

## Resenha:

**BOUSQUET. How the University Works: higher education and the low-wage nation. New York, NY: New York University Press, 2008.**

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RESUMO - O livro de Bousquet oferece uma perspectiva original sobre a mercantilização do Ensino Superior nos Estados Unidos da América, argumentando que o estilo de gestão empresarial, que foi formado pela teoria da escolha racional, pela teoria dos sistemas e pela teoria economia gerencial sócio-psicológica, desenvolveu um sistema que sistematicamente explora professores que são apenas contratados, alunos de graduação e de pós-graduação, através de, entre outras coisas, a subvenção das rendas universitárias pela ajuda de custo, oriundas de receitas públicas, aos universitários e também pela negação dos benefícios essenciais e direitos fundamentais dos trabalhadores. Usando em sua análise uma abordagem marxista desafiante, o autor propõe uma teoria do desperdício para explicar a educação de pós-graduação em que alunos de doutorado, em vez de serem o principal produto do sistema, são o subproduto mais conspícuo, dado que este grau de qualificação geralmente marca o fim, e não o início, de uma carreira acadêmica, e destina a maior parte dos seus titulares, se é que passam a trabalhar de modo algum no setor de Educação Superior, para as fileiras dos professores proletariados e individados. Bousquet chama os professores contratados e estudantes de pós-graduação para unirem-se, fazendo isto através de uma retórica desafiante, a qual pode acabar alienando muitos dos próprios administradores e formuladores de políticas que ele procura influenciar.

Palavras-chave: Ensino Superior; Mercantilização; Teoria Crítica; Pós-graduação; Professores Contratados.

*ABSTRACT - Bousquet's book offers an original perspective on the evolution of the marketization of higher education in the United States of America, arguing that corporate style management, informed by rational choice theory, systems theory, and socio-psychological managerial economics, has developed a system that systematically exploits contingent faculty, graduate students, and undergraduate students through, among other things, the subsidization of university revenues through student aid and the denial of essential benefits and worker protection. Using an unapologetic, critical, Marxist approach to his analysis, he argues for a wastage theory of graduate education in which Ph.D. students are, rather than one of the systems principal products, one of its most prominent byproducts given that this terminal degree often marks the end, not the beginning of one's academic career, and destines the majority of its holders to the indebted proletariat contingent ranks, if they go on to work in the higher education sector at all. His call for contingent faculty and graduate students to unite, delivered as it were through a defiant rhetoric, may alienate some of the very administrators and policy makers that he seeks to influence.*

*Keywords: Higher Education; Corporatization; Critical Theory; Graduate Education; Contingent Faculty.*

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## 1. Introduction

As suggested by the title, Marc Bousquet's book proposes to explain to readers "how the university works" and places it in the context of "the low-wage nation." He does indeed set about doing this, but in ways that may disorient an unsuspecting reader, and not efficiently until the book's penultimate chapter. Instead of beginning with a high-level functional or theoretical analysis of how higher education operates, as the title might imply, Bousquet approaches his thesis from a narrower context of adjunct faculty and graduate student labor issues. Only later does he expound on how, over time, the academy was changed through the "informationalization" of teaching and learning and through the "casualization" of the work force. Finally near the end of the book he explains the implications of all this for undergraduate students and the resulting overall societal consciousness within which the institution operates.

Bousquet attempts no less than to offer both an empirical and normative theory of the academy and its role in modern society. His work is fundamentally (and thoroughly) critical and feminist in its discourse, relying on tropes of the proletariat mental laborers versus the bourgeois administration, (with the tenured faculty playing either role, depending on the time period described or rhetoric employed). The opening sections read very much like a call for contingent faculty and graduate students to unite. This unapologetic approach liberates Bousquet from the trappings of the discourse of rational choice theory, systems theory, and socio-psychological managerial economics so often found in modern

texts on the state of higher education and allows him to critique the developments in higher education management and labor relations in ways that can (and therefore should) inform debates from a unique perspective. The text comes across almost as investigative journalism, or rather as investigative theorism, effectively raising awareness in its readers about facets of the institution of higher education many may never have considered.

