, and workplace action.

The idea of the market supports the belief that changes in the system of academic work are rational, directed by large impersonal forces beyond the response of the professoriat. The staying power of the market analogy has to do with its capacity to provide an imaginary solution—the invisible hand—to a real problem. The analogy to the market has almost no utility for analyzing the employment prospects of holders of the Ph.D. Under present arrangements, the pool of tenure-stream positions is not primarily affected by forces such as “demand” for education or student enrollment

but rather by policy decisions made by legislatures, administrations, and bodies of accreditation (about who will teach and under what conditions, and so on). Addressing these real problems of policy requires the faculty to struggle in these arenas, where the emergence of what Sheila Slaughter and Larry Leslie (1997) distinguish as “market-like” faculty behavior has been engineered by those with an ideological commitment to bringing “academic capitalism” into being. In this context, the emergence of the rhetoric of “market” in graduate education is better seen as the advance guard of marketization processes through higher education more generally, presenting as rational and inevitable the commodification of the university in the service of more efficient accumulation. The power of job market theory to disorganize academic labor is hardly limited to the graduate employee. Higher education faculty are among the most unionized of all working persons—44 percent as opposed to 14 percent of the working population—and yet this has been at best a very flawed unionism, grossly complicit with management’s creation of multiple tiers of super-exploitation. Indeed, despite the impressive penetration of unionism in the profession, the salaries of faculty have stagnated enormously against the average wage—more than nearly any other occupation. That stagnation has to come directly from the faculty unions’ failure to assert even such basic principles against super-exploitation as parity or equal pay for equal work. The idea that the problems of the degree holder are problems of “the market” and not problems for the faculty to address has mystified the degradation, deskilling, and underpricing of faculty work—when it is obvious that of course their working conditions will inevitably converge on the super-exploitation of the contingent laborers working in their midst. Understanding the dissemination of second-wave market ideology regarding the labor of graduate employees through disciplinary and even collective-bargaining circuits is a key component of understanding exactly how faculty unions have failed to address the structural realities of academic labor.

The rhetorical rather than descriptive character of the flourishing field that we might call “job market studies” is underlined by the fact that it has grown in direct proportion to its *inability* to describe the reality of the labor system: the whole point of the explosive casualization implemented by university management since 1968 has been to increasingly *eradicate* anything that can be called an “academic job market” or a place for holders of the Ph.D. to “sell their labor.”

But this brings up a reasonable question: if the linkage between graduate education and the system of academic labor more generally is improperly described as a market, how should it be described? If that improper description has been circulated by graduate faculty, university

management, and the officers of disciplinary organizations—and that improper description has been largely accepted by organized faculty labor—who has a better description?

Which brings us to the title of this essay. The core of any redescription of the linkage between graduate education and the system of academic labor more generally has to begin by discarding the Fordist assumption that the situation of the doctoral degree holder can be grasped by a manufacturing analogy to production. Under casualization, it makes very little sense to view the graduate student as potentially a product for the job market: most graduate students are already laboring at the only academic job they'll ever have. (Hence the importance for organized graduate student labor of inscribing the designation “graduate employee” in law and discourse.) From this standpoint, it has to be acknowledged that increasingly the holders of the doctoral degree are not so much the products of the graduate employee labor system as its by-products, insofar as that that labor system exists primarily to recruit, train, supervise, and legitimate the employment of nondegreed rather than degreed teachers. This is not to say that the system doesn't produce and employ holders of the Ph.D., only that this operation has become secondary to its extraction of teaching labor from nondegreed persons, primarily graduate employees and former graduate employees now working as adjunct labor—as part-timers, full-time lecturers, postdocs, and so on.

This essay argues that the organized graduate employee has a better description. Against the dominant second-wave heuristic of the “job market,” and as a corrective to the lapsed and too-often residual labor knowledge of the first wave of faculty unionism, a third wave of thinking about academic labor is emergent in the graduate employee union movement. While this emergent knowledge is based in the particular experience of casualization by two generations of graduate employees and former graduate employees, I hope in the next few pages to suggest that it is not only a better knowledge of the “local” circumstance of the graduate employee (because how can the graduate employee be localized, exactly? Every other “location” in the system, from perma-temp to university president, is filled by someone who has been a graduate employee) but, further, that this third wave is an emergent better knowledge of the labor system as a totality. Consistent with the insights of psychoanalytic Marxism, it is in the graduate employees' character as incipient by-products, their understanding that the system's constant pressure is not toward their incorporation but toward compelling their recognition that they must serve as the system's indigestible remainder, that provides the partial standpoint from which we can most usefully and justly accept a description of the whole.

