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White-Collar Proletariat: The Case of Becky Meadows

Marc Bousquet

Why would decent quality wizards live in poverty?
Couldn't they perform basic magic to gain material goods?

—Alex Wang (high school student, writing in
response to the first four Harry Potter books)

Equally important, the creation of a reserve army of underemployed skilled white-collar workers whose jobs by no means exhausts the limits of their skills or abilities has increased the pool of available labor. By reducing job security this reserve army acts as a critical buttress to the power of employers over their workers.

The case of teaching provides a good example of this shift. It is easy to imagine teaching as relatively integrated, unalienated labor. The teacher is in direct contact with his or her material and has at least a modicum of

control over his or her work. . . . However, the teacher's job has undergone subtle change. The educational efficiency binge of the 1920s led to the application of business management methods to the high schools. The concentration of decision-making power in the hands of administrators and the quest for economic rationalization had the same disastrous consequences for teachers that bureaucracy and rationalization of production had on most other workers. In the interests of scientific management, control of curriculum, evaluation, counselling, selection of texts, and methods of teaching was placed in the hands of experts. . . .

Until recently, professional workers and white-collar labor had smugly accepted the comforting view that they constituted a privileged group—a modern aristocracy of labor. They had greater job security, greater control over their work, and of course, more money. . . . [However] the working conditions of office and 'brain' labor are increasingly coming to resemble those of the production line.

—Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis

My research interests include rhetoric and cultural studies, the Frankfurt School, postcolonial theory, the rhetoric of globalization, geography studies, contemporary politics, and the university as a site of political struggle.

—Catherine Chaput

Interests: Native American literature and indigenous studies, globalism and ethnic cultures, rhetoric and critical theory, public intellectuals, the essay.

—Scott Lyons

The most important response I can make to Jim Zebroski's essay is to join him in encouraging a broadened discussion of class in rhetoric and composition, as well as in English studies more generally. I'm sure that other respondents will compile a long list of folks contributing to the question, including a significant group of well-known figures working "in" the discipline from Mina Shaughnessy to Sharon Crowley, as well as those whose work intersects the field, from Richard Hoggart and Henry Giroux to Judith Butler and Slavoj Žižek. For my part, I'd mention a large cohort of emerging scholars. Of particular note are those addressing the

intersection of class, gender, and race, such as Donna Strickland, Scott Lyons, and Matthew Abraham, and those whose work expresses a frankly materialist orientation, such as M. J. Braun and Catherine Chaput, whose *Inside the Teaching Machine: Rhetoric and the Globalization of the U.S. Public Research University* will appear in 2008. I'd also mention my former students Laura Bartlett, whose "Working Lives" database at Ohio State presents a significant opportunity to research the self-composition of the majority of undergraduates who work in order to attend school, and the University of Oklahoma's Christopher Carter, whose book on resisting the corporate university will also appear in 2008. I'd also have to include my collaborators in the *Tenured Bosses* collection, Tony Scott and Leo Parascondola, the nearly two dozen contributors to that book, and the many rhet-comp faculty who contribute to *Workplace: A Journal for Academic Labor*, commonly from the standpoint of labor, as intellectuals who recognize themselves as workers (and not as escapees from the working class). Tony Scott's monograph, *The Political Economy of Composition: A Radically Social Approach to the "The Social,"* is forthcoming from Utah State.

As this very partial list suggests, one way of responding would be to push a bit at Jim's survey of the literature. Jim observes that rhetoric and composition has "fled from a larger conversation about writing and social class" (514), that it's "rarely discussed" and, quoting bell hooks, "the uncool subject."

However, it might be useful to ask the (very Foucauldian) question of how this happens in rhet-comp—to reflect on the discursive nature not just of social class, but of the discipline of "rhetoric and composition" itself. We must ask: how has disciplinary power-knowledge operated to silence the question of class? I suspect that this is the reason I've been invited to respond to Jim: my "Composition as Management Science" essay as well as many of the *Tenured Bosses* contributions perform this kind of analysis with respect to the relations between composition labor and composition management.

Rhetoric and composition's disciplinary "successes" are closely connected to the fact that its scholarship is increasingly produced by a lower-managerial cadre in an historical moment in which upper management has massively and unprecedentedly intensified the immiseration of

higher education labor. This includes “composition labor.” But it also means other faculty and staff, and the students themselves, including the first-year undergraduates who form the most vulnerable sector of the cheap labor force exploited by campus employers and their partners. (In closing, I’ll suggest the relevance of the increasing exploitation of undergraduate labor discussed in chapter 4 of my most recent book, *How the University Works*, and which is the topic of my current research.)

In short, I and other contributors to *Tenured Bosses* observe that managerial power-knowledge operates discursively through the discipline to silence rhet-comp labor. One of the mechanisms we identified is (neoliberal) economic determinism, such as the widespread claim, advocated most doggedly by Richard Miller, that “the market” decides wages and working conditions. Scholars working in the Marxist tradition are often absurdly labelled by ideologues and the ill-informed, regrettably including by Jim, as economic determinists. (When nothing could be further from the truth, at least for Western Marxism since Gramsci!) The real economic determinism of the present time is the almost totemistic belief in markets as supernatural agents beyond human agency and responsibility. In rhet-comp, this ideologeme operates in a number of directions. It supports vocationalism and commercially directed curiosity, and philosophies of canny collaboration with the power-knowledge of ruling-class trustees and their well-paid servants in university administration. It supports fatalism, passivity, and resignation with respect to the four-decades-and-counting human event, the activist restructuring by management of higher ed workplaces. It generates, on the one hand, sincerely felt sympathy regarding the “job market” for composition labor. But that sympathy itself operates discursively to divorce the managerial subject from relations of more profound solidarity, eroding through fatalism the possibility of critical reflection regarding the structurally related phenomenon of excellent job prospects for composition management. (Although the repressed knowledge of the structural relation returns, generating the emotions of relief, disciplinary pride, confusion, shame, and survivor guilt.)

