

The Academic Devolution

JEFFREY J. WILLIAMS

The Last Professors: The Corporate University and the Fate of the Humanities

by Frank Donoghue
Fordham University Press, 2008
172 pp., \$22

How the University Works: Higher Education and the Low-Wage Nation

by Marc Bousquet
NYU Press, 2008
304 pp., \$23

In 1968, Christopher Jencks and David Riesman published a book called *The Academic Revolution*. It tells the success story of American higher education, from small, sectarian colleges to the major universities of the postwar era. Its revolution is not that of students but the professionalization of faculty and the new stress on research. Jencks and Riesman observe that, for the first time in American history, professors were more preoccupied with research than teaching, with their discipline than their campus, and with graduate education than undergraduate. Stressing “the rise to power of the academic professions,” Jencks and Riesman might well have called their book “The Rise of the Professors.”

The revolution didn’t happen by accident. It was planned during the Second World War, as those in Franklin Roosevelt’s administration worried about the postwar years and invented the G.I. Bill, among other things, to stave off a return to economic depression, as well as to build America through “the endless frontier” of science, as adviser Vannevar Bush called it. It was promoted by the Report of the President’s Commission on Education, or “Truman Commission,” in 1947, which called for massive public investment in higher education to

provide opportunity for Americans across class and race lines. It was incited by Sputnik and the subsequent creation, in 1958, of the National Defense Education Act. Like the federal highway system, which was brokered for the sake of national defense, the United States developed a national system of affordable higher education and university-based research.

Published by Doubleday, *The Academic Revolution* was something of a public event. There was a large audience for updates on the state of American higher education, and it was met with a wave of histories, position statements, and reports, such as a forty-book series from the Carnegie Commission on Higher Education that adduced all manner of demographic and other data about the spread of higher education to a majority of Americans. The burgeoning university was a measure of the postwar boom, like the great American car companies that put rubber on the pavement of the new highways.

Forty years later, the revolution seems distant history, and a reaction has set in. From a time of expansive federal and state funding, accounting for upwards of 60 percent of university budgets and resulting in unprecedented support of research across the disciplines, low tuition for students, and plentiful jobs for faculty, we have experienced a prolonged period of cutbacks, with federal and state support reduced to about 30 percent, resulting in the rise of commercially directed research, skyrocketing tuitions (by a factor of ten in less than thirty years, more than three times the rate of inflation), and the shrinking of permanent faculty positions.

Sometimes it seems as if the reaction was inevitable, but, like the revolution, it did not happen by accident. It expresses the policies of neoliberalism, repealing the policies of the New Deal and Great Society, shifting the university from being a public entitlement like high school to more of a pay-as-you-go, privatized service. It was primed with legislation such as the Bayh-

Dole Act of 1980, which allowed universities to hold patents, resulting in their directly adopting corporate strategies and commercial goals for research. It was paved with a shift in federal aid from grants to loans, now tipping the scale at eighty billion dollars annually in student loans compared to fifty billion in grants, and with the privatization of Sallie Mae, from a federal nonprofit founded in 1965 under the Higher Education Act to, beginning in 1996, a private enterprise. This led to an astronomical increase in student debt, from around \$2,000 per graduate in 1982 to about \$23,000 twenty-five years later. The reaction was also forged with the managerial policies of contemporary corporate capitalism, resulting in a steady decline of full-time, tenure-stream faculty jobs, so that now the predominant position of faculty is casual—part time, temporary, non-tenurable—and close to the academic version of day labor. In my field, English, the current statistic is that 32 percent of faculty have tenure-line jobs, meaning that more than two-thirds do not. Formerly a representative figure of the postwar meritocracy, one who demonstrates merit in school, regardless of background, and succeeds to a secure, professional, middle-class career, the professor is now an embattled creature.