Under the general neoliberal onslaught, the notion of “market” serves as the only available heuristic for thinking at the level of totality: in this airless environment, even the slightest displacement of market logic yields insight into a very different underlying reality. One doesn’t have to become wildly unconventional to accomplish this displacement. For instance: it is perfectly conventional for scholars of professional work more generally to employ the heuristic of a labor monopoly rather than a labor “market.” (The best application of a labor-market mode of analysis to academic work might include the concept of segmentation: asking, for example, how is it that women comprise a vast majority in the casual sector and a distinct minority in the tenured sector.) Monopoly control of professional labor generally reflects a social bargain made by professional associations that exchange a service mission with the public for substantial control over the conditions of their work, generally including deciding who gets to practice. In a professionalized police culture, for instance, only the graduates of police academies may practice, and the police unions, like professional associations, supervise this instruction and apprenticeship and safeguard the employment conditions of these recruits against the deprivations of would-be amateur and volunteer police practitioners. From this perspective, the ideological literalization of the “job-market” analogy may be seen as having obscured the very useful possibility of describing the academic labor system in perfectly scholarly and conventional terms as a failed monopoly of professional labor. That is: postsecondary educators generally fulfill the service mission that constitutes their half of the bargain, and society in return continues to grant them monopoly control over degrees, but the labor monopoly fails because degree holding no longer represents control over who may practice.¹

Indeed, the inescapable observation must be this: under casualization, *degree holding increasingly represents a disqualification from practice*. The ultimate refutation to job market theory is that, in observing that the holder of the doctoral degree is the “waste product of graduate education,” we are only moving toward an acknowledgment of simple fact.

For most graduate employees, the receipt of the Ph.D. signifies the end—and not the beginning—of a long teaching career. Degree holders frequently serve as university teachers for eight or ten years before earning their doctorate. In English departments, a degree holder will have taught many writing classes, perhaps also a literature survey or theme class, even an upper-division seminar related to his or her field of study. Many degree holders have served as adjunct lecturers at other campuses, sometimes teaching M.A. students and advising their theses en route to

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their own degrees. Some will have taught thirty to forty sections, or the equivalent of five to seven years' full-time teaching work. During this time, they received frequent mentoring and regular evaluation; most will have a large portfolio of enthusiastic observations and warm student commendations. A large fraction will have published essays and book reviews and authored their departmental Web pages. Yet at precisely the juncture that this "preparation" should end and regular employment begin—the acquisition of the Ph.D.—the system embarrasses itself and discloses a horrible truth that every recent degree holder knows and few administrators wish to acknowledge: under the actually existing system of graduate education, the terminal degree is no longer the beginning of one's teaching career but the logical end of that career.

Acknowledging that the receipt of the doctorate names the end of many long teaching careers asks us to confront the reality of casualization. As presently constructed, the system of academic work requires persons who have the terminal M.A. or the M.Phil., or who are ABD—ideally persons who have a well-paid partner or other means of support enabling them to teach for wages below the poverty line for an extended period of time without undue suffering.² Without a degree and presupposing another source of income, persons of this description can and do teach virtually forever. The system cannot run without persons who are doing or who have done graduate study, quite frequently persons who can be represented as on some long trajectory toward the terminal doctorate. For our analysis, the inescapable point must be this: all of these nondegreed persons—graduate employees and former graduate employees working on an adjunct basis—are the "products" of the system of graduate education in the same way that persons who hold the Ph.D. are its product. Indeed, these other "products" are what the labor system produces to sustain itself. The system "really needs" a continuous flow of replaceable nondegreed labor. As presently constructed, the academic labor system requires few if any new degree holders—but it gasps and sputters when there is a tiny interruption in the steady stream of new graduate students (hence the appearance of employment contracts in admittance packets).³

What needs to be quite clear is that this is not a "system out of control," a machine with a thrown rod or blown gasket. Quite the contrary: it's a smoothly functioning new system with its own easily apprehensible logic, a logic premised entirely on the continual replacement of degree holders with nondegreed labor. The plight of recent degree holders encapsulates this logic. Let us say that Jane Doe has taught sections 101-97 and 101-98 for the past seven years and, for the past four, women's studies 205, a special topics course fulfilling a university-wide diversity requirement. Upon earning the degree (or in many circumstances much earlier),

Doe becomes ineligible to teach those sections, unless given a special waiver or postdoctoral invitation. The reason most universities limit the number of years a graduate student is “eligible to teach” is to ensure a smooth flow of new persons into the system. The many “exceptions” to these eligibility rules are the expression of this labor pool’s flexibility, enabling the administration to be confident that it can deliver low-cost teaching labor “just in time” to any point on the factory floor.

This system has no trouble bringing persons in through its primary gateways: admission to a graduate program at a research university. Its only problem is disposing of them after it has extracted six to ten years of their labor, to make room for new cheap teachers. This logic of replacement creates many local ironies. Because persons who are declared “ineligible to teach” by a graduate program frequently serve as flexible labor at other campuses, it is often at the junior colleges and other less-prestigious locations that the most experienced and dedicated flexible faculty can be found. That is: whereas the flexible labor at research universities with graduate programs will typically have between zero and five years of experience, the flexible labor at junior colleges will typically have between five and twenty years of experience. These local ironies are important because they make clear that the system’s logic is not designed to provide better teaching even at the richest schools: it is designed to accommodate capital accumulation, which transpires with greater efficiency at the richest schools.

To the extent that our understanding of casualization continues to be grafted onto the assumptions of the job market theory of graduate education, we have continued to flounder epistemologically. Thinking about casualization means abandoning the vividly counterfactual job market premise, that doctoral education functions primarily to create a “supply” of teachers with the Ph.D., and asking instead: What does it mean that the primary function of the vast web of doctoral education is to provide the university with teachers who *don’t* hold the doctorate?