Another mechanism we observed is the historiography of the discipline itself. In both informal and (more surprisingly) formal contexts, the writing that comprises rhet-comp’s disciplinary narrative is frequently

combative, clannish, and boosterish, deeply invested in the invention of bogeys and outsiders to produce a solidarity of antagonism: “Up with composition-the-victim! Down with literature-the-oppressor!” “After centuries of oppression, we emerge!” Emotionally ramified, this means, amongst other things: “We are composition and therefore, good, right, and marketable!” “They are literature and therefore bad, wrong, and deservedly unmarketable!” The fact that composition labor is by a substantial majority this demonized “literary” Other is relevant. Most “lit people” are composition labor at every stage of the career—grad student, adjunct, nontenurable full-time, tenure-track, and tenured. In reality, a tiny minority of all persons dubbed “lit people” by the discourse will ever become the bogey named by the discourse—tenured faculty who primarily teach “great books.” This bogey is a false, cartoonish descriptor of the actual interests of “lit people,” most of whom share with most “comp people” a diverse set of interests joined by the broad, interdisciplinary front of inquiry associated with British cultural studies and the “cultural turn”—pedagogy, literacy and its uses, emerging media, dominant media, residual media, literature and culture with rhetorical intent, literature and culture with rhetorical effects, writing as a practice embedded in other practices, critical and social theory, information studies, and language use by individual, institutional, economic, political, dominant-cultural and counter-cultural actors—especially under the figure of writing—in a dizzying host of contexts, from economic/political/media globalization to hip-hop, office gossip, and autobiography. I refer you to Catherine Chaput: “My research interests include rhetoric and cultural studies, the Frankfurt School, postcolonial theory, the rhetoric of globalization, geography studies, contemporary politics, and the university as a site of political struggle.” And Scott Lyons: “Interests: Native American literature and indigenous studies, globalism and ethnic cultures, rhetoric and critical theory, public intellectuals, the essay.”

The crude division—“Are you a lit person or a comp person?”—does little to describe the diverse and overlapping interests of English studies scholars under those signs. It’s especially false with the current and rising generation of scholars, and the vast majority of scholars trained outside of the few surviving narrowly belletrist doctoral programs. However, the issue isn’t the inadequacy of the description. The issue is the discursive

operation of the binary. Perhaps it posits a false hostile solidarity to “lit people”/composition labor to foster a real hostile solidarity amongst “comp people”/composition management. By raising composition labor as a bogey under the sign of literature, composition management unifies itself. Tony Scott, Leo Parascondola, and I decided to launch *Tenured Bosses* amidst an e-mail exchange analyzing the rhetorical function of the term “we” that operates so widely in rhet-comp discourse. The “we” as employed by professional, managerial rhet-comp faculty generally embraces composition labor and is rarely employed to make distinctions between composition teachers and rhet-comp professionals. This offers a contrast to the way that education-school discourse deploys terms such as “schoolteachers” and “teachers” to indicate differences between these Others and the career university faculty producing the disciplinary discourse.

The embrace of the rhet-comp workforce represented by this “we” produces the official, compulsory sympathetic response from its lower-managerial and disciplinary-discourse-producing speakers toward the silenced, bracketed members of the “we” (I feel your pain; I’m with you, man; you stay put—I’m going straight to the dean and make some good arguments on your behalf, champ; tough break there, kiddo). The paternalism of this standpoint is problematic in its own right, as I’ve observed elsewhere, and remark below. But it functions even more elusively, transferring the justice claims of labor (and the emotional complexes associated with the experience of injustice) to lower management and its professional discourse. It simply does not follow that the needs of composition workers for health care, appropriate wages, faculty status, and basic elements of academic freedom (such as curricular design and choice of textbooks) naturally flow from improvements in the situation of the WPA and a cadre of tenure-track composition scholars. This is the case in other disciplines, in which tenure-track faculty, individually and in the institutions they control (senates, unions, professional associations), have done little to help nontrack faculty and have often been complicit in their exploitation.

The professional discursive “we” operates to suggest that composition is different from those other disciplines in a good way. Rhetoric and composition track faculty prefer to see themselves as better than other

track faculty on “adjunct issues.” Even though there are far more nontrack faculty in rhet-comp than in other disciplines, and the track faculty are more likely to serve as management and are more obviously managerial in their function, “we” don’t hold with such distinctions. There is no problem amongst ourselves! Every day, we’re in there doing what we can for our people! They get to share their input when we choose the common textbooks! We do it with them! We make all our decisions in consultation with them! I mean, “we” do it all together. They like it that way. Stop attacking us! Stop talking! Go away, you commie agitator!

Oops, our “we” is slipping. The further one presses at this professional-discursive “we,” the more tensions it can be seen to be covering—and the underlying psychology of managerial “we” and a labor “them” emerges. There are real tensions between tenured management and nontenurable faculty—over academic freedom, fairness, due process, pay, benefits, career trajectory—and “we” covers them up. As Derrida observed, discourses are always falling apart. The work of domination, continuous repair of discourse, is arduous. Maintaining the professional-discursive “we” takes a lot of lower-managerial effort—emotional labor, even—and that gets frustrating sometimes. Even mothers get angry at their children. It’s hard not to get angry at someone who is always making a mess on your nice clean “we.”

