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[Book Review – How the University Works](#)

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[Marc Bousquet](#) has written quite a book (book blog [here](#)) that deserves to be widely distributed not only in academia but to any organization involved in labor issues. The University (capitalized as generic) may be the main topic but the background and consequences apply to general labor-management relations. It's a very dense book that weaves social theory, labor relations history and contemporary academic labor analysis. It should command one's attention and will give academic readers quite a few "wow, that's what's going on where I work" moments. I cannot hope to do justice to such a substantial and important book but I want nevertheless to try to extract what I think are the central insights of Marc's analysis.

The Three Stages of Academic Labor- Management Relations

"Over the past forty years, the administration of higher education has changed considerably. Campus administrations have steadily diverged from the ideals of faculty governance, collegiality, and professional self-determination. Instead, they have embraced the values and practices of corporate management. Consequently, the new realities of of managed education strongly correspond to the better-understood realities of managed health care." (1)

So opens *How the University Works*. In the 200 or so pages that follow, Marc Bousquet takes us all the way back to the 1940s, to help us understand where these changes come from and what their consequences are for contemporary academia. Bousquet contends that there have been three stages in labor-management, or faculty-administration in the case of academia, which correspond to three waves of discourse (shall we say epistemes, since Foucault is mentioned?) about such relations.

1. The first wave corresponds to the 1945-1980s period. It is the period of high unionism where campuses were staffed largely with unionized tenured (or on tenure-track) faculty and non-teaching staff, affiliated with public-employee unions. These were the days of high unionization levels.
2. The second wave emerged in the 1980s on the heels of the managerial revolution that is still dominant today, geared precisely toward striking back at the unionist awareness of the first wave. This second wave was conceptualized in neoliberal terms. This is when higher education discourse became centered around issues of labor market, education as matching system for the economy, students-as-consumers or customers, that is, when the value of a degree had to become synonymous to an economic value on the job market. The universities and colleges themselves were now required to see themselves AS job markets and had to reorganize themselves for the sake of efficiency. Indeed, universities were then enjoined to NOT produce too many Ph.Ds that would clog the market and colleges were swept up in the "continuous improvement" insanity (my term).
3. The third wave is in the works: it is epitomized by the graduate students and contingent faculty unionization movement as pushback against managerial domination. It is epitomized by movements such as the Coalition of Graduate Employee Unions (GEU). That unionization movement covers over fifty campuses and contingent faculty are now dominant in the Higher Education branch of the National Education Association (NEA).

What are the consequences of this "trilogy"? Marc Bousquet focuses on the dynamics of the second wave, and the strategies needed to counter the assault on academic labor.

The third wave is founded on the recognition of human agency, that is, the capacity to act and initiate change in the face of the neoliberal and globalist ideology of inevitability and irreversibility. It also recognizes that real change has to reach institutional levels of decision-making and be enacted through social policy. As such, the "we work" third wave slogan (as in, we may be students or contingent faculty but we are still labor in the full sense of the term and should be treated as such, and not as waste of the system) has several implications(41-44):

- "We are not 'overproducing Ph.Ds'; we are underproducing jobs." The university would not be able to function without the

reserve army of graduate students and contingent workers. In this sense, the work they do constitutes REAL jobs and positions that are simply never filled but could be filled by degree holders. But the way the managed university works is to fill these positions with contingent work, on a casualized basis and treat them as if they were not actual positions. Moreover, contingent workers can often only afford to take these low-paid positions because they have spouses with full-time positions, other systems of financial assistance, or simply get into debt. In other words, cheap teaching is subsidized by other parts of the social structure.

- *“Cheap teaching is not a victimless crime.”* Such labor made and maintained cheap hurts everyone in addition to contingent workers. On the end of the labor chain, the increasing casualization of work at the university tends to increase the stressing of the system: full-time, tenured faculty still have to teach more, advise more, publish more, serve on more committees or continuous improvement teams, get more involved in “shared governance”, etc. It also leave undergraduate teaching to the less experienced graduate students.

“Casualization systematically replaces the scholarly activity of the professoriate with new management tasks, and it 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.” (43)

Similarly, it becomes possible to use George Ritzer’s concept of McDonaldization of higher education: packing as many students as possible in classrooms with the lowest paid teachers (better yet, keep the students away from campus by using online, distance and hybrid delivery modes, akin to drive-through windows) teaching out of the trunk of their cars because they only have collective office space. We also witness the standardization of curriculum and curriculum processes which reduces innovation as more and more curriculum products are delivered standardized by publishers (outsourcing).

