



On the Horizon

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Book Review : How the University Works

The Reviewers

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How the University Works is something of a misnomer, since the content of this book might dictate a title more appropriately called "How the university doesn't work". While universities are successful as institutions and economic entities, according to Bousquet's thesis, they do not work for certain exploited groups, especially graduate students and adjunct faculty. These are not minor groups in the modern public university as they make up to 75 percent of the college teaching force as opposed to the 25 percent of tenured faculty. Thirty-five years ago the situation was reversed with three-quarters of the faculty in tenure-track positions. Bousquet is concerned with why university structures have so dramatically changed. He negates the usual theory that a poor economy and "job market" have necessitated cheaper faculty, and claims that casualization of faculty labor, or intentional reduction of full-time tenure positions to part-time temporary jobs, is a deliberate administrative policy to shift funds from teaching faculty to pet building projects.

Those in the US higher education environment are accustomed to thinking of graduate students as apprentice scholars in modern universities. In Bousquet's academic Marxist approach, we should reconceptualize them as workers, workers who lose their teaching jobs when they graduate. This would reframe the circumstances of graduate students considerably. Universities enroll basic sciences, arts, and humanities graduate students as cheap, unregulated, just-in-time, disposable labor. The academic myth is that a job market awaits new PhDs, when in reality graduation is the end of most teaching careers not the beginning. There are so few tenure track positions in comparison to the number of recent PhD graduates, that the pretense of a job market in college teaching is presented as an illusion created to recruit new graduate students. Such hypocrisy has resulted in one of the most tiered labor systems in the USA, in educational institutions – institutions that usually profess a

benign, liberal democracy and emphasize diversity and academic freedom.

Some of the most interesting discussions in *How the University Works* are the particular circumstances of graduate students and adjunct faculty. If newly graduated PhDs do not acquire a tenure-track job, as is the case with most of those in the basic science, humanities, and art, they often attempt to find the only work they can, that is teaching part-time and paid by the course as adjunct faculty. I know from personal experience, that assignments and salary change each semester, so adjuncts spend a large proportion of time working for substandard wages and piecing together courses at different universities, earning derogatory titles like “freeway fliers”. This type of job is usually subsidized by state unemployment or spousal support and results in the usual blame-the-victim type of behavior by their tenured colleagues. A fascinating read of personal stories about life as adjunct faculty can be found in *Ghosts in the Classroom*, edited by M. Dubson (2001).

How the University Works does present an excellent analysis of the working conditions of disenfranchised groups. I will explain the points chapter by chapter because each makes distinct conclusions and then mention some issues and problems in my own voice.

The first chapter discusses the change in universities from faculty governance to corporate management practices. A comparison is made to the health care industry where capital maximization is the prime objective. Activities and relationships between professionals and either patients or students are commodified by means of restricted time and increased caseload. Full-time tenured faculty time is highly protected while most of the faculty, poorly paid graduate students and adjuncts, handle the majority of large classes of students and are paid \$2,000 to \$3,000 per course. That is not much of a salary given that a typical load is four to six courses a year and there is no security or equivalent course load from semester to semester.

The idea of a job market in college teaching being available for graduate students after acquiring their PhD is quite fictitious according to Bousquet. It is based on false theory from economics, inappropriate for college teaching because the PhD is no longer a decisive factor in who is hired to teach college students. Job market theory says that overproduction of PhDs is the problem that can be corrected by encouraging early retirements and shrinking graduate programs. But since tenured jobs disappear with retirements and graduate students are used to fill those jobs, over production is not the problem. The lack of will in higher education and society in general to create appropriately high numbers of tenure-track positions is the issue. Looking at graduate students as workers allows Bousquet to come to the following conclusions (pp. 40-4): We are not “over-producing PhDs, we are under-producing jobs.” Tenure track positions are the only positions that offer a living wage, however universities have found an enormous amount of savings to be had by hiring disposable workers, grad students and adjunct faculty. “Cheap teaching is not a victimless crime.” Adjunct faculty teach at multiple universities, and teach double the courses at half the salary for a semester at a time, without a living wage, no time for academic relationships, and are actively barred from any meaningful role in faculty governance. Undergraduate students and tenured faculty suffer in that there are not enough faculties to do the work of advising students or run the departments. “Casualization is an issue of racial, gendered, and class justice.” Without a living wage, only classes not dependent on a wage to live will be able to teach in universities. Also women are predominant among adjunct faculty, particularly in the liberal studies fields, subsidized by husbands, summer unemployment, or food stamps. “Late capitalism doesn’t just happen to the university; the university makes late capitalism happen.” Universities have become big business, with pressure to efficiently grow and increase the product or graduation rates, to institute business processes, and to supply the general fast food, low wage market with a ceaseless amount of undergraduates who now spend more time working off-campus jobs than studying or going to class.