If I’m right, however, the tensions between composition management and composition labor repressed in the discursive “we” return in the hostility to “lit people”—more of whom are nontrack composition labor than track faculty of any kind, much less the cartoon belletrist/mandarin literary theorist of the discourse. So one urgent discursive function of rhet-comp’s disciplinary conversation is to preserve and even cartoonishly magnify the division between disciplinary managerial professionals and academic labor. And if this discourse is indeed a front in the class struggle (class war prosecuted from above, in the active permatemping/proletarianization of faculty and students along with the global workforce), then it’s ultimately not surprising that rhet-comp’s cartooning of the Other bears such a resemblance to wartime propaganda. There may be a real threat to dominance being repressed. If “literature” represents little threat to “composition,” the cartooned “lit people” may—as labor—threaten the lower-managerial work of dominance, including discursive labor,

and, especially, including the work of dominance which is not “for” rhet-comp professionals, but which rhet-comp professionals perform for the ruling class and upper administration. Just because Iraq didn’t threaten the United States and its allies in the way that US political discourse described (financial support of Bin Laden, weapons of mass destruction) doesn’t mean that Iraq didn’t threaten the United States (oil, Middle East hegemony).

The response to “Composition as Management Science” is a case in point. While I have rarely met a composition worker who didn’t like, understand, and agree with many points of the essay, the response from composition management has often been vitriolic, frequently ad hominem, contrary to fact, and poorly reasoned. Because I think it’s relevant to a deep-running problematic in the rhet-comp discourse, with real consequences for junior scholars (a problem that affects Jim’s own work on social class), I’m going to share Jan Swearingen’s intemperate posting to the *h-rhetor* discussion inspired by the *Information University: Rise of the Education Management Organization* special issue of *Works and Days* that reprinted four of my essays on the structural transformation of the university. (The issue included a response by James Porter and some of his co-authors in the “Institutions R Us” piece):

Jim Porter: Thank you for continuing to fight the good fight against Bousquet and his colleagues, Gucci Marxists who engage in precisely the cynical disdain for composition—even as they pretend to protect its teachers—that has poisoned English departments for years. Thanks for the reference to your article, as well.

—Jan Swearingen, Texas A&M U

At the time, Swearingen, like Porter, was a senior scholar with tenure, a long list of publications, and powerful friendships across the discipline. I, on the other hand, had just been tenured and promoted. At the time, I was struggling to preserve intellectual space for my rhet-comp thesis advisees—including the recipients of Louisville’s single recruitment fellowship two years running—and other dissident students in an atmosphere riven exactly by the kind of “lit versus comp” ideology then and now “poisoning English departments.” There was certainly “disdain for

composition” among both literature-identified and rhet-comp-identified faculty at Louisville, although I wasn’t one of them. As a cultural studies scholar working on the discourse of the corporate university, writing for new media, and the elocutionary practices of ordinary citizen-activists in 19th-century social movements, I was one of a small number of idealists maintaining then, as now, that we could all get along and that we had lots of common ground by way of the Birmingham School. (Sufficiently indicative of all that needs to be said regarding my idealism in that respect is the moment in a department meeting when all of the powerful tenured “lit,” “comp,” and “rhet” ideologues agreed, on the basis of their mutual ignorance and on behalf of all the nontenured, nontrack, and graduate-student cultural studies intellectuals in the department, that cultural studies was “really” a branch of literary study!)

Two things interest me about Swearingen’s remarks. First, they are emblematic of the need to raise a bogey that is pronounced in many quarters of the rhet-comp discourse, especially those that purport to be metadiscursive and reflective regarding such issues as the material circumstances of rhet-comp practice, managerialism, and so forth. While the overwhelming majority of respondents on the *h-rhetor* list repudiated Swearingen’s rhetoric and cold war standpoint, half or more of the contributors to a similar discussion on *WPA-L* tended toward this sort of pugnacity. Swearingen et al. are tapping into a powerfully divisive rhetoric (while projecting the divisiveness onto the Other), tending to solidify an “us” against the enemy-bogey (“fighting the good fight”).

This exchange between the tenured, directed at the work of junior scholars, graduate students, and nontrack faculty, is packed with scare-multipliers: the enemy is actually plural; he has “colleagues” in it with him! But the Marxists wear Prada! Meaning: despite the fact the editors of *Tenured Bosses* are one untenured junior and two graduate students, they’re the real aristocratic victimizers, not us! Melodramatic villains originally wore black opera hats and capes, the clothing of the aristocracy, to signify that they’re the class enemy of the proletarian audience. For similar reasons they employed “elevated” diction and tones of disdain—à la Jeremy Irons’ recent turns as villain—or perhaps à la the belletrist/mandarin literary theorist of the discourse’s cartoon.

But in reality the one co-editor who actually is a Marxist never came closer to Gucci than the transit stop on Fifth Avenue. Leo Parascondola is a retired New York City bus driver whose union pension enabled him to afford to subsidize the cheap teaching of New York State while he went to CUNY's graduate school. Long a Marxist as a radical member of the transit union before he ever entertained the idea of voluntary super-exploitation as a literacy worker, Leo studied rhet-comp with Ira Shor and plays an active role of intellectual leadership in the MLA Radical Caucus with close associates working in the Marxist tradition such as Dick Ohmann and Paul Lauter, editor of the *Heath* anthology. The socioeconomic background of many of the more radical contributors to the *Tenured Bosses* volume is suggested by the occupations of their parents, including mechanics, roofers, and hairdressers. If only organic intellectualism were a sufficient answer to the kind of sloppy efforts at invalidation offered by representatives of the managerial discourse!