Any real examination of graduate education and casualization leads inescapably to the conclusion that the real “labor market” in the academy is a market in the labor of persons without the terminal degree. And if this is true, the creation of persons holding the doctorate may be more properly named a “by-product” of the graduate employee system: persons who don’t hold the degree are inherently more “marketable” than persons who do. That is, this is a system that creates holders of the Ph.D. but doesn’t have much use for them. Indeed, the buildup of degree holders in the system represents a potentially toxic blockage. The academic labor system produces degree holders largely in the sense that a car’s engine produces heat—a tiny fraction of which is recycled into the car’s interior by the

cabin heater, but the vast majority of which figures as waste energy that the system urgently requires to be radiated away. The system of academic labor creates degree holders only out of a tiny fraction of the employees it takes in by way of graduate education: leaving aside the use of M.A. students as instructional staff, doctoral programs in the humanities typically award the Ph.D. to between 20 and 40 percent of their entrants. And the system employs only perhaps a third of the degree holders it makes. Like a car's engine idling in the takeout food line, the system's greatest urgency is to dispel most of the degree-holding waste product.

From the perspective of casualization, the possibility of a toxic buildup of degree holders is not, as commonly maintained by job market theorists, the result of "too many" graduate students. On the contrary, it is precisely the nature of perma-temping to arrange that there are always "just enough" graduate students and other nondegreed flex workers to be delivered "just in time" to serve the university's labor needs. It is in the interest and logic of the system to have as many graduate students as it can employ while producing the fewest number of degrees—or, better yet, to produce persons with degrees who don't make a claim for permanent academic employment. This is one of the reasons why graduate school administrations have recently promoted the Marie Antoinette or "let them eat cake" theory of graduate education: "Why, if they cannot find teaching work, let them be screenwriters!" This is a kind of excrement theory for managers, through which the degree holder figures as a horrible stain or blot, an embarrassment that the system is hysterically trying to scrape from its shoes. By institutionalizing the practice of preparing degree holders for "alternate careers," the system's managers are creating a radiator or waste pipe to flush away persons whose teaching services are no longer required—precisely because they now hold the degree.

In suggesting the need for an "excrement theory" to replace market theories of graduate education, I am in a way only insisting upon the urgency of recognizing the already excremental circumstance of the degree holder. Persons who actually hold the terminal degree are the traumatic Real puncturing the collective fantasy powering this system. Degree in hand, loans coming due, the working partner expecting a more fair financial contribution, perhaps the question of children growing relevant, the degree holder asks a question to which the system has no answer: if I have been a splendid teacher and scholar while nondegreed for the past ten years, why am I suddenly unsuitable? The answer to this question is the one that makes us writhe with humiliation: only the degree itself renders the previously splendid teacher suddenly an undesirable waste product.

Nearly all of the administrative responses to the degree holder can already be understood as responses to waste: flush it, ship it to the prov-

inces, recycle it through another industry, keep it away from the fresh meat. Until graduate employees have an excrement theory of their own, they will continue to grasp their circumstance incompletely—that is, that they feel “treated like shit”—without grasping the systemic reality that they *are* waste. Insofar as graduate employees feel “treated like” waste, they can maintain the fantasy that they really exist elsewhere, in some place other than the overwhelmingly excremental testimony of their experience. This fantasy becomes an alibi for inaction, because in this construction agency lies elsewhere, with the administrative touch on the flush-chain. The affect of people who feel “treated like” waste is an appeal to some other agent: please stop treating us this way. Which is to say to that outside agent, “please recognize that we are not waste,” even when that benevolent recognition is contrary to the testimony of our understanding. (And it is of course only good management to tell the exploited and super-exploited, “Yes, I recognize your dignity. You are special.”) Persons who have the grasp of the totality of the system that proceeds from the understanding that they are indeed the waste of that system—persons who know they are not merely “treated like” waste but are in fact the actual shit of the system, being churned inexorably toward the outside, not merely “disposable” labor but labor *that must be disposed of* for the system to work—these are persons who can perform acts of blockage. They are the system’s constitutive exterior: without expelling the degree holder, the system could not be what it is. The difference in consciousness between feeling treated like waste and knowing one’s excremental condition is the difference between experiencing casualization as “local disorder” (which authority will soon rectify) and having the grasp of one’s potential for transforming the systemic realities of an actually existing new order. Where the degree-holding waste product understands its capacity for blockage and refuses to be expelled, the system organizing the inside must rapidly succumb.

There are obviously many ways of writing about the casualization of academic work. The larger picture is of the corporatization of the university and the informationalization of higher education (so that some pale fraud going by the name of education can be delivered in the way information is delivered: “just in time” and “on demand”). I wish to state unequivocally: To these problems generally and to the specific pressure point of graduate student experience, the only solution is the continual mobilization of a united and activist movement of faculty, graduate employees, and students consistent with the most inclusive forms of unionization. And the specific philosophies of mobilization appropriate to unionism by members of the academic community will inevitably be those that seek to bring down the barriers between academic work and other kinds of work,

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to struggle with the exceptionalism associated with “mental” labor generally.⁴ The affiliation of many of the UC graduate employee locals with UAW and the social-movement unionism of CUNY Professional Staff Congress’s New Caucus instantiate these achieved and continuously achievable realities. Ultimately, the most helpful standpoint from which to initiate action will be one that sees contingent labor as the experience of two generations of young people in North America and globally, one that sees the university as a dynamic node of post-Fordist employment from the sweatshop to the classroom.