Chapter two covers informationalization in the university, that means the institution handles all things in the same way it handles data, as something that should be available when needed and disappear when not needed. To manage labor in this way requires strong management, and so the former function of faculty self-governance has shifted to the administration as decision-makers. Technology has had a role in that the most efficient capitalist ideal is completely automated production and in teaching that means automated courses through technology or distance education. However this was a false dream, according to Bousquet, because profit comes from uneven deployment of technology and not from technology *per se*. So the universities first with online programs would benefit, but once they all offer them, there will be no benefit.

The third chapter talks about the management mindset of higher education's administrators. Management theory has come into play in the university with its “cult of excellence” (Readings, 1996) and leadership mantra and business practices like merit pay and entrepreneurship. Before 1980, administrators were seen rather disdainfully

in universities as analogous to file clerks, and came from the ranks of supposedly failed faculty. Administrative reaction to the politically militant students of the 1960s and the newly unionized faculty of the 1970s caused a reformation of the role of the president and other upper administrators. They, rather than the faculty, were to formulate leadership that included mission statements, strategic planning, planning for continuous quality improvement or efficiency, accounting schemas, marketing, and various types of management theory. Toyotism, the Japanese management theory of Toyota, encompassed shared governance with workers and unions, encouraging them to identify with the institution rather than each other. In academia as well, partial worker autonomy (academic freedom) and participation in management (faculty governance) help provide an “institutional collegiality” that will willingly make sacrifices during funding cuts. If product quality is an administrative goal, it must be gained by increasing faculty productivity – more students, more research, more grant money brought in. This had become so institutionalized that every year is a year of financial crisis in higher education, and the faculty workforce views competition for research funding, raises, promotion, etc. as natural and leading to better workers or a more prestigious institution and so justified. Academic capitalism is promoted by the compliance of federal/state government as well as administrators and faculty.

Bousquet discusses the student worker in chapter four. The vivid description of a joint program between UPS and Jefferson Community College about student workers is bleak, remorseless, and exploitive by both business and higher education. UPS gave the students jobs, or at least a chance to report five nights a week and see if work with a high rate of injury was available for 3 or 4 hours starting at midnight for \$8.50 an hour. Faculty provided classes on site in inferior off-campus conditions. Most students made about \$6,000 a year. Often pressured to skip class, retention and degree completion were rare. Out of 10,000 students, only 300 degrees were obtained between 1997 and 2006, and half of those were only associate degrees. UPS benefits when students drop out, since they keep the workers and do not have to reimburse the education expenses. The UPS system is one that provides cheap, docile, disposable labor for UPS, not one designed to help students.

States that formerly paid about 75 percent of student tuition now pay about 25 percent, leaving public universities and students to make up the difference. Universities, in states where allowed, pass this cost on to undergraduate students with ever-rising tuition rates, so that students are no longer able to work their way through college. The abandonment of public universities by the state rests on the public perception of the college mission having narrowed to job preparation from the former goal of citizen formation for the democratic state. Current faculty lament, in general, the amount of hours their students work and see it as the primary reason that students do poorly in school – no time to read, study, or do anything for the class outside the three or four hours that the class meets per week. Students commonly work for low wage fast food or retail or campus jobs that mean full-time school schedules are impossible and the four-year degree has lengthened, increasing the time it will take young adults to move on with their lives. Bousquet questions why we as a society tolerate a system that prevents young adults from starting a career and families until they are 30 or 40 years old. Only 20 percent of US college students do not work; 50 percent work an average of 25 hours per week; and the remaining 30 percent work full-time or more likely multiple part-time jobs equaling 40 hours or more a week. The financial burden of a college education has been shifted from state funds to the student, so the student is paying about three times as much as a couple of decades ago for less of a post-college benefit in terms of full-time jobs in many fields.

Chapter five details the problems with writing programs where 80-100 percent of the faculty are adjunct, part-time faculty, largely female, and are governed by a tenured writing director. Bousquet points out that prior authors have tended to propose that individual writing directors (lower management) be agents of change, rather than the solidarity of the adjuncts themselves. While directors attempts at change have been instrumental in creating academic programs, such as adding an undergraduate major or graduate programs, that validate their area of study, they have not been successful at altering their adjunct faculty's working conditions. Writing directors are not in the position to be able to organize labor or add health insurance, health benefits, job security, or raises for part-time faculty. Writing directors are more vulnerable to upper management's control than faculty, so could hardly be expected to lead change in labor restructuring in any meaningful way. Writing programs are situated within a larger context of the general change of the “managed” university in our society. A global phenomenon has created universities that suffer forced privatization as the state contributes so little to student tuition. Institutions that formerly provided a common set of values and knowledge and trained democratic citizens to be able to self-govern have changed to institutions to that sell commodities to customers who use it to purchase jobs. Governments becoming over-involved in business interests prompted this change and desiring universities to act like businesses, run on growth and profit principles. Education then is reduced to vocation preparation.