There's much that's revealing in Swearingen's charge that these villains engage in a *pretended* paternalism ("pretending to protect [composition's] teachers"). Evidently an authentic paternalism is just the ticket. And, in fact, paternalism is an all-too-common feature of the WPA discourse, one that we irritated by exploring the agency of intellectual workers through self-organization. Through this kind of appropriation, composition management co-opts the voice of composition labor, positing itself in the heroic selfhood of working-class culture (the melodramatic hero of comp studies facing aristocratic villain-litterateurs, playing Dudley Do-Right to the feminized composition teacher in need of "protecting").

The second dimension of interest is Swearingen and Porter et al.'s overt red-baiting. Together with similar remarks on *WPA-L*, as well as similar caricaturing of Marxists and scholarship in the Marxist tradition by Kurt Spellmeyer, Richard Miller, and many others, red-baiting is increasingly visible as a normal-unexceptional and disciplinary-normative feature of rhet-comp's professional-managerial discourse. As with permatemping and managerialism, red-baiting is not rhet-comp's issue in isolation—as I write this in August 2007, the American Sociological Association issued a report concluding that 1/3 of its scholars feared for their academic freedom. By comparison, *Inside Higher Ed* reports, a

similar survey during the height of McCarthyism found only 1/5 of faculty fearing for their academic freedom (Jaschik, “Pessimistic”). My personal view is that the increased fear for freedom relates to the ascent of managerial power and lack of protection for the academic rights of the 3/4 majority of nontrack faculty, as much as it does to the resurgence of Red Menace scare-mongering.

This red-baiting in rhet-comp is especially peculiar when it appears in the context of scholarship wanting to draw on the Marxist tradition or which lionizes Marxist scholars. This was the case in the Porter et al. essay, recipient of CCC’s best essay prize, which makes a series of lumpish asides regarding Marxists, all the while drawing much of their main argument from adulatory references to radical geographer David Harvey, who is, with his CUNY colleagues Shor and Stanley Aronowitz, probably among the best known half-dozen Marxist thinkers in the United States. The very first chapter of *Spaces of Hope* comprises a discussion of pedagogy, narrating Harvey’s career-long commitment to teaching the *Communist Manifesto* and analyzing the continuing special urgency and relevance of Marxist thought.

I emphasize this red-baiting in this response to Jim’s essay because my view is that the essay suffers from its contact points with red-baiting elements of the disciplinary discourse but is also struggling to push past them. Regular readers of *JAC* will know that Jim has replied to my “Composition as Management Science” essay in a way that was in certain substantial respects friendly and thoughtful. That response introduced some of the themes that Jim follows up in the current essay—our shared concern to encourage more work on social class in rhet-comp and the need to struggle with aspects of the disciplinary discourse threatening to challenge the possibility of dissenting thought, especially for younger scholars, as well as the problems posed for all critical intellectuals by the ascent of vocationalism, managerialism, skills education, and procedural knowledge. The part I didn’t enjoy very much was where he quite creatively imagines that he finds in my work some of the same “traces of the discourse of positivism” that he also sees in Miller, Porter, Michael Murphy, and others, subsequently suggesting that my use of the term “materialist views” and a reference to “the objective conditions of labor created by upper management” at least “opens the door” to the Red

Menace: “I, for one,” he writes, “do not want to return to the old discourses of positivistic Marxism” (“Class” 436). Gee whillikers, Jim: me neither. As Jim insists before he gets started, this is a carefully qualified and really quite creative reading of my piece: “Let me be clear: I am *not* charging anyone with presenting a positivist argument, let alone being a positivist. That would be absurd. Bousquet is a critical theorist” (431). A whole lot more clever, more careful, and more professional than Swearingen’s “first, let’s hang all the Marxists” approach, I still felt red-baited by many aspects of Jim’s piece, including his choice of an epigraph from Lenin comparing “intelligent idealism” to “unintelligent materialism.” Despite discomfort with what I viewed as at least a sly flirtation with red-baiting, given the many kind and thoughtful things that Jim also wrote in the piece, I decided the best response was to write Jim privately, thank him for the good bits, and suggest that my work in post-post-Marxism had more in common with the interests of *JAC* board member Slavoj Žižek than Josef Stalin. If I remember correctly, I suggested he look at the non-Badiou sections of Žižek’s *The Ticklish Subject* and the exchanges with, especially, Ernesto Laclau in Judith Butler, Laclau, and Žižek’s *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality*. In these texts, Žižek makes very serious contributions to the core questions raised by post-Marxism and social movement theory: if we all, or most of us, agree that “class” isn’t a foundational category for justice claims, that an ensemble of social movements will somehow best pursue social justice and no category is foundational, how do we adjudicate between competing justice claims? Especially when justice for some may have broad—if not universal—consequences, including what others, in their own movements, will experience as unjust? Are there ways that we must think about “universality” in this context? Or in the context of capitalist globalization? Or in the context of eco-criticism? Žižek takes the risk of querying whether a kernel or specter of Cartesianism might not resolve some of these questions; however, it’s hardly a return to Stalinism.