In this enlarged context, it is fair to ask: Why bother to talk about the doctoral degree holder at all, when the experience of contingency is general, or at least generational? Isn’t it frivolous to speak of an “excrement theory” of graduate education when the democratic promise of higher education is eroding everywhere around us? Don’t we just need more clear positive knowledge regarding flex work? In the big picture, just how important are the problems of underemployed holders of doctoral degrees anyway?

Insisting on the need for an excrement theory of graduate education is in a way making an argument for privileging the systemic location of the degree holder. Without a theory of the waste product—the system’s constitutive exterior—we have so far utterly failed to see that the effects of academic casualization are immanent throughout the system (not merely “local” to the casualized). For thirty years the bad knowledge of “markets” for degree holders has enabled faculty unions and disciplinary associations alike to accommodate the creation of a two-tier labor system, the most dramatically tiered labor system in North America. With the exception of the City University of New York, no faculty labor union has ever bargained for graduate students and other flex workers under the basic principle of collective bargaining: parity, or equal pay for equal work. Faculty bargaining agents have accepted the collective fantasy regarding the waste of the labor system, that graduate employees are being “trained” for future jobs, not toiling in the only academic job they will ever have. Subtract the largely imaginary relationship of most graduate employee labor to a future job, and the systemic effects of that labor are visible as the effects of casualized second-tier labor in any workplace: management domination of the work rules, speedup, moonlighting, grossly depressed wages for everyone.

Without a theory of the specificity of the degree holder’s location in the system, the logic of replacement governing this system of disposable labor has been consistently mistaken as a problem only for the relatively small constituency of the graduate student. For instance, the total compatibility of the cheap teaching system with capital accumulation has

enabled most schools (or the public funding them) to spend money on other things besides teaching labor—to engage in vast building programs, to create enormous endowments, to launch new programs and services, and so on. From this perspective, one might sentimentally deplore the way that graduate students are exploited by being cycled out of the system after a period of service and debt accumulation but go on to feel that “other constituencies” are surely benefiting from new stadiums, business centers, and prisons. The money saved by cheap teaching surely benefits some people, and if the only people harmed are a few graduate students, or persons whose other sources of income allow them to teach as a kind of philanthropy, what’s the big deal?

One of the most useful aspects of the knowledge of graduate employee unionists is the way it addresses the system as a totality, enabling us to see that no one working, learning, or even investing in the education ecology really benefits from the system of cheap teaching.

From “I Feel Your Pain” to “Oh, Shit! Your Problem Is My Problem!”

A vigorous “third wave” of oppositional knowledge emerged in the early part of the 1990s, grounded in what has grown into a fifty-campus movement of graduate employee unions (GEUs) and the occasional systemic critique offered by activist graduate student organizations (GSOs) such as the MLA’s Graduate Student Caucus and the National Association of Graduate and Professional Students. Some aspects of this movement have been documented in books by Cary Nelson (1997a, 1997b) and Michael Berube (1998), in a 1997 special issue of *Social Text* edited by Randy Martin (expanded and republished; see Martin 2000b), on GEU Web sites (particularly the site for Jon Curtiss’s Coalition of Graduate Employee Unions; see Coalition of Graduate Employee Unions 2000), in occasional articles by GEU and GSO leadership in the *minnesota review* (see Christensen 1998; Davis 1995–96; M. Kelley 1998; Watkins 1995–96), and in *Workplace: A Journal for Academic Labor* (see Bowen 1998; Krupat 2000; Martin 2000a; Moten and Harney 2000). This is knowledge that can be articulated well to labor-oriented cultural studies and critical higher ed scholarship (such as that of Stanley Aronowitz [2000] and Gary Rhoades [1998]) and to the inclusive movement unionism of insurgent faculty groups, like Barbara Bowen’s New Caucus of the CUNY Professional Staff Congress and the coalition politics of contingent-faculty groups reaching out to students and taxpayers, such as the Coalition of Contingent Academic Labor and the California Part-Time Faculty Association (see Leatherman 2001).