## 2. Strengths

One of the book's greatest strengths is in its compelling characterization of the "remorseless advance of reliance on contingent labor" not as an inexplicable conundrum of institutions caught in the throes of simultaneous demands for more equitable access, increased quality, and greater austerity. No, instead Bousquet boldly describes a theory of a job system which "is functioning exactly as it has evolved to function—delivering cheap instructional labor precisely when it is needed, disposing of experienced instructional labor when it becomes more expensive, breeding compliance in all its participants" (Bousquet, 2008, p. xiv). As the foreword author notes, Bousquet's theory is coherent and integrated.

But his theorizing goes further, proposing a wastage theory to explain how the academy has realized efficiencies of scale within a highly stratified post-industrial society and free market economy. Not only has the academy turned Ph.D.s from one of its principal products into one of its most prominent byproducts (given that this terminal degree often marks the end, not the

beginning of one's academic career, and destines the majority of its holders to the indebted proletariat contingent ranks), but what's more "nearly all of the administrative responses to the degree holder can be already understood as responses to waste: flush it, ship to the provinces, recycle it through another industry, keep it away from the fresh meat. Unorganized graduate employees and contingent faculty have a tendency to grasp their circumstance incompletely—that is, they feel 'treated like shit'—without grasping the systemic reality that they are waste" (ibid., 2008, p. 26, emphasis in original).

Later in the book, Bousquet expands on this wastage theory to show how colleges rely on a vast, poorly paid undergraduate workforce and the subsidization of its revenue through their burden of student loans. He implicates the private business sector too, in particular UPS, in confusing the role of student and worker further through work study agreements whereby the company entices low wage vulnerable workers with the promise of college assistance to staff their dangerous and hard-to-fill overnight shifts, relying on uncompensated child care, transportation costs, health care costs, and support of family members to make profits while relegating their academic promises to lip service.

Bousquet proposes an alternative narrative to the popular meme of commercialization in higher education as inevitable. Instead of the "centrist" conceptualizations of colleges and universities as "victims of history," as he contends such scholars as Derek Bok (1986, 2006) and David Kirp (2003a, 2003b) put forth, in which management

induces faculty to voluntarily adopt new organizational cultures motivated by "excellence," "competition," "entrepreneurship," etc., Bousquet insists that an alternate reading of current developments will lead individuals to resist the status quo that disenfranchises and marginalizes contingent mental workers, and therefore undermines the academy in general.

### **3. Weaknesses**

Where the book is found wanting arises in many ways from the rhetorical stance which also provides so many of its strengths.

#### **3.1. Unexamined Assumptions**

Bousquet cites for-profit colleges as an example of the rise in the costs imposed on students, despite the cost cutting measures of relying on marginalized faculty and the simultaneous expansion in numbers of and benefits for the administrative ranks. But this characterization of a "tuition gold rush" is a straw man argument that goes unexamined as it applies in the public sector in such basic ways as the phenomenon of simultaneous reduction in public spending. Even without a more balanced consideration of other sectors of higher education, he simply doesn't do the math to show whether or not the increase in number and compensation of administrators matches the tuition increase, nor does he clearly demonstrate how the increase in tuition relates to the increase in discretionary spending on infrastructure, services, and athletics programs. These several

accusations are proposed as given, then used for developing the book's larger thesis.

### 3.2. Monolithic Villainization

Bousquet casts administration as a monolithic force ubiquitously opposed to the interest of faculty and students. He contends that “management culture has [become] ever more internally consistent and cohesive. The culture of university management has the power and, crucially, the intention to remake competing campus cultures in its own image” (Bousquet, 2008, p. 11). He doubts the oppositional culture of the faculty, claiming that they reside wholly in the “competitive, market-based, high-performance habitus designed for them by management.” (ibid., 2008, p. 13), and extends the stronghold that this “managerial caste” has on the academy by explaining that “the idea of a job market operates rhetorically and not descriptively, serving largely to legitimate faculty passivity in the face of this wholesale restructuring of the academic workplace by activist legislatures and administrators” (ibid., 2008, p. 13). Ironically, this monolithic depiction comes across as fatalistic about the state of the academy as the approach taken in other mainstream, supposedly centrist views, he so readily dismisses as unproductive.