In the present essay, Jim’s thought has evolved. I have to enthusiastically join in one of his concrete proposals for something that might be termed “critical ruling-class studies.” That’s a splendid idea. Jim includes a lengthy section on Lynn Worsham’s “Going Postal” essay. There he manages to note her intellectual engagement with Althusser and Marx

and quote her account of how “the phrase *going postal* originated in the objective conditions of the working day in U.S. postal facilities” (qtd. in Zebroski 538) without finding that her use of the term “objective conditions of the working day” opens the door to the Red Menace or lethal traces of positivism. And despite relying on what most reviewers agree is the most trenchantly neohumanist account of Foucault’s career by Eric Paras, Jim seeks to mobilize Foucault’s antihumanist accounts of subjectivity to account for collective agency in social transformation—in that “the collective work of archaeology occasionally turns the discourse off and *that* may have effects” (568) rather than Enlightenment models of education/knowledge leading to personal liberation/social transformation. (Žižek has my favorite remark on just this point: “They know what they do,” he says sadly of those earnestly educated to humanistic liberation, “but they do it anyway.”) I was also very happy to read Jim term “questionable” whether “the sharpest criticisms of James Berlin’s call for a Birmingham-School-like cultural studies approach to English” as “based on Enlightenment assumptions” is “an accurate representation of Berlin’s work” (568).

On the other hand, he leaves unquestioned whether this is an accurate representation of the Birmingham School (where Foucauldian and post-Foucauldian assessments of Enlightenment ideology in education have been stock-in-trade for thirty years). It must be very difficult to be as profoundly invested in encouraging an academic discipline to more energetically pursue the question of social class, as Jim is unquestionably, and yet to be as uncomfortable as he is with Marxism and whole schools of thought associated with Marxism, such as critical pedagogy and British cultural studies. This can lead to real errors, such as confusing “money” or “income” with capital. The first question I ask my students in a conversation on class is: “What’s the difference between money and capital?” This often leads to a discussion covering such questions as, “How much capital do you have to control in order to avoid working for a living?” “Does the possession of, say, ten million dollars make a difference in your world view?” “How would possessing sufficient capital to avoid work affect your choices about an occupation or the choices you make about higher education?” “Does it make a difference to your personality if you earned the ten million after a lifetime of

competitive struggle to become a highly paid neurosurgeon who invests small capital in McDonald's franchises or if you get the ten million in a trust fund?" "To what class do highly paid professionals and managers 'belong'?" "Why do so many people who could earn a managerial paycheck choose instead to engage in lower-paying work?" Jim presents oversimplified versions of class relations and, interestingly, switches from discussing class relations as discourse to evaluating a rhetoric of class relations as an organizing tool (noting accurately enough that persons with "middle class" ideology don't find such a rhetoric appealing). He presents an impoverished discussion of Foucault's relationship to Marx, other Marxist intellectuals, especially the tradition of cultural materialism, and the events of 1968-70: during "a short period in the late 1960s and early 1970s [Foucault] appropriated leftist rhetoric," he writes, relying on Paras (515); "As Paras proves, Foucault had been critical of Marxism throughout his previous career" (530). The question of Foucault, Marx, European Marxism, and the cultural-Marxist tradition to which he significantly contributes is really the subject of a book—many books, in fact. One that would effectively illuminate and extend Jim's argument is Mark Poster's *Foucault, Marxism and History*, which appeared in the year of Foucault's death, 1984. Poster spends two chapters examining the complex web of Foucault's relationship to Marxist thought before exploring how this nexus might illuminate the shift that he dubbed a move from "mode of production" to the "mode of information." A significant text in the "post-Marxist" moment ("Marxism itself may now be an obstacle to social criticism" [44]), Poster's book unfolds in learned relation to the Marxist tradition. In this respect it resembles the book most often cited as emblematic of post-Marxism, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, which devotes three of four chapters to a genealogy of Marxist thought. What is missing in Jim's account isn't just the substance of Marxist tradition and its many vicissitudes since 1945, but also the intellectual movement of the contemporary scene: in the face of a global-capitalist totalization, with the most thoughtful, bestselling, and celebrated theorists of today (Harvey, Mohanty, Žižek, Hardt and Negri, and so forth), we have for years been summoning what Derrida was pleased to call the "specter of Marx" in what may well be a "post-post-Marxist" moment.

I think Jim's next effort will be better and do more of the work he wants it to do for the discipline if he spends more time with the substantial Marxist tradition on the questions of social class, disciplinarity, and higher education that he raises. A highly developed and long running conversation on these questions can be accessed via a wide variety of disciplines, from women's studies to education, history, philosophy, anthropology, cyberstudies, and sociology. For instance, his appreciation of Worsham's significant contribution to the scholarship of labor and value would be improved by situating it in any of the strands of the past quarter century of Marxist scholarship that it engages. *JAC* readers will already situate the work in the context of the conversations among Žižek, Butler, and Laclau to which I have already alluded, and the related massive literature on such questions as the "intersectionality" of social movements. However, it is also part of a long chain of specifically feminist engagements with Marx, especially those indebted to Selma James, influencing 1970s radical feminists such as Angela Davis, who argued for the "obsolescence of housework" by fully industrializing and collectivizing it, and two generations of socialist feminists in, especially anthropology and philosophy, but also biology and communications, labor studies, and literature, encompassing Donna Haraway, Johanna Brenner, Nancy Hartsock, Chandra Mohanty, and bell hooks, among scores of others, as well as the more mainstream political organizers and activists who sought "comparable worth" legislation until that ground to a halt under the Reagan-Bush reaction. Worsham's work unfolds within this context of a greatly expanded understanding of the labor of "reproducing society" beyond the biological role of reproduction and direct care of children, to the social work of education, health care, civil service, lawyering, industrial psychology, cultural production—all the labor theorized by Italian autonomists (the Marxist school to which Hardt and Negri belong) such as Maurizio Lazzarato as "immaterial labor" and by Birmingham School thinkers like Andrew Ross as "mental labor."