In being able to describe the major sources of this third wave of knowledge so swiftly, I hope to suggest a key condition of graduate employee labor knowledge—that despite its vigor, it is continually under active erasure by the positive and commonsensical knowledge of the foundations, disciplines, institutes, and media. To some extent, this erasure takes the simple, ideological form of the power of second-wave market knowledge to interpellate concerned faculty, undergraduates, taxpayers, and public analysts, not to mention graduate employees themselves. For graduate employees, the overwhelming consciousness of one's disposability all too frequently lends the aura of concreteness to the ideology of "market." But the erasure of graduate employee labor knowledge also takes the more active forms of direct suppression. In organizing campaigns, the suppression of labor knowledge by administrations can take the form of nonrenewal of the fellowships and assistantships of organizers, punitive recommendations by advisers—even, occasionally, expulsion. Most often, though, direct suppression of labor knowledge by administrations and disciplinary institutions takes the form of the kind of pervasive information warfare conducted, for example, by MLA's staff and executive council in response to resolutions by the organization's assembly in support of Yale's GEU. In this instance, typical of the control that the staff and officers of MLA sought to impose on the organization's processes of self-governance throughout the 1990s, organization staffers mailed out a twelve-page propaganda leaflet attempting to shore up the administrative position on the labor dispute (hoping, unsuccessfully, that the membership would decline to ratify the measure). As Berube notes, this completely one-sided document was circulated, without any sense of irony, under the claim that it attempted to preserve "diversity of opinion" on the question and formed part of a continuing pattern by MLA officers and staff of containing graduate employee dissent (1998, 56–58).⁵

The fundamental unit of third-wave or graduate employee consciousness regarding the structure of academic labor can be contained in two words: we work. As nearly any graduate employee union Web site will tell you, most graduate employees are already working in the only academic job they'll ever have. But coming to this fundamental consciousness is not only a question of overcoming the ideology of apprenticeship and the disciplinary powers of academic institutions, it is a question of struggling with the apparatus of the state itself: until very recently, university employers consistently enjoyed the support of federal and state courts in maintaining that graduate students working as teachers were "apprentices" and "students" and thus denied the rights of labor, especially the right to bargain collectively. As Randy Martin puts it: academic labor

generally and graduate employee organizers in particular “meet the State head on” in contesting “the claim of the university to be the lawgiver” in defining the conditions of their labor (2000a, 4–5). A consistent problem for the graduate employee union movement has been the degree to which the interlocking ideologemes of “youth,” “study,” and “apprenticeship” are underwritten by federal and state law, so that a typical doctoral degree holder in the humanities, completing his or her degree at age thirty-seven and having taught near full-time for as much as ten or twelve years—having paid taxes on earnings and acquired debt of perhaps \$20,000 (a special kind of debt at an interest rate higher than home mortgages and, unlike the debt of credit card holders and businesspeople, unforgivable in bankruptcy)—must now begin to seek a new career.⁶

In recognizing that their work is—in fact—labor, graduate employees have been able to get beyond the fetish of “the economy,” “the market,” and “the law” that bedevils second-wave knowledge. Graduate employees understand that all of these forces exist not in a distant field of titans but in the arena of everyday struggle with the employer for control of the workplace. For the graduate employees, it has not been a question—as for the dominant discourse—of forecasting the economy or learning the limits established by the law—but rather of making the law responsive to their understanding. Despite setbacks in state courts and before the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) in the 1970s and the extraordinary, sustained, and frequently illegal opposition by university employers, graduate employee unionists have throughout the 1990s continually won victories writing their knowledge (“we work”) into law. At public universities, the organization of graduate employee unions is subject to state law. In order to win recognition, organizers have had to initiate multiyear legislative campaigns—the ongoing litigation of the UAW-affiliated University of California unions is finally bringing to a close seventeen years of foot-dragging by the university employer. In decisions involving unionists at private universities (Yale and NYU) between 1996 and 2001, the National Labor Relations Board essentially reversed itself on previous holdings (1972, 1974, 1976) regarding the workplace status of graduate employees: under these decisions, graduate students working as teachers and various postdoctoral employees have the right to bargain their working conditions, opening the way to organizing drives at more than a dozen private universities. The will and capacity of university employers to defy the law rival the most ruthless union busting of any other commercial enterprise. When in March 2000 the Illinois House of Representatives passed a bill written by the University of Illinois graduate employees, granting them the right to collectively bargain their working conditions, the support of the

state Public Employment Relations Board has meant that even this special act of the legislature has not ended the university's continuing refusal to recognize the union.

Implicit in the understanding "we work" and the corollary understanding that the consciousness of work has to be materialized in law, social policy, and workplace practice are a set of important realizations.

1. We are not "overproducing Ph.D.s"; we are underproducing jobs. There is plenty of work in higher education for everyone who wants to do it. The problem is that this enormous quantity of work no longer comes in the bundle of tenure, dignity, scholarship, and a living wage that we call "a job." The concrete aura of the claim that degree holders are "overproduced" conceals the necessary understanding that there is in fact a huge shortage of degree holders. If degree holders were doing the teaching, there'd be far too few of them. Graduate employees understand that "labor markets" are socially structured: with a single stroke (by, say, recovering the tenure lines lost in either New York or California since 1972), all of the "surplus" degree holders could be immediately employed. Even a modest "reconversion" plan designed to re-create jobs out of part-time piecework would swiftly generate a real shortage of degreed persons. The intervening official knowledge, informed by liberal economic determinism (what I call vulgar liberalism), works to conceal the operation of a policy universe (social, legal, institutional) shaping academic working conditions—a policy universe that organized graduate employees understand that they can and must transform.
2. Cheap teaching is not a victimless crime. Graduate employees understand that the system of cheap teaching hurts everyone, not just the persons who teach cheaply. The cheapness of their labor holds down salaries in the ladder ranks: professorial salaries have stagnated 50 percent against per capita gains since 1970 and have stagnated most in the disciplines most reliant upon graduate employee labor. In this period, tenured faculty have stagnated more in real wages than any other group besides persons without a college education. The cheapness and disorganization of flexible labor supports speed up throughout the system: assistant and associate professors teach more, serve more, and publish more in return for lower compensation than any previous generation of faculty. Senior faculty suffer as well. At my institution, as in many other locations, the phenomenon of salary compression is so bad that newly hired junior faculty frequently earn wages similar to or higher than those of associate professors and within spitting distance of the wages of full professors: nearly everyone in the ladder ranks of departments like mine earns between \$40,000 and \$60,000—regardless of rank, distinction, or term of service. This means that a sixty-year-old distinguished scholar with a national reputation and three books (and three children in college) earns a salary similar to that of junior faculty in many other disciplines. Because