For example, although he dismisses the supposed centrist views of scholars such as Derek Bok and David Kirp—that institutions are the victims of history, needing to come to terms with the commercialization of higher education—he himself doesn't cast faculty as being particularly assertive agents. His

description of the adoption of “job market theory” sounds just as fatalistic: “whatever actions faculty might take to secure their own working conditions, job-market theory defines their responsibility toward graduate students and former graduate students not as a relationship of solidarity with coworkers but, instead, as a managerial responsibility...[seen] through the lens of participating in the administration of the ‘market’. From a labor perspective, job-market theory disables the practice of solidarity and helps to legitimate the tiering of the workforce” (Bousquet, 2008, p. 20). Despite his optimism for a renewed democratization of the academy, Bousquet's depictions do not inspire such in his readers.

### 3.3. Hyperbolic Analogies

Finally, it must be observed that though Bousquet's treatise is persuasive on its own merits, it is at times hyperbolic. His use of such imagery in the opening sections as “excrement theory” wherein graduate students are analogous to “waste” in the system, or a “stain”, “blot”, or “excess heat to be radiated away”, even an “embarrassment to be scraped away from [the system]'s shoe” is illustrative but at times appears overwrought. This unmitigated critical approach creates a climate in which the reader is led to feel that any counter argument he or she might form to his theory would, if the author could engage in a rhetorical exchange, label the reader merely a patsy or enabler of the system. That the book is unapologetically radical may be a point of strength—indeed it would certainly be less persuasive and interesting if less forthright—

but by being so it also risks alienating its message from many of the readers he hopes to reach.

#### **4. Implications and Value for Higher Education Administrators and Observers**

The book is not casual reading for general consumption. Bousquet relies on his audience's knowledge of the history of higher education, of influential actors in the academy, and of nuanced philosophical and ideological interpretations of it all to elucidate events, texts, and historical developments in higher education that may be relatively unknown or largely unexamined. Because the text is a call for critical examination and for mobilization to activism, his audience is principally the professoriate of the academy, particularly the established tenured faculty, as they have—in his view—the unrealized potential to effect the greatest change. However, he clearly hopes to reach most directly graduate student organizers, contingent faculty organizers, and not least of all sympathetic administrators, and fellow activist intellectuals. Indeed, he implicates all involved in the enterprise, as noted by the author of the book's foreword: "is is ourselves we must scrutinize, however reluctant we are to do so...[the system] operates not merely with our consent but with our sustaining labor. The regret

so many of us express amounts to little more than rationalizing consolation" (Bousquet, 2008, p. xvi).

The book goes to the heart of the arguments related to public versus private good, the meaning and purpose of higher education, how it is financed, and who should benefit from it, and in which ways: should education determine access to healthcare? How much should individuals subsidize of their own entry into a capitalist free market system where the benefits and costs on the human scale are not always clear. Bousquet asks his readers to consider, regardless of whether one is inclined to accept higher education as something "special" or something "utilitarian": "Who should enjoy the [benefits of that experience]? ...On what terms? Who pays for it? What kinds and just how much specialness should the campus distribute?" (ibid., 2008, p. 154). For him, we need to bypass the "technocratic" and "necessitarian" questions of why and how college costs always increase in today's world and instead focus on agencies of inequality by asking instead "to whom is the arrangement of student debt and student labor most useful... Not just: Who pays for education? But: Who pays for low wages?" (ibid., 2008, p. 154). All of us, he would contend, unless we collectively do something to change it.

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