Speaking of mental labor, the point at which Jim's work would be most improved by an encounter with decades of recent Marxist thought is in his account of the relationship between education and social class, especially in connection with intellectuals and professionals as workers. Here are two of Jim's comments in this connection:

Further, the discourse of class . . . puts into question the expertise, but also the very activity of the professional and especially the very idea of “intellectual work.” Intellectual work for many working class people is an oxymoron. Work is physical. How can there be real nonphysical work? Street smarts are acceptable and desirable, but intellectual work is paper pushing (or used to be before computers). (560)

When we who are first generation college students (and first generation Ph.D’s) decided to leave working class culture and make the crossing to the university and the middle class culture of the professions, what sort of language acts helped us to imagine that action before it happened? (565)

Most composition workers grading papers for a couple of thousand a class will recognize Jim’s account of social class and intellectual work as somewhat dated. Among the problems are his indirect-discourse version of how “working-class” people think about work (“Work is physical. How can there be real nonphysical work?”); the assumptions regarding who constitutes the working class; and the naturalization of educator ideology.

As early as Stanley Aronowitz’s Birmingham-inspired doctoral dissertation (which in 1973 became *False Promises: The Shaping of American Working Class Consciousness*, one of the definitive books on social class the United States), the notion of “white-collar proletarians” has been a significant analytical category with respect to a number of issues relevant here. That is, rather than identify “intellectual work” with a “white collar” or “middle class” departure from the working class “to the university” and professionalism (as Jim does, based on his own life story), since the early 1970s the most persuasive—often Marxist—accounts have tracked higher education’s role in the steady proletarianization of intellectual workers, of which rhet-comp’s labor force is perhaps a core instance. As Bowles and Gintis note, the proletarianization of faculty is simply part of the larger process of ratcheting “white-collar” work, observed in the 1950s and 60s by C. Wright Mills and Harry Braverman. As Aronowitz observes, the term “white collar” did not function descriptively (to name “an actual group of workers”) so much as it functioned discursively, promoting “a specific perspective on social

class,” specifically the presupposition of “an essential difference between the structure of labor in the factory and the office” (292). In these accounts, higher education generally through commercialization and vocationalization of the curriculum, through stratification, disentanglement and privatization—as well as the direct employers of a profoundly and callously casualized workforce —has not contributed to the kind of emancipation from the working class that Jim represents, but instead is profoundly complicit in a steadily increasing immiseration of American labor.

Especially relevant is the question of the meaning of the massive expansion of higher education participation. Nearly 70 percent of American high school graduates are enrolled in higher ed *within a year of graduating high school*. This statistic does not count the huge number of adult and returning students, or intermittent attendants—the average age of an enrolled undergraduate is about 26. What this suggests is higher education’s participation in the production of a highly skilled proletariat—with advanced job training funded not by employers but by the state and workers themselves—that has also been extensively disciplined by schooling. The whole question of working-class consciousness, so far from being alien to higher education, is now deeply imbricated in campus discourse, including disciplinary discourses—especially rhetoric and composition, which functions as close to a universal experience of higher education as there is.

The majority of higher education faculty are proletarian, members of the global pool of casual or “precarious” labor, the “precarariat.” In turn they labor, as both objects and subjects of professional academic discourse, to produce proletarians disciplined to accept and submissively navigate their precarious condition.

Does that condition of power-knowledge mean that there’s no possibility of counter-power and counter-knowledge?

Of course not.

But you can’t survey the literature of those possibilities without tripping over a Marxist, even in the United States.

There are lots of way to go from here—the important literatures on professional-managerial consciousness, the feminization and casualization of labor globally, the immiseration of workers in the service economy, the

function of “youth” and “student” discourses in enabling the exploitation by US employers of new categories of labor that the law doesn’t accord the rights of workers—all literatures to which full-time critic of contemporary capitalism Barbara Ehrenreich has meaningfully contributed, if you have to pick just one person to read. Or we could pursue analogies between the situation of composition labor and schoolteachers vis a vis curriculum, teaching methods, and their managers. Or we could discuss the methods through which schoolteachers continue to express collective agency (for example, through unions and direct political action) not just on wages but also issues of academic freedom, including assessment (high stakes testing).

However, I want to close with the account of some contemporary white-collar proletarians, some of whom, like Becky Meadows, I knew a bit in the right-to-work state of Kentucky. You may have caught Becky Meadows’ case as it flashed across the wire on *Inside Higher Education* in July 2007. Like Jim, Becky is the member of her family with the most education and the first academic career, a long-term rhet-comp worker who received her pedagogy training at Louisville, where she was in my required critical theory class—she read Žižek, Butler, and Laclau, choosing to present on Butler. I remember her as a quirky, brash country singer (performing locally under the stage name FOXX) and author of a piece of *Phantom of the Opera*-based fan fiction that she published and promoted on the website she created for a class assignment. She promptly began as an adjunct instructor of developmental writing at the nearby community college, and soon after began teaching across the river in southern Indiana, at Ivy Tech Community College.

There she taught primarily composition but occasionally also two communications courses for which she wasn’t credentialed at a lower rate of pay, teaching as many as seven courses a semester to make ends meet on the \$1536 she earned per course. During her several years of part-time work, she began doctoral studies and with ABD status applied for a full-time assistant professorship as the Liberal Arts Program Chairperson at Ivy Tech in 2005, winning the job. In this administrative position, she had 25 hours of administrative responsibility and student advising every week; she was also required to teach four courses every term, over a dizzying area of subject areas: “I taught PHL 101, Introduction to

Philosophy; PHL 102, Introduction to Ethics; HUM 201 and 202, Introduction to Humanities I and II; and English 111, English Composition.”¹ For this she earned a nine-month salary of \$37,150, with a summer stipend, and elected to teach an additional course each term, paid at the adjunct rate of \$1536. “I had to resign my GTAship at U of L,” she told me, and slow down her dissertation research substantially. “But I thought it was worth it. Full-time positions are difficult to find in this area, and my husband and I own a house in Carrollton, Kentucky, which is only eight miles from my hometown of Ghent, Kentucky. We have found the place we want to stay.”

