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reseñas educativas (Spanish)
resenhas educativas (Portuguese)**Bousquet, Marc. (2008). *How the University Works: Higher Education and the Low-Wage Nation*. NY: New York University**

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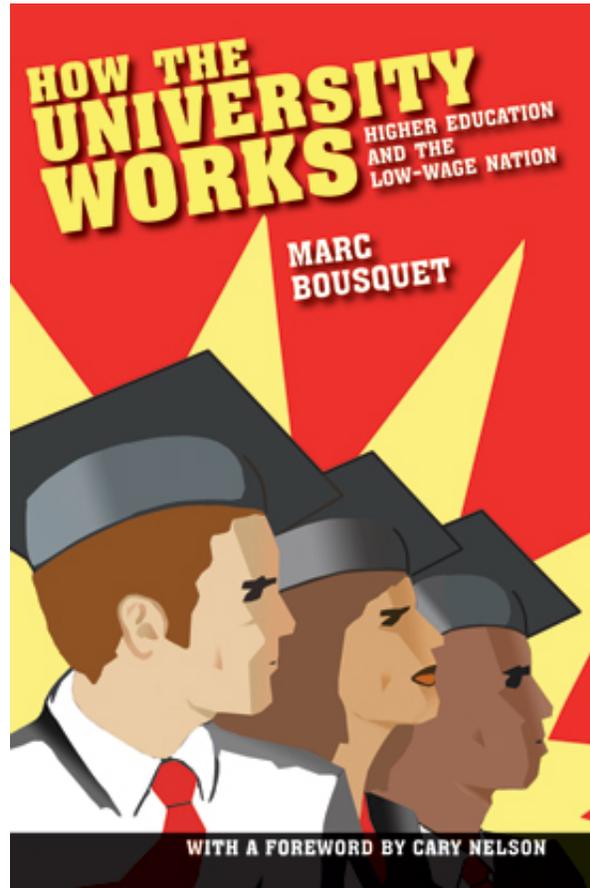
**Reviewed by Kelly T. Winters & Rebecca Ropers-Huilman
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How the university works begins with the following line from the foreword by Cary Nelson, "Marc Bousquet is the Virgil of postmodern academic labor, leading a professoriate in denial through the Dantesque wastes of a system whose sins daily grow more numerous" (p. xiii). This opening sentence captures one of the most unique aspects of this book, namely that it draws on theories of labor, law, literature, economics, education, management, rhetoric, and culture to paint a critical view of the context and current challenges faced by the academic labor force and those who would sustain it. The arguments made throughout the book are timely and situate higher education within the larger, national dialog on the limits of unfettered free markets, hyper capitalism, and corporate greed. The lofty Nelson quote also suggests some of the challenges of the text, namely that it sometimes gets lost in its own ambitious objectives, stretches beyond theory and practice and moves toward manifesto, and assumes a perspective that does not offer many partnered solutions.

The text is organized into six essays that cover theoretical lenses, faculty and administration culture, students and work, disciplinary complexities, faculty labor unions, and employment realities. The essays can be read as stand-alone pieces, each taking a slightly different slant on the implications of the increasingly corporate higher education landscape. The book thematically falls within the scope of previous texts such as *Academic capitalism: Politics policies, and the entrepreneurial university* (1997) by Slaughter and Leslie, *Academic capitalism and the new economy* (2004) by Slaughter and Rhoades, *Take back higher education* (2004) by H. Giroux and S. Searles Giroux, and *Neoliberalism and education reform* (2007) edited by Ross and Gibson. Bousquet's contribution to this growing body of literature is in his extensive theorizing on the rise and subsequent undercompensation and devaluing of contingent faculty and graduate students over the past thirty years. That this is perhaps one of the most pressing issues in higher education is an understatement: Curtis and Jacobe (2006) report that fifty-seven percent of faculty held tenured and tenure-track positions in 1975, a number that had dropped to thirty-five percent in 2003. Glazer-Raymo (2008) and others have noted that contingent faculty are more likely to be women, in "increasingly feminized" disciplines that include education, humanities, and fine arts fields, and teaching in environments where the institution type determines salary (p. 10). There are also a significant number of people of color who are working off the tenure track (Almanac, 2008). Suffice it to say that Bousquet's attention to this issue is not only timely, but also critical to the understanding of a phenomenon that has unequal

effects on different populations within the academy.