salary compression is really also salary depression, it also means that this distinguished scholar earns about as much as a good accountant with two or three years of experience or a twenty-five-year-old district attorney. At the end of a career covered with distinction, this professor earns about half of what moderately accomplished professionals in law and medicine earn at the beginning of their careers. He or she frequently earns less than a secondary school teacher, civil servant, factory employee, or bartender with the same term of service. In many ways, he or she also has less control over work and fewer rights to due process, despite the fantasies of unfireable tenured faculty. You have to look pretty hard to find other avenues of employment where sixty-year-old persons who've distinguished themselves at their work get paid less than college faculty. And cheap teaching hasn't only reduced salaries: it has diminished the dignity, research support, and academic freedom of the tenured, as well as affecting their morale and their capacity to govern the academy.

The system of graduate education has also radically altered the experience of general education for nearly all undergraduate students. Ask any thirty-seven-year-old graduate employee with ten or more years of service, who is just beginning to peak in pedagogical and scholarly powers, yet soon to be replaced by a twenty-two-year-old M.A. candidate: Is this a system that teaches well? And that graduate employee will answer: Heck, no, it is just a system that teaches cheaply. Accomplishing its marvelous cheapness by allocating an ever-larger section of the curriculum to flexible instructors who typically have between zero and four years of teaching experience, or who have brought their graduate studies to early termination, the system replaces its most experienced and accomplished teachers with persons who are less accomplished and less experienced. In English departments it is now typical for students to take nearly all first-year classes, many lower-division survey courses, and some advanced topics courses from nondegreed persons who are imperfectly attuned to disciplinary knowledge, who may or may not have an active research agenda, who may or may not have a future in the profession. The whole zone of general education—that is, the education that most persons who go to college have in common with each other—has been radically evacuated. The proletarianized teachers who will be the only experience that most students have of a language department generally don't even enjoy such necessities as offices, telephones, or photocopying privileges—much less the protections of due process that guarantee academic freedom. It is usual practice for administrations to simply dispense with the services of flexible teachers who exercise academic freedom: those who teach controversial material, of course, but also those who generate student complaints by teaching difficult material. Flexible teachers cannot afford to provide an obstacle to the advancing administrative ideal of an ultimately education-free transfer of cash for course credits. Most citizens wouldn't dream of employing an accountant without an office or a telephone—or

The system
replaces its most
experienced and
accomplished
teachers with
persons who are
less accomplished
and less
experienced.

go to a lawyer who practiced avocationally—but they regularly send their children for writing and liberal arts instruction by a person working out of the trunk of a car.

To paraphrase Emma Goldman, cheap teaching is a social crime and failure. This is true even if the injuries to all persons who teach are excluded from the equation. Even the persons who seemingly “benefit” from the labor savings—students and the public they serve and also become—are substantially injured. Nor is it just a matter of teaching. The whole complex of research production is diminished by the elimination of tenurable faculty positions. Casualization systematically replaces the scholarly activity of the professoriat with new management tasks and profoundly degrades the undergraduate educational experience—producing such “efficiencies” as a reduced variety of course offerings, reduced access to faculty doing active scholarship in their field, and the regular replacement of experienced professionals with students and avocational labor.

3. Casualization is an issue of racial, gendered, and class justice. Frequently the cheap teachers are persons who can afford to teach with little or no compensation, as idealized in the recent financial services commercial illustrating the corporate employee taking a plush early retirement so he can “afford” to realize his “dream” of being a teacher. What does it mean that increasingly only persons who can “afford to teach” are entering higher education as a profession? Surely one reason the neoliberal second-wave knowledge took such hold of the academy during the 1980s and 1990s is the degree to which academic casualization has increasingly closed the profession to persons who rely on waged work to live—and replaced them with persons for whom teaching figures as a secondary income. If it typically requires family support to become a teacher, how do factors such as class and the racialized wealth gap affect the composition of the professoriat? Today’s graduate employee unionists are at least half women, and they understand that casualization is a feminist issue. The recent Coalition of Graduate Employee Unions’ “Casual Nation” report (2000) headlines the fact that women take about 40 percent of the doctorates but represent about 58 percent of the full-time temporary instructors and only 25 percent of senior professors. There is a sharp generational break: women who joined the faculty from 1985 to 1992 were much less likely to join the faculty as members of the ladder ranks than women who joined the faculty in earlier cohorts. Despite a plentiful “surplus” of women holding the doctorate, junior faculty women are substantially more likely to work in poorer-paying and less-satisfying sectors of higher education than junior faculty men. The NSOPF “New Entrants” analysis shows that fewer than half of the women who began full-time work from 1985 to 1992 held the Ph.D.: women were about as likely to hold the M.A. (44.2 percent) as the Ph.D. (48.4 percent), whereas male “new entrants” overwhelmingly hold the Ph.D (71.0 percent) (Finkelstein, Seal, and Schuster 1998). The only fields in which women have