Chapter 6 talks about the misleading emphasis on a job market for faculty teaching in higher education. The

reality is that graduate students are not being trained for this dubious and non-existent job market, but instead are recruited for their tuition dollars and cheap labor. The historical circumstances are clearly laid out. The first wave of faculty unionism was before 1970 when 50 percent of public universities were unionized. By 1980, administrators characterized graduate education and the academic world of work as a market relationship, justifying an increase in graduate programs. Graduate student unionization gathered steam in the 1990s and continues today in the form of the Coalition of Graduate Employee Unions (GEU). According to Bousquet, the problem is not that we have an oversupply of graduate students, but that the discussion is framed in the ideology of the marketplace rather than that of solving the problem in terms of solidarity and labor. Prior to the 1960s graduates acquired academic jobs through the old-boy network – not an advantage for women or minorities. But there were fewer students to place, fewer state controls, and smaller disciplines, so friends took care of each other's students or graduates simply were hired to stay on at their original university. The MLA conference was the first to modernize the hiring process by collecting resumes, posting interview times and places, and posting job descriptions in the 1960s. Soon, by the 1970s, major annual conferences became what were called “meat markets”, highly unpleasant talent/beauty/and charm contests for academics. At the same time, tenure-track positions were rapidly being replaced by adjuncts and temporary instructors and the increasing numbers of students were usually serviced with contingent faculty rather than new tenure-track positions. Instead of focusing on these phenomena, the discourse about faculty employment revolved around the job market for faculty and talked about “oversupply” of applicants as if that market was produced by rational economic principles rather than employer choice. But, and this is remarkable, junior faculty were 30 percent less likely after 1985 to hold the PhD than earlier faculty. In fact, only 55 percent of humanities junior faculty holds a doctorate. How can there be an oversupply of PhDs on the job market at the same time that more and more hires don't have PhDs? There is a conscious choice of cheap instructors over the best-qualified instructors. In fact, it would appear that acquiring a PhD directly harms one's ability to get a teaching job.

In sum, conceptualizing PhD graduate students in research universities as apprentice scholars allows society to feel ethically justified in keeping their working circumstances substandard. After all, students are supposed to be poor, aren't they? But as soon as we recast them as workers then they need to be treated as other laborers. The key issue in this argument is that they could only be apprentice scholars if there were scholar jobs after they graduate. Since there are not, we must be recruiting them for their current labor as teaching faculty, preferred due to their inherently short shelf life. Once given the PhD, they must either leave the university or find work as adjunct instructors. Since adjunct labor can not be reclassified as students they are often reconceptualized as “failed” PhDs, second rate in terms of research, or sorry victims of the economy. Many readers of *How the University Works*, myself included, will find close connections between Bousquet's description and theory and their own life experience in academia and thus, convincing and comprehensive. The points that Bousquet makes in his first chapter are excellent and can stand repeating: We are under-producing academic jobs. Cheap teaching is not a victimless crime. Causalization is an issue of justice. Bousquet's background was forged in the mid-1990s, when, as a graduate student, he worked for unionization of graduate student TAs at CUNY and a larger role in the MLA. He points out quite rightly how the modern university conceptually has changed from an apprenticeship system to one that deploys its labor force like Wal-Mart. At the time, I remember many adjunct professors in the California State University system were shocked to find out that UCLA graduate students already made about four times more than adjuncts, which certainly laid to rest the winsome notion that the PhD had monetary value. The statistics clearly show that low-cost contingent faculty and graduate students have been substituted for tenured professor positions over the past 50 years. In practice, though, the concept of graduate students as intentional waste seems oversimplified. Individual faculty/student relationships do still operate within the apprentice model, particularly in the research arena. Even though that mentorship cannot extend to post-graduate tenured positions any longer, given economic and political realities, the apprentice relationship still exists. Many universities offer GAs or TAs that are not profitable for the university, but are structured more along the lines of scholarships and have nothing to do with cheap teaching labor. Some positions of RAs, TAs, and GAs are arguably make-work with little tangible benefit, dependent on the varied needs of the faculty they are assisting. Graduate student do not always provide cheap labor that benefits the university financially.

I would question some of the other arguments, as well, because I have found so much more variation in universities than what Marxist theory allows. I would make more of the economic and social changes affecting higher education and less of the faculty versus administrative schism that is both a product and a producer of unionism. Any war has to be simplified to a certain extent so that the fighters are clear that they are in the right. This is particularly true with ongoing union battles between labor and management and certainly justified when labor finds itself exploited or management finds the institution becoming dysfunctional. The problem, though, is

that even while theorizing management and its methods, the larger economic, political, and social causes for the exploitation also need full consideration. I would like to see more emphasis on the entire historical context for these labor changes, but perhaps that is another book, such as Newfield (2008), *Unmaking the Public University: The Forty-year Assault on the Middle Class*.