In the introductory essay, *Your problem is my problem*, Bousquet sets the issue of the corporatization of higher education into a larger national context, in which he reports that many contingent faculty are paid less than \$2000 per course, net less than \$16,000 annually, and do so without any benefits, all of this on top of managing graduate school debt that can top \$100,000 (p. 3). He contrasts these stark numbers with the soaring upper administration pay, rising tuition costs, and the amenities arms race of multi-million dollar facility construction, ultimately identifying them as hallmarks of the culture of the “Corporate University” (p. 9). Bousquet argues that tenured and tenure-track faculty have been hamstrung in their attempts at organizing and fostering a counter-corporate movement. Meanwhile, graduate education continues to provide institutions with what Bousquet titles “disposable labor,” and efforts for student unionization and resistance have also been uneven (p. 27). He ends the introduction with four main arguments that are woven throughout the remaining essays: a) the current job market is underproducing tenure-track jobs; b) efforts to reduce the cost of faculty labor have fundamentally changed many disciplines and graduate education; c) the rise in the number of contingent faculty is a justice issue related to race, class, and gender, and; d) that these realities are the result of both local and national higher education policy decisions.



Marc Bousquet

The second essay, *The informal economy of the “Information University,”* is perhaps the most theoretical of the book, and in it Bousquet introduces the concept of informationalization, or the substitution of “information delivery for education” (p. 56). He argues that while faculty have raised concerns about the automated and disembodied nature of distance learning, administrators have embarked upon building projects that have made it possible for students to expect embodied experiences (via sports stadiums, food courts, and fitness facilities) that are “divorced from [their] ‘education’” (p. 56). In other words, students have come to have certain expectations about what an on-campus experience will be like, but those experiences are becoming further detached from actual teaching and learning opportunities with faculty. While faculty and administrators have been distracted by arguments over what role technology will play in course delivery, administrators have worked to convince faculty to convert their courses into units that can now be taught by contingent faculty. While faculty may have been resistant to information technology, their course content has been informationalized, and is now able to be delivered “in the mode of information” (p. 60). This observation allows Bousquet to theorize that senior

administrators have mechanized and commodified the production of knowledge, and through this process, increased their level of surveillance and control over faculty, courses, and curricula. Another feature of the informationalized university is that administrators have been able to render those who produce knowledge contingent, flexible, always in supply, and available on demand. He further argues that the assessment movement, along with its theoretical roots in organizational and leadership literature, has encouraged administrators to view themselves as prescient, history forming decision makers, the effect of which has made faculty expendable and disposable.

The essay titled *The faculty organize, but management enjoys solidarity* examines the evolution of administrative culture as it relates to faculty unionization efforts. Bousquet argues that Total Quality Management (TQM) theory and related managerial “how-to” books dominate the discourse on higher education leadership, the effect of which has been the establishment of a monoculture shared by senior administrators (p. 99). He suggests the quest for continuous improvement creates an organizational structure where administrators have the power to intentionally “overload” or “stress” the system so that faculty governments have weakened authority (p. 105-6). He surmises that these management theories are now institutionalized to the extent that “every year is a year of fiscal crisis, ...[with] ‘new’ pressures on wages, workloads, class sizes, benefits, and autonomy” (p. 107). The essay then turns to the complexities faculty face when attempting to unionize in such a campus climate.