achieved near parity in numbers with male faculty in the upper ranks are the most ill-paid fields, primarily language, literature, and writing instruction. The sectors in which women outnumber men in the academy are uniformly the worst paid, frequently involving lessened autonomy (as in writing instruction, where the largely female staff is generally not rewarded for research, usually excluded from governance and even union representation, and frequently barred even from such basic expressions of academic discretion as choosing course texts, syllabi, requirements, and pedagogy).

4. Late capitalism doesn't just happen to the university; the university makes late capitalism happen. The flexible faculty are just one dimension of an informationalized higher ed—the transformation of the university into an efficient and thoroughly accountable environment through which streaming education can be made available in the way that information is delivered: just in time, on demand, in spasms synchronized to the work rhythm of student labor on the shop floor. The university has not only casualized its own labor force: it operates as a kind of fusion reactor for casualization more generally, directly serving the casual economy by supplying it with flexible student labor (which is to say: by providing flex workers with the identity of “student”), normalizing and generalizing the experience of casual work. The casualization of the higher education teacher has been accompanied by the wholesale reinventing of what it means to be an undergraduate: the identity of “student” has been disarticulated from the concept and possibility of leisure and vigorously rearticulated to contingent labor. In the twenty-first century, “being a student” names a way of work. The graduate employee understands that the gen-x structure of feeling proceeds from the generational register of the economic order: insofar as casualization colonizes the experience and possibilities of “youth,” cheerfully extending the term of youth and youthful “enjoyment” into the fourth decade of life—because youth now delimits a term of availability for super-exploitation.

This knowledge of the graduate employee conditions the political subjectivity of antagonism to the actually existing system of academic labor. Everyone with an interest in transforming that system will inevitably attempt to share into, or even ventriloquize, that knowledge. The one or two attempts to ventriloquize that knowledge have resulted in classic cases of incorporation, reinstalling the neoliberal fetish of “the market” and “the economy”—as when the “Final Report” of the MLA Committee on Professional Employment (1997) struggled visibly to deploy the graduate employee critique of the “job market” heuristic, developing the compromise language of “job system” (GSC “labor system” + MLA “job market” = “job system”), only to fail to deliver any analysis at the level of system.⁷ Refraining from attributing the critique to the graduate caucus in its own midst and failing even to mention either the graduate employee union

movement or faculty unionism more generally—and conspicuously leaving Cary Nelson, Michael Berube, and others from its bibliography—the Committee on Professional Employment (CPE) report attempts to “sound like” the GEU/GSO critique while obscuring the political reality and general experience of faculty unionism: about 44 percent of all faculty (two of three faculty on publicly funded campuses) are unionized (Rhoades 1998, 9–10). In this ventriloquism and disappearing act, the CPE ultimately reinstalls the “imperative” of the “realities of the job market” (6) and offers the same set of “solutions” that Orr offered in 1970: supply-side balancing of “the market,” alternate careers, more teacher training, “buyer beware” labels on admission letters, and so on. Any analysis at the level of system suggests that all of these “solutions” actually contribute to the well-being of casualization—especially the fantasy of “alternate” careers, which enables administrations to flush away the degree-holding waste product. These official disciplinary “solutions” all proceed out of the primary ventriloquism of the Clinton era, “I feel your pain” (see, for instance, Sandra Gilbert’s performance in “Bob’s Jobs” [1998]), but vigorously reinstall the market logic that produced that pain in the first place.

Moving from the discourse of “I feel your pain” to the collective recognition that our problems are mutual ultimately means acknowledging the intellectual and political leadership of the graduate employee union movement. Acting at the level of system means acting as graduate employees have acted, writing their knowledge into law and policy at every level of social organization, from the campus and community to state and federal statute, developing linkages to labor on a global scale. This means that everyone else implicated in the system of academic work will benefit from “acting with” the graduate employee (rather than “sounding like” them while “acting with” administration). Against the dominative totality of higher ed marketization—the flexible dictatorship of university administration—the possibility of antagonism at the same level of systemic totality is emergent in the GEU movement. Acting with the GEU movement, we are privileging the perspective of the graduate employee (as incipient degree holder) and doing so in the belief that accomplishing the particular agenda of the graduate employee will address the problems that are general to the system (but feel “specific” to other locations). That is, in re-creating jobs out of the piecemeal done by the graduate employees and other incipient degree holders, we address with one stroke the problems experienced by everyone else: tenure-stream faculty benefit because eliminating cheap teaching raises the price of experienced teaching and reinstalls the value of research in pedagogy; undergraduates benefit by receiving experienced, secure faculty (who “do knowledge” rather than