As much as I agree with the harm that labor casualization does to humanities, arts, and sciences adjunct faculty, the entire university, and society at large, I doubt that unionism is a full solution to the problem. Having survived 24 years in the California State University system as a unionized part-time, full-time, temporary faculty member, it became quite clear to me by the mid-1980s that a union that served both part-time and tenured faculty was a contradiction in terms. Every time that the tenured faculties were threatened by the latest economic crisis during bargaining, the part-time faculties were the ones that lost benefits. The union and social attitudes in general were responsible, though, for creating a fair pay structure in the 1970s for part-time faculty that was based on and prorated according to tenure ranks with full benefits. But the lack of security, lack of self-governance, lack of research and teaching support, and especially the lack of collegial notice were sufficient to ensure steady career regression. Many other public university unions do not include non-tenured faculty at all, and so are even less cognizant of the invisible half of the faculty body. But I had enough exposure to unions to believe that while they can make many gains for labor, they alone are not an answer to inequity. Even though Canada is largely unionized, the same problem of unfair tiered labor in higher education also exists there.

Solutions can be found both internally by rearranging budget priorities, as Bousquet has suggested, and externally by legislation. Bousquet believes that the extra funds produced by the rise in student tuition over the decades that also saw a decrease in faculty pay, are not needed by the nonprofit public university, but spent by profligate administrators on useless buildings and sports activities. Administrators, the scapegoats here, are painted with a broad brush, cartoon-like characters with a monolithic desire to wield power, money, and completely retool the values and culture of the university. Bousquet (p. 15) says their “overriding ambition [is] to render all employees other than themselves ‘permanently temporary’”. He simplifies administrators, their role, and their “power” to change the system. It is unclear which administrators he means – only the presidents and provost, or are the deans included or does he mean the finance and student affairs team as well. Are the registrar’s office included and the technologists? Most administrators do not have tenure and are “fire at will” employees, dependent ultimately on hierarchical approval of a board of trustees. In my experience, administrators have a wide variety of opinions on this issue of contingent faculty and may be one of the important means for reprioritizing budgets to favor teaching and learning. Bousquet does propose on his last page some specific budgetary suggestions for universities looking to upgrade the salary of graduate employees and part-time faculty to a living wage. This would make more sense if presented in terms of a realistic and entire university budget, realizing that universities are extremely varied in their missions, budgets, and necessity for existing on the economic edge as institutions. Practical solutions possible within the university structure were delineated as long ago as 1993 in *The Invisible Faculty* (Gappa and Leslie, 1993), superficial though it was in terms of underlying theory.

Political action at the state level is another possibility. Hoeller, an adjunct professor from Seattle, has taken this route by lobbying in Washington, introducing bills, and initiating lawsuits to increase health and retirement benefits of part-time faculty (June, 2008, p. 1). Changing labor conditions through state legislation takes the struggle off the home campus, where contingent labor has the most to lose. Hoeller’s latest bill was to grant annual renewable contracts to adjuncts who were working at least half-time for a university for three years, recognizing that academic freedom is of laughable value for those on a three-month job security plan. If society cares how its children are taught in higher education, there could be more efforts to regulate working conditions at a state level. This might be a mixed blessing though, since state controls over universities can mean a worsening of conditions rather than the opposite.

A limited instrumentalist view on technology is presented in *How the University Works* in that technology is seen as only a tool that administrators want to use to completely automate course production. Certainly that was a popular idea about eight years ago, but it has long since proven to be misguided. Technology can create much efficiency, but few people today expect to see faculty disappear, as even private, for-profit online universities have discovered. The role of faculty will change as all information is moved online and easily searchable. The role of memory in student assessment will change as well, but faculty will still be needed for overview, structure, guidance, and motivation. It will be the faculty who will use technology for its role in enhancing student/faculty interaction and increasing the quality of the teaching experience.

Bousquet has written an important book that gives us a social narrative to discuss contingent faculty as exploited workers. If the values of higher education include diversity, democracy, and equity, as we so often claim, how can we let our educational labor structures fail to mirror those values? Solutions to the current tiered faculty structures in universities can be built upon Bousquet's theoretical foundations. The value in this book is precisely in its theoretical understanding of the problems. However, I think it will take more than unionism to give students, adjunct faculty, and the growing phenomena of part-time workers in all industries a living wage with security. The importance of humanities to society was a dialogue that could take place among the social elite in universities of the Age of Reason. Now that higher education must school everyone for vocation placement in our Post-Modern world, I doubt that dialogue will happen again in any broad way, but would like very much to see it.

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