- *“Casualization is an issue of racial, gendered and class justice.”* These cheap teachers are those who can afford to teach at such low-pay. If one has to rely on a salary to live, cheap teaching jobs are out of the question. This explains why the third wave unionization movement is largely composed of women: casualization is a feminist issue.
- *“Late capitalism doesn’t just happen to the university; the university makes late capitalism happen.”* The transformation of labor in the managed university: replacement of fixed labor with casualized and flexible labor, the use of new information and communication technologies to provide education without teachers, as well as the transformation of students into casual labor.

Awareness of the labor realities of higher education requires awareness of the four points above, an awareness necessary to fight back against second wave discourse and practice.

Second Wave Thinking: The Rise of the Managed University

Marc Bousquet compares the current university system to an HMO. The university has become an organization to be managed like an efficient business where efficiency means delivering education at the lowest possible cost and running at a profit. However, as in the case of health care, this managerial revolution has not brought about cheaper education. Quite the opposite, the cost of higher education has been consistently increasing. How is this possible considering that casualized, flexible labor and the McDonaldization of higher education are becoming the norm? Where did the money saved by reducing tenured faculty go?

Bousquet is merciless when he discusses what he calls the “corporate welfare” university and “education profiteers”, that is, the for-profit higher education institutions who pumps enormous amounts of money in terms of federal financial aid, higher tuition and use even more casualization to reduce labor costs. However, non-for-profit institutions have also used increased tuition and corporate subsidies (vendors). But it is not that hard to find where the money went:

1. skyrocketing of the number of administrators with high pay
2. expansion of facilities, especially those dedicated to athletics

The overall trend here is the “corporatization” of the university:

“apparel sales; sport marketing; corporate-financed research; curriculum endowment, and building; job training; direct financial investment via portfolios, pensions and cooperative ventures; the production and enclosure of intellectual property; the selection of vendors for books, information technology, soda pop, and construction; the purchase and provision of non-standard labor; and so forth.” (9)

The corporate university is one pillar in the emerging of academic capitalism which encourage market behavior such as competition for scarce resources and never-ending quest for efficiency and – the buzzword of the decade – accountability under the auspices of a managerial class, thoroughly socialized into second-wave thinking.

Under such a model of efficiency, for instance, the use of graduate students has only the function of extracting as much flexible and cheap labor with very little prospect of full-time employment. Actually, as soon as students obtain their degree, they become unemployable and get replaced by the next class of graduate students. Getting the degree is a way out the door, not a way to integrate the system as a degree-holder with certified expertise. The function of the graduate students then is to do the “dirty work” of academia, teaching undergraduates, mostly. Of course, this also happens under the rationalization, on the part of tenured faculty, that this is training for a future job in academia. The reality is that it is not. In other words, *“in many disciplines, for the majority of graduates, the Ph.D. indicates the logical conclusion of an academic career.”* (23) Efficiency then, involves constant in-flows and out-flows of replaceable graduates students. Non-degree holders in, degree-holders out.

Moreover, these flows are absolutely necessary for the system to work: it is essential that the system expels its degree-holders. It would be impossible for the “efficient” university to function as it does, to grant degrees and then employ these degree holders. The great lie of the corporate university is that graduate programs do NOT prepare for future academic employment, nor for the majority.

Of course, Bousquet makes the obvious connection between this and the general global casualization of the workforce under the label of informalization. This is how the managed university is one piece of a puzzle (not just a passive victim of global processes) and an active participant in global capitalism’s labor mode. But as with the alter-globalization movement, there is resistance in the form of the third wave discourse and the movement of unionization of contingent work.

Second-wave thinking also tends to follow a form of technological determinism: technology drives change and is the universal problem-solver. The idea of disembodied educational experience is the ultimate efficient teaching mode where only a few contingent workers are needed, not full-time teachers and scholars. Of course, one cannot consider this without referring to the model of the genre: the University of Phoenix which epitomizes the ultimate commodification of higher education.