Bousquet shifts his focus and tone in *Students are already workers*, an essay that begins with a description of the dire conditions faced by the employees who work at a UPS facility in Lexington, Kentucky. Unlike previous essays, which forward a theoretical perspective told through abstractions, *Students are already workers* is grounded in telling a more specific story of students who work under impossible conditions as a way to earn tuition benefits. The essay raises critical questions about the reality that over eighty percent of all undergraduate students work, a statistic that counters popular culture narratives of the higher education experience as an endless frat house party and extended adolescence (p. 137, 150). He writes that the students are now themselves contingent labor, theorizing that:

There is a social bargain with youth-qua-student that goes something like this: “Accept contingency now, in exchange for an escape from it later.” The university’s role in this bargain is crucial: it provides the core promise of escaping into a future, without which their “temporary” employment would otherwise require larger enticements. The campus brokers the deal: give us, our vendors, and our employing partners what we want (tuition, fees, and a fair chunk of labor time over several years), and you can escape the life you are living now (p. 148).

The challenge in such a social bargain is, of course, that many students continue on as contingent laborers, and that higher education itself now benefits in the form of corporate connections, tuition payments, and in the formation of a low-wage, on-campus workforce. The essay concludes with a discussion of how student labor fits into larger democratic and social justice frameworks, as many students leave college without degrees and with the disjointed perspective that such contingent work is for anonymous “other” workers, those who do not have full agency or citizenship (p. 156).

In *Composition as management science*, Bousquet explores how the development of the administrative position of Writing Program Administrator (WPA) exemplifies some of the complexities of managerialism within academic disciplines. He argues that WPAs are given little disciplinary or managerial authority to shape or change the realities of the contingent faculty work force that provides the labor in most composition courses. Bousquet writes that many WPAs struggle to gain respect and validity, both for the discipline of rhetoric and composition studies, and for their abilities as professional managers. This lack of power within the administration could mean that even well-meaning and “heroic” WPAs have little capacity for institutional transformation, and that their positions more often than not perpetuate and reinforce the primacy of the corporate structure (p. 160). Bousquet theorizes that the WPA model has implications for other disciplines that wish to maintain control over their curriculum and hiring, promotion, and tenure policies.

The final essay, titled *The rhetoric of “Job Market” and the reality of the academic labor system*,

analyzes the construction of the narrative that asserts that there is a lack of tenure-track jobs because graduate schools are overproducing degrees. Bousquet examines the political, cultural, and economic contexts that lead Bowen and Sosa (1989) to erroneously predict that there would be substantial new demand for faculty. Bousquet argues that in the late 1960s disciplinary organizations such as the Modern Language Association (MLA) began to change their rhetoric to be more market-, supply-, demand-, and production- focused, and that the continued use of such rhetoric made the “market” analogy a reality. Meanwhile, the “managerial-turn” in the dominant administrator leadership ideologies of the 1980s lead to a further belief in the reality of such markets. Bousquet notes that such discourses accepted “the market” as a reality that could be quantitatively studied via fluctuations, and he observes that such discourse concealed the “wholesale casualization [of degreed labor] beneath a circular and self-authenticating market rhetoric: because the system is a market, it naturally fluctuates; because the system fluctuates, it must be a market” (p. 199). By placing the Bowen and Sosa report in this rhetorical context, Bousquet is able to argue that their conceptual framework was unaware of evidence that the whole system had transformed, and as such, they were not attuned to the reality that many tenure-track positions were being replaced with contingent, “managed labor” (p. 200). The “managerial-turn” in higher education leadership ideology, which Bousquet notes is typified by the Bowen and Sosa report, gave rise to the belief that graduate degrees were being overproduced and were therefore in need of managed control. Such control has come in the form of graduate program administrators: “The most pernicious armchair activism of them all, ...the notion that graduate faculty can balance “the market” from the conference table at which they discuss the dossiers of applicants to their programs” (p. 188). In such a system, graduate program administrators have also become a part of larger neoliberal ideologies in that they are now acting on and replicating market logic.

As is apparent from the essay summaries, *How the university works* attempts to cast a broad disciplinary and analytical net over the issue of the undercompensation and devaluing of the academic labor force. Ross and Gibson (2007) have argued that Marxian education theory is the most appropriate answer to neoliberal ideologies because it can offer a “vision of social transformation that is firmly grounded in the material life of capitalist society” (p. 9), and Bousquet’s presentation of the subject matter seems to come to a similar conclusion. The overall tone of the book gives the impression that the author is taking on neoliberalism by way of a materialist approach so as to define the current realities and injustices faced by the academic labor force. As such, this series of essays is an effective presentation of injustice as theorized in terms of those inequalities that are most tangible: top-down and title-driven power structures, salary and benefit inequalities, and the job prospects of graduate students.