“provide information”) in the first two years, when they are most vulnerable; other movement activists benefit from a more diverse and de-marketized professoriat; the public, taxpayers, and employers receive a more literate, accomplished, thoughtful, and civically oriented citizenry—the embodied and political subjects of education, not the reactive “meatware” of information capitalism. We of the academic system would in a way, then, be submitting to a “dictatorship of the flexible,” saying instead of “I feel your pain” something more like this: “Oh heck, now I realize that your problems are intimately related to my own difficulties. Solving your problem *is* solving my problem.” This is an accession to the moral and political imperative of the incipient degree holders, acknowledging their marginality as a constitutive exterior, where actions have effects immanent throughout the system as a whole. And to the extent that the system of academic labor is a system interlocking in a plane with other systems, it seems plausible that a dictatorship of the knowledge proletariat could be articulated to the proletarian struggles elaborating themselves elsewhere. (The GEU movement, for instance, might be the basis for an important evolution in the undergraduate movement against sweatshops, which in my view would acquire even greater vitality by becoming conscious of the North American student’s own status as flexible labor.) The articulation of the GEU movement to other proletarian movements will necessarily take place on the equal relation of the shared consciousness of work rather than the hierarchical relation of expertise. But the articulation of the GEU movement within “the knowledge class” itself *will* take place in a hierarchical relation—a revived apprenticeship, if you will—except that this apprenticeship runs on the opposite trajectory: we can only have a workers’ movement in the academy when the professoriat (and their unions and institutions) are willing to politically and intellectually indenture themselves to the graduate employee.

Notes

I wish to thank, as a group, the members of the *Workplace* editorial collective and the innumerable graduate employee activists and unionists who have generously improved this project with their comments, friendship, and spirited commitment to transformation.

1. On the failure of professional associations to exert even modest influence upon university employers, see Watt’s entry, “The Modern Language Association” in Nelson and Watt 1999, 169–78, and his “What Is an Organization Like the MLA?” (1998) As Lennard Davis observes in his “manifesto” against them, “the obvious thing about professional organizations in general is how well they dovetail with institutional agendas” (1995–96, 197).

2. The most recent surveys on the question of wages for casual academic teachers are those conducted by the Coalition on the Academic Work Force (See American Historical Association 2000). In English composition, fewer than one-third of the responding programs paid more than \$2,500 a class. Nearly half (47.6 percent) paid less than \$2,000 per class: teaching a full-time load of eight classes nets less than \$16,000 annually, usually without benefits.

3. This can be described as a system of “all but unwaged” work or a kind of volunteerism, like the Peace Corps, increasingly approachable through an ethos of service or creativity, as with the “avocational” and “supplemental” activities that generate a large fraction of Web content. Recently, Tiziana Terranova (2000) and Andrew Ross (2000) have attempted to chart the strategic exploitation of “free labor” in both digital capitalism and the occupations of mental work more generally. As Ross observes, from the point of view of accumulation, the phenomenon of doctoral degree holders driving taxicabs does not represent a “waste” of education but testifies instead to the ruthless and systematic conversion of it to “un- or undercompensated labor” in ways we have yet to fully chart (27).

4. On academic unionism, professional work, and social movements, see Rhoades 1998; Martin 2000a, 2000b, Tirelli 2000; Aronowitz 2000; Nelson 1997a, 1997b; Nelson and Watt 1999; R. Kelley 1997; B. Bowen 1998.

5. During this period, largely coterminous with Phyllis Franklin’s unprecedented two decades as executive director of the MLA, numerous measures were employed in the association to contain dissent, including changing the organization’s constitution. Some of these measures are discussed in M. Kelley 1998 and Christensen 1998. For the association’s official view of itself in relation to graduate employee activism, see Showalter 1999.

6. Interestingly, police officers and soldiers also frequently have the opportunity to seek new careers at age thirty-seven or thirty-eight. These retired servants of the state are typically homeowners and parents, enjoying annual pensions of \$20,000 or \$30,000 and lifetime medical coverage: their years of service to the state have been amply rewarded. From the perspective of the legally enforced super-exploitation of the graduate employee—the leading edge of the knowledge proletariat—the mere everyday exploitation of the working class has started to look pretty comfortable. Few members of the professoriat would complain if their contracts resembled the terms of service of these public employees: paid apprenticeship, twenty years of service, a decent wage, and a pension. (Nor is this mere speculation: two-thirds of higher education faculty in public institutions are unionized and enjoy rates of pay not very different from soldiers and police officers. From a labor point of view, faculty unions have been less successful than other public-employee unions in preventing a second tier of service—although outsourcing and casualization is a significant feature of the law-enforcement and military workplaces as well.)

7. The critique of the job market heuristic was first circulated on the discussion list of the Graduate Student Caucus (E-grad) during 1994 and 1995, by this author and others. It was read at an MLA welcome session in December 1996 and brought to the CPE conversation by Vicky Smallman and Pat Carter, the graduate student members of that committee. As with previous disciplinary incorporations of the work of Nelson, Berube, and countless intellectuals of the GEU movement, the CPE obscures the origins of this critique and claims authorship for itself (Modern Language Association 1997, 12).

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