Becky identifies closely with her Ivy Tech students and their education experiences and feelings. Growing up on a farm in Kentucky, she was valedictorian of her rural high school yet “astonished her teachers” by declining to go to college:

I was pretty burned out at that point. I sat out for two years and worked at Begley’s Drug Store in Carrollton, and I discovered I had enough money each month to make my car payment and to pay my car insurance, so I began attending Jefferson Community College in Louisville. I carpooled back and forth from Carrollton with some friends for one semester, and then a friend and I moved into an apartment in Louisville. I was bitten by the Journalism bug after I joined the JCC student newspaper, and after having been the paper’s editor, I transferred to the University of Missouri-Columbia where I earned my Bachelor of Journalism degree. I discovered that nobody wants to pay journalists very much, though, so a friend of mine and I started our own newspaper in Carrollton, Ky. We kept it going for about 2 years before we ran out of money. At that point, I decided to go to U of L to get my M.A. in English, and I started teaching developmental English courses at JCC.

She identifies with their economic experience as well. “I grew up pretty poor but happy:

There are lot of people who are poorer than my family. I always thought we were middle class until I saw the monetary dividing lines for class in a Sociology class when I was a sophomore at the University of Missouri, when I realized we were lower class. That was a bit of a shock. I grew up thinking nearly everyone around me

was middle class, but in reality, we were all lower class. I did watch my grandmother get up every morning at 5 a.m. and go to work at the local tube factory in Carrollton. I saw how hot, sweaty, and sick she was when she got off work at 3 p.m. I saw how she earned \$160 per month pension after working 36 years for that place. I'm sure that has something to do with my education goals and my drive. I believe my grandmother made it up to \$8 an hour before she retired. My mother didn't work at first because she had 5 children, but she did work after the children were all either out of the house or in high school. She was a custodian for many years. There were a few somewhat affluent families in Carrollton, but certainly not many. One family had a two-story mansion-looking house on Highway 227, and I always thought they were wealthy. They even had an in-ground swimming pool!

Becky approached her eventual hiring directly into a full-time administrative position overseeing her former peers without many complicated feelings about the transition. Like many in the WPA position, she saw her administrative position straightforwardly as an empowerment, an opportunity to do more than previously on behalf of her part-time colleagues:

I very much enjoyed my administrative position because I enjoy helping people. I worked hard to ensure the adjuncts in my department had the number of courses they needed each semester. I also worked with them on the use of technology so they could teach some online courses, which cut down on their travel to campus and saved them gas. I devised a method where adjuncts could make up missed courses via Blackboard instead of having to schedule additional classes or suffer a cut in pay. I felt empowered because I knew I could help the adjunct instructors in the Liberal Arts Program even as I built the program. It really was the ideal position for me.

As an administrator and teacher, Becky considered herself a success and developed a strong personnel record. She was comfortable in her role and ambitious for promotion. "I would love to be an academic dean some day," she told me:

I considered myself very successful. The Liberal Arts Program Chairperson position I held was my first administrative position,

and it was the bottom rung of administration, but I loved my job. Dr. Joe Moore, the Academic Dean for the Madison campus where I taught, said I would be promoted from Program Chairperson to Department Chairperson effective this summer. . . . Obviously I was on the right track, or I wouldn't have been slated for a promotion. My teacher evaluations were always stellar, and my last performance evaluation, in 2005, was superb. In fact, Dr. Moore wrote on that evaluation that he was very happy to have me at the college.

So what interrupted this progress, the first better-paying step in Becky's own version of Jim's "crossing" into professionalism and the middle class, perhaps a future deanship? Toward the end of this successful first year as an assistant professor and administrator, two of the adjunct faculty that Becky supervised had health crises. Without health insurance and, contrary to administrator propaganda, without other sources of health care, Becky—the "country goth" singer, with some nice airplay on "country alternative" outlets—came up with an idea: to hold a benefit concert that would raise some money toward a "health care fund" for uninsured faculty. As she tells it, initial reaction to her idea was lukewarm, but not hostile: she was told that she could hold the concert so long as the campus wasn't connected to the effort. She arranged tickets and publicity, but then received a complaint from upper administration regarding identification of the benefit as a "College Relief Fund." Having interpreted the previous directive as meaning to avoid mentioning Ivy Tech, Becky obligingly removed the term "college" from the publicity. But then, on April 30, she received a memo from the director of human resources under the subject line "Cease and Desist," maintaining, Becky says "that I had been told to stop the adjunct fundraising concert, and that I had continued to proceed. I was very upset by this memo because that simply was not true—at no time did anyone in administration ask me to stop the fundraising concert." With the term coming to an end, Becky asked for meetings and explanations of this ominous communication and cancelled the concert; however, she was put off repeatedly until the day after she walked through commencement ceremonies, May 21.

At that meeting, it was suggested that she had caused a "PR nightmare" by "suggesting that the college does nothing for its adjuncts" and

had committed “insubordination.” On May 23, she received a certified letter indicating that her contract would not be renewed.