It took some time for the commentary to catch up to the reality. Through the 1980s and 1990s attention was focused on the flare and fireworks of the political correctness debates, but since the mid-1990s there has been a building wave of reports on the distressed condition of higher education. A main line examines the “corporate university” and its dangers, in both academic studies, such as Sheila Slaughter and Larry Leslie’s *Academic Capitalism: Politics, Policies, and the Entrepreneurial University*, and public reports, such as Jennifer Washburn’s *University, Inc.: The Corporate Corruption of Higher Education*. Only recently has there been attention to student debt, with exposés such as Alan Collinge’s *The Student Loan Scam: The Most Oppressive Debt in U.S. History*, as well as my articles, “Debt Education” and “Student Debt and the Spirit of Indenture” in the Summer 2006 and Fall 2008 issues of *Dissent*. A persistent strand, probably more prominent inside academe and less known to a wide public, has focused on faculty. Two recent

books, Frank Donoghue’s *The Last Professors: The Corporate University and the Fate of the Humanities* and Marc Bousquet’s *How the University Works: Higher Education and the Low-Wage Nation*, provide the best general accounts of what has happened to faculty, particularly in the humanities. Together they make a sobering sequel, forty years after, to *The Academic Revolution*.

If *The Academic Revolution* celebrated the heyday of professorial power, *The Last Professors* sings, as its title suggests, its elegy. Its basic thesis is that professorial positions, especially in the traditional core of the humanities, are an endangered species and henceforth will exist only in the most elite refuges. In his best and most depressing chapter, “Competing in Academia,” Donoghue synthesizes the statistics of those who survive the sluiceway from graduate school to tenure-stream job. Not only do a minority of those with Ph.D.s get permanent positions, but Donoghue shows that the real ratio is in fact much more severe, nearer to one in ten. He traces the extraordinarily high rate of attrition of those in graduate school, which is much greater, for instance, than those in law or medical school. This is compounded by those who finish but are stuck in the purgatory of “post-docs” or part-time, “adjunct” positions. Donoghue’s account and other statistics make clear that the claim that faculty is populated by tenured radicals is a myth: it is actually populated by overworked and underpaid adjuncts or graduate students. Instead of being exemplary figures of the postwar meritocracy, the current generation of faculty more likely represents the job-traumatized.

The news in the rest of the book is no more encouraging. Donoghue looks at other cornerstones of academic life, such as tenure and publishing. He shows how tenure and its presumed protections of academic freedom have effectively been curtailed, given the paucity of tenure-track jobs, and comments on the state of academic publishing, which has adopted blatant market protocols, resulting in the drying up of the traditional research monograph, even though academic presses presumably exist to support them. He also reports on the rise of for-profits, such as the

University of Phoenix, that teach vocational subjects and don't confer tenure, and sees them as a key rather than peripheral segment of the future of higher education. In turn, disciplines like English will go the way of the classics, except at top-ranked schools. Although they will retain the humanities, they too have been corrupted, in Donoghue's diagnosis, by the race for prestige and by "prestige envy," driven by annual rankings such as those in *U.S. News and World Report*.

The strength of *The Last Professors* is that it puts all of these features of the academic landscape in a composite picture, one that reads like a well-paced trade book rather than a belabored academic tome. I expect it will be eye-opening for those unfamiliar with what has been happening to higher education. It does not present firsthand reporting, but Donoghue provides a short, deft synthesis. The weakness of the book is that, despite its alarming diagnoses, it offers no prescription or course of treatment, and it is finally deeply fatalistic. Donoghue's only suggestion is a resigned one, in the last paragraph, that we study institutional history. This is a decent idea, but it takes the perspective of a stoic philosopher, accepting the vicissitudes of life, good or bad, with a dispassionate stance of reflection and without trying to do anything about them. Donoghue's dispassion leaves *The Last Professors* devoid of a sense of politics.

Stanley Fish is a presiding spirit of the book, noted in the acknowledgments and discussed in the first chapter, and Fish wrote a fulsome post on his *New York Times* blog (January 18, 2009) about it, concluding, "After reading Donoghue's book, I feel that I have timed it just right, for it seems that I have had a career that would not have been available to me had I entered the world 50 years later. Just lucky, I guess." (Would one say this if democracy verged on extinction?) Donoghue seems to have taken to heart Fish's pronouncements that literary criticism and politics are separate spheres and that critics should do their jobs of interpreting literary works and leave politics to those in political science.