Technology does not only offer the possibility of teaching without teachers. It also increases the degree of administrative control over processes and personnel:

“Management dissemination of technology has been used to surveil, punish, regiment, censor and control faculty; to direct how they allocate time and effort; to cement administrative control over the curriculum; and to impose supplemental duties, including technological self-education and continuous availability to students and administration via email. In some cases, technology has even displaced living labor entirely with automated learning programs tended by software maintenance and courseware sales personnel.” (59)

In the process, teaching is reduced to delivering pre-packaged information, not fostering innovative and critical thinking. In this field, the academic publishers also produce pre-packaged courses that are ready-to-teach right out of the box without any real input from the actual instructors.

Of course, efficiency analysis would find everything to love about that system, especially since administrators do not have to factor in the externalities of such a system, mostly as they apply to the quality of life of contingent workers and their dislocated lives spent driving between different teaching sites, the bad quick meals eaten in the car, the shuffling of kids to and from various care sites, etc. These external costs are shouldered by relatives, spouses and other support systems. And of course, they are disposable at will.

And of course, technology is also at the heart of the continuous improvement movement, a subsidiary ideology of the second wave discourse.

Continuous Improvement as Stressing the System

Toyotism has made itself comfortably at home within higher education. Under the leadership of the likes of Malcolm Baldrige, continuous improvement systems were supposed to provide efficiency and accountability in ways understandable to the business world: finally, we would find out whether these lefty professors were really teaching or just indoctrinating young minds and if the latter, then there would be way to remedy that more to the likings of the Reaganites. This movement has been immensely successful.

At the community college where I work, as faculty rolls were slashed, we have witnessed the creation of an entire upper administrative layer dedicated to satisfying accrediting bodies (yes, there is a multiplicity of agencies, self-appointed in measuring... well... everything

and anything). Every action has to be turned into a process with flow chart; every issue, no matter how trivial, has to generate a QIP team to resolve it, every team has to generate paperwork and account for its own processes, etc... Faculty are then expected to develop the tools of their own surveillance (see David Lyons and the Surveillance Society). A few will be rewarded for their complete buy-in into the system.

What is amazing is how all this activity is for nothing. It never produces anything of value to improve teaching and learning. It is purely self-reflective and self-replicating in a constant feedback loop.

““The core concept is of continuous reinvention – often called continuous quality improvement, where quality means efficiency so that the managers are constantly being asked to improve efficiency, that is, to continuously produce more with lower labor costs. This is otherwise known as “stressing the system” or “kaizen”, a philosophy of continuous testing of the limits of worker performance, or “management by stress”. Key stressing strategies include compelling teams and individuals to act entrepreneurially and compete with each other resources. (...) In its academic version, the Toyotist work regime is supported by a triumphalist administrative literature such as Continuous Quality Improvement in Higher Education. (...) In all of this literature, the notion of administrators “causing quality” is fundamentally a literature about the stressing (or “continuous improvement”) of faculty productivity”

This continuous stressing of the system is detrimental to any educational system. It takes time away from actual teaching and preparation. And as is made clear in the management literature, it keeps the remaining full-time faculty busy running around like mice in a maze, therefore, more manageable by the administration under the pretense of shared governance and collaboration.

Having become a numerical minority living under continuous system stressing, the full-time faculty have not been at the forefront of the current, third wave, push-back. Contingent workers are leading the way and Marc Bousquet’s book is truly a call to arms, or at least, social activism. Indeed, one of the major tenet of second wave thinking is the claim to inevitability, the denial of human agency and of the potential for social and structural change in social movements. The student anti-sweatshop movement, the contingent workers unionism, and more generally the alter-globalization movement all re-claim the mantel of agency at the heart of social and political life. There are alternatives.

This is already a long review and I have left out major aspects of Marc Bousquet’s book such as students as workers, English-specific challenges. So, I will not pretend to have done justice to the substantial and rich arguments made there. But I think the book is ultimately successful in raising readers’ awareness and it should be mandated reading to every faculty senate or faculty shared governance body.

As importantly, it reminds us, academics, that we are labor, as we too often tend to forget.

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One Response to “Book Review – How the University Works”



1. [Ron Says:](#)
[August 22nd, 2008 at 6:56 am](#)

Christine,

Once again, thanks! This helps me to put into perspective what I have been seeing at our institution since 1985.

Ron

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