Becky’s learned a bit from her experience and is beginning to approach her situation somewhat differently. She still wants to be a dean. She still considers herself neither a radical nor an agitator. But she also has an AAUP-recommended attorney and has asked for and received the support of the American Philosophical Association’s Committee for the Defense of the Professional Rights of Philosophers. The chair of the APA committee, Martin Benjamin, told *Inside Higher Education*, “It’s a prima facie case that her rights may have been violated. . . . It looked like she’d been doing an excellent job, had the esteem of her colleagues, good teaching evaluations, and it was very surprising that she would not be given a contract. It seems like everything they asked her to do, she did” (qtd. in Jaschik, “Price”). And the president of Indiana AAUP, Richard Schneirov, told the same reporter (after speaking to a number of her colleagues too fearful to speak out) that “there is no doubt” she was terminated for unintentionally embarrassing the college while trying to help adjunct faculty.

Becky still feels that her future is bright: “I don’t even consider the possibility that I might not ever again land a full-time position; I don’t think anyone should operate from that point of view. I’ve always believed if you dream it, you can be it, and I know a position will come open that’s meant just for me.” But she’s far less sanguine about administrative culture:

I do think there is a huge problem in this country regarding adjunct instructors, and I do think colleges and universities could pay their adjuncts at least a living wage. I see institutions invest in new buildings, new coaches, star athletes, and pay raises for administration, for example, while adjunct pay increases about 3 percent per year, if that. That’s not logical to me. . . . Ivy Tech’s Madison campus is certainly an example of this; the college is willing to undertake a major fundraising campaign to build a new building for the campus, which I completely agree was needed, but nobody seems to be sticking his or her neck out to get more money for adjunct instructors, and when I try to implement a fundraising concert to raise money for adjuncts with healthcare issues, I am terminated. It makes no sense to me.

And she now questions the administrative commitments to academic values in the the absence of tenure: “In essence, at Ivy Tech, I was a glorified adjunct myself, as are all of the full-time faculty because they operate on yearly contracts. If I had been tenured, I would still have my job today!” She’s grateful for AAUP’s support and feels that it’s “the duty” of MLA and CCCC to promptly emulate APA and establish committees in defense of the professional rights of faculty in their disciplines.

What does this future dean have to say about academic labor? “I’m a huge proponent of labor unions,” she said. “The most difficult part would be getting in touch with adjunct faculty members across the state. Anyone interested in this idea should email me at professorfoxx9@aol.com—maybe we can get something going.”

There’s a lot more to say about what the stratification, commodification, and corporatization of higher education has meant for labor in the United States: there’s been a huge, corresponding stratification of academic labor, including a stratification of access to basic academic rights. As I proofread this, another professor has been fired simply for raising questions about the excesses of capitalism—in conflict with his new college president’s vision of “institutional mission” (Guess). It has also meant an intensified stratification of the workforce overall: for most who “purchase higher education services,” the experience will not spring them “out” of the working class, but locate them more precisely within it. Indeed, for the increasingly small minority who evade higher education and who do not qualify for such traditional labor aristocracies as the skilled trades or the organized public service, such as policing and firefighting, the appropriate description is not “working class” but “underclass.”

The institutions of higher education increasingly function to create an underclass not just by exclusion of workers (gatekeeping), but by active incorporation of workers on hyperexploitative terms. This is certainly true for faculty, staff, and graduate employees. As I learned in researching *How the University Works*, it’s also true for undergraduates, who are perhaps the single largest category of workers employed on most campuses. In chapter 4, “Students are Already Workers,” I explore a scheme by which UPS has collaborated with the Teamsters and several

Louisville-area campuses and indeed many campuses across the country in converting its most stressful, injury-producing night shifts into “financial aid” positions for the neediest undergraduates students. For working five school nights a week between midnight and three or four am, depending on the shipper’s needs, a student can take home as little as \$25 a night. These jobs are so bad that average turnover before converting them to “financial aid” was well over 100%, with most hires lasting just weeks on the high-pressure night sort. Despite everything that the campus “partners” have done to encourage retention, and propaganda boasting that they’ve “helped 10,000 students” in the Louisville area alone with this “financial aid,” complete with self-authenticating awards for corporate citizenship from the university-corporate complex, UPS officials can only associate the ten thousand persons they’ve so cheaply employed with 300 degrees, a figure that the most generous analysis can extrapolate to perhaps a 12% rate of persistence to degree. If these individuals do persist to degree, they’re most often doing it elsewhere, and not under the aegis of this mendacious scheme of “aid.” What of those students who do not persist—what lessons have they learned? “They all blame themselves,” one of their first-year writing instructors told me of those who can’t persist (and subsist) on “aid” of \$25 for three hours on the high-speed sort after midnight. And of the minority of those who do persist—are they escaping into the world of middle-class professionalism that Jim represents? In many cases, no.

We need to think a lot more carefully about the relationship of higher education to social class today and in recent decades, not just in the United States but globally. To do that, persons working in rhetoric and composition to produce its professional discourse must be willing to be critically reflective about their role as managers and the extent to which the rhet-comp discourse is enmeshed by the keywords and procapitalist trajectory of larger management discourse, including both management theory and the scholarship of education administration. We need to stop tolerating red-baiting and boosterism. We need to give up parochialism regarding “other” disciplines.

My own conviction is that the figure of writing offers contemporary English studies a vital set of opportunities for intellectual leadership and public intervention. We can seize those opportunities in part by extending

our encounter with Foucault. But we can do much more if we are more open to the richness of the critical—often broadly Marxist—tradition than has been the case in recent years. I think Jim and I can agree that “we” have little to lose as a discipline by casting off certain discursive chains.

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Notes

1. All quotations attributed to Becky Meadows refer to an e-mail exchange that took place between me and Meadows in late July and early August 2007.

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Being the Namer or the Named: Working-Class Discourse Conflicts

Nancy Mack

Busy academics are choosy about what we read. We skim articles that seem mildly interesting but not very useful to our own scholarship and teaching. We speed through the introduction; page through the subhead-