One lesson of the history of the American university is that it is not an ivory tower. It resides at the heart of American politics, forged through the continual negotiation and some-

times outright struggle between public and private, civic and business, and egalitarian and elitist interests. Over the past thirty years, the latter interests have come out on top, but the story is still being written. This sense of struggle does not register in Donoghue's history. To wit, in his first chapter he debunks the rhetoric of crisis that seems to permeate talk about higher education, noting how business-minded commentators in the early 1900s called for more vocationalism. Donoghue's point is that such tensions have always been there, little has changed, and there is no crisis. It does seem as if cries of crisis arrive with annoying regularity each season, but sometimes they are worth heeding and call for struggle. The other part of the history that Donoghue does not mention is that those early century businessmen did not get their way, and the university followed a different direction at mid-century.

The modern American university is the product of policy. The results of policy are not entirely predictable nor indelible—the G.I. Bill, for instance, was designed as a small program but became transformative, and student loans were designed as minor, supplemental aid under the Great Society but became oppressive. However, Donoghue presents a university in which change just happens and follows an inevitable path. (Here he shows the influence of Fish's version of pragmatism.) One policy, for example, that Donoghue does not seem to be aware of regards the status of for-profit universities to receive federal student loans. Before 1996, such aid was limited only to non-profits. For-profits were not entirely reputable and were not deemed to deserve federal subsidy. However, after heavy lobbying, the for-profits engineered a change in the law, and they now account for about 20 percent of federal student loans. For-profits have become a major growth industry on the back of this federal policy. Though it would be an uphill battle, one can imagine that the policy might be reversed.

Marc Bousquet's How the University Works, like *The Last Professors*, diagnoses the troubles of higher education, especially the pinched conditions of faculty in the humanities, but Bousquet finds them cause for opposition, taking, as his title suggests, the perspective of labor. Bousquet

first made his mark with an essay, "The Waste Product of Graduate Education," that appeared in *Social Text* in 2002 and forms part of the introduction and last chapter of this book. It trenchantly debunks the standard view that graduate school is a kind of apprenticeship whose travails one endures for the deferred rewards of a lifelong professional career.

Bousquet points out that, if a majority of people don't get jobs, it's not really an apprenticeship; instead, the majority of new Ph.D.s become the waste of the system: they can no longer stay on as "graduate teaching assistants" and, even though experienced teachers, are expelled. The system perpetuates itself by bringing in "new meat," a new round of cheap teaching labor, rather than giving those it has trained full-fledged professorial jobs. Work in the contemporary university is not particularly humane.

The lack of jobs is typically attributed to "the market," with the supply of teachers exceeding the demand. Bousquet attacks the mindless invocation of the market to explain away what is in fact a labor policy. Considering the increasing number of undergraduates, he points out that current demand is actually quite high, but many full-time jobs have been converted to casual, contingent ones. Professors are not becoming extinct but more thoroughly exploited or, as he puts it, "We are not 'overproducing teachers'; we are underproducing jobs."

From the situation of graduate students, Bousquet widens his scope to consider what keeps the system going, and a good part of the book examines the role of administration, the one growth area of high-paying jobs over the past twenty years. He shows how tenure-line faculty in English—the lucky minority remaining who have full-time jobs—have more and more been reconfigured as middle managers, rather than teachers and researchers. They run writing programs and manage the graduate students or adjuncts who staff high-enrollment courses like composition. (Both Bousquet and Donoghue are English professors, and their analyses gravitate toward their home terrain, but they do have wider relevance, as English typically is one of the largest departments with the largest number of student hours at any university.) Bousquet also looks at upper

administration, which has expanded and prospered precisely as faculty has been downsized. The innovation of current administration is to "informationalize" teaching labor, that is, to marshal it with the speed of a keystroke, so it can be delivered flexibly and "just in time." Adjuncts, for instance, might be hired a week before term or let go a day after, and are much more flexible than pesky tenured professors. The revolution this time is a managerial revolution.