This primary theoretical lens is not without limitations. In order to present his arguments in a way that is rooted in the material, it was necessary for Bousquet to flatten all institutional variety into one generalized idea of higher education. Within this generalized space, some fairly formulaic scripts begin to emerge: administration=bad; faculty=maligned and endangered; contingent faculty and students=victim. In this generalizable space, it can be argued that the issues facing a community college are on par with those facing an Ivy League university. While there is certainly a great need for theory that seeks to connect the dots, it is misleading to downplay the depth and breadth of American higher education, and the often unique circumstances and contexts faced by each institution type. In some ways, this strategy further renders invisible and problematizes the myriad experiences of faculty, staff, administration, and students of institutions that do not fit the research university “norm,” which is all too often what popular culture understands as “higher education.” Without a broader context that acknowledges the widely divergent experiences of those in higher education in the United States, the few specific examples, institutions, and cases that are shared could be interpreted as anomalies that have been included for dramatic purposes.

Bousquet’s arguments would have been further strengthened by a discussion of why he believes the current tenure system should remain as the desired outcome for the academic labor market. As he and others have noted, women and people of color are currently underrepresented in the ranks of tenured and tenure-track professors, yet there is little in the book that would suggest how the author envisions the organization of faculty unions changing the long-standing and sometimes problematic culture of promotion and tenure. In other words, he puts great faith in faculty unions, but fails to

consider how he believes those unions might break down current inequities in academic structures.

The placement of the essays within the book, and some of the rhetorical choices made by the author, make it challenging to understand how the system can be changed. In the forward, Cary Nelson notes that this book “grew out of theorized activism” (p. xiii), yet there was little in the book that directly addressed or theorized change strategies. A more nuanced, Marxist and labor theory read of the complexities of taking action within the broader, neoliberal context would have been helpful in furthering the discussion. Much of what the author offers as examples of resistance are focused on organized labor movements. He does not theorize potential limitations or challenges to such action, nor does he address the criticism that unions can become institutionalized systems that perpetuate systems of asymmetrical power. A concluding essay in which the author raised such issues and put forth implications for future research and action would have further strengthened the book. A concluding essay could also have helped readers negotiate the sometimes labyrinthine structure of the individual essays, and also give some sense of the logic flow behind the ordering of the essays. In the absence of such reflection, the tone of the book can at times come across as adversarial, accusatory and from a place that does not offer partnered solutions, options, or alternatives. This tone makes it challenging to know who is “us” and “them,” so as to further an understanding about who determined that these populations were expendable in higher education.

Bousquet also misses out on opportunities to directly address and theorize the gendered dimensions of the academic labor issues highlighted in the book. Since women make up a disproportionate number of contingent faculty, a deeper consideration of feminist theories would have added another explanatory dimension. For example, Metcalfe and Slaughter (2008) have argued that, “academic capitalism creates conditions within colleges and universities that allow men to recapture some of the historic privilege they have derived from higher education ...[through the creation of an] alternative internal hierarchy” (p. 81-2). A discussion of gender and alternative internal hierarchies would have added another layer to the analysis found in *Composition as management science*. Since women comprise the majority of rhetoric and composition faculty and WPAs, what might it mean that they are negotiating gendered, corporate organizational structures from positions of low-authority? How and in what ways can WPAs negotiate gendered structures that dictate which rhetoric “pleases the prince?” (Bousquet, p. 178).

The primary strength of *How the university works* is that it is conceptually framed from multi-disciplinary perspective. It raises thought-provoking and difficult questions and is presented in a format that is accessible to many audiences. This book could be very useful as a text in a graduate higher education leadership or organizational theory course, as it raises many complex rhetorical questions that are critical of the evolving canon of higher education research and scholarship. Similarly, this book is an essential read for administrators and faculty who wish to understand the multifaceted realities of contingent and graduate student work.

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