One other component of this revolution is the stunning rise in undergraduate work hours. In his best and most haunting chapter, "Students Are Already Workers," Bousquet exposes with the brio of a muckraker the sheer number of hours many students work, as well as the poor conditions of their work. Now students at state universities work an average of twenty-five hours a week (at private universities, students instead garner more debt, which after all is deferred labor), and Bousquet, taking a page from Barbara Ehrenreich's *Nickel and Dimed*, presents students' stories of their experiences. The rise in student work has a rippling set of consequences, such as poorer grades, lengthening time to graduation, high dropout rates, and intensified stress. For a majority of students, the experience of higher education is not one of intellectual exploration and growth, but of extended, underpaid labor and duress.

For Bousquet, labor stitches together the experience of students, faculty, and administrators in the university. Though this might seem a basic insight, there is considerable resistance toward seeing academe in terms of labor. Plumbers are laborers, whereas students are, well, students, professors are autonomous professionals, and the university is a kind of collegial club rather than a factory. This entrenched attitude impedes those of us in academe from recognizing our actual position and doing anything about it. It induces blithe indifference from many tenured faculty or, from those less blithe, fatalism. In response, Bousquet's prescription is a simple, old-fashioned one: organize. This is easier to say than to do, but Bousquet's analysis of graduate education arose from his time, while a graduate student in the mid-1990s, in the union at the City University of New York and in the Graduate Student Caucus of the Modern

Language Association, including two years as its president, so it is not an abstract suggestion. Bousquet's surmise is that the movement for equitable labor and conditions in the university will come from adjuncts and students rather than from permanent faculty, and he takes as a model an adjunct union in Chicago that has negotiated relatively fair terms of contract.

One problem with the focus on labor is that it is most directed to an intra-academic audience, to those on the shop floor, and in some ways *How the University Works* is caught between being an intra-academic call to arms and a public exposé. It is hard to garner public sympathy for professors, or for labor, on the terms of labor; rather, the ground of appeal is what professors provide and what needs they serve. Faculty is not really used to thinking this way; we are accustomed to thinking of ourselves as independent researchers who teach, whereas the public understanding of faculty is that we are primarily teachers. It is not what the public should do for us; it is what we do for them. Bousquet answers this with the pithy statement that "Cheap teaching is not a victimless crime." This is a case that those of us in higher education have to make more strongly to enjoy and deserve the support of those outside our union local.

This also suggests the uncomfortable recognition that the academic revolution might have had its excesses, insofar as it gravitated toward professorial self-interest. The rationale is of course that professors should have autonomy to do their research—academic freedom—but it also detaches professors from direct public accountability. We need to re-evaluate the

apportionment of our work, and of the prestige it garners, between research and teaching. To embrace the recognition that we are labor likely means that we also would have to recognize ourselves more forthrightly as teachers.

In the chapter on student work, Bousquet reaches out to a broader audience. The chapter continues the thematic concern for labor, but in manner and mode, it sticks out like a *Nation* article in contrast to the more academic tenor of the bulk of the book. Although it makes the book slightly lopsided, it also suggests an important direction for research. We need more reports of students' experiences of higher education, which violate any decent sense of education, to spur policies that remedy them.

As in most reactions, those who attained power during the revolution have been led to the chopping block. The sharp swing in power has enhanced the attraction of an apocalyptic view. Despite its criticism of crisis narratives, *The Last Professors* leans toward an apocalyptic view, projecting a "last man." The labor perspective of *How the University Works*, while it might deglamorize some of the burnish of professors, brings the crisis to earth, showing that we can do something about it. Institutions are, after all, made by people. Though they sometimes seem like monoliths subject to their own implacable logic, they can be made in better and worse ways.

Jeffrey J. Williams is one of the editors of the *Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, the second edition of which will appear in January 2010. He teaches at Carnegie Mellon University.



COPYRIGHT INFORMATION

TITLE: The Academic Devolution
SOURCE: Dissent 56 no4 Fall 2009

The magazine publisher is the copyright holder of this article and it is reproduced with permission. Further reproduction of this article in violation of the copyright is prohibited.