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Forging a Workers' Consciousness in Composition Studies

(on Marc Bousquet, Tony Scott, and Leo Parascondola, eds, *Tenured Bosses and Disposable Teachers: Writing Instruction in the Managed University* [Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 2004])

Composition theorists who study the profession, like their colleagues across the university, usually focus on the role of tenured and tenure-track faculty at research and aspiring research universities. Thus, there is a tendency to allow research activities to stand in for all university work. The omission of community colleges, four-year liberal arts schools, and non-tenured lines is not surprising given the importance of research and research faculty to the contemporary university's formation. The United States system of public higher education developed through an emphasis on creating research to help the United States compete within the capitalist marketplace. For instance, advocates of the Land Grant Act—the source of many state universities—argued for greater investment in agricultural technology specifically because smaller European countries were yielding larger crops than were American farmers (Cross 80-1). Privileging research over other academic labor has a history as old as the U.S. university system, but *Tenured Bosses and Disposable Teachers*, edited by Marc Bousquet, Tony Scott, and Leo Parascondola, seeks to reverse this trend by focusing on lowly writing instructors and others glossed over in prevailing studies of the profession.

Informed by Gary Rhoades' important study, *Managed Professionals: Unionized Faculty and Restructuring Academic Labor*, the contributors to *Tenured Bosses* acknowledge that they are scholars who explore the often esoteric nuances of language, teachers who harbor pedagogical hopes for transforming the world, and individuals who derive fulfillment from their work—what one essay calls "psychic reward." Yet they also identify themselves as workers whose conditions of labor will not change without forging a class consciousness of their positionality as labor opposed to the interests of capital. The collection brings together such well-known scholars as Richard Ohmann, David Downing, and Paul Lauter who all underscore the importance of linking a critical consciousness of the labor situation to the objective realities of our material working conditions. Lauter suggests that "most of the problems this book engages cannot adequately be addressed unless or until the free-market ideology that underwrites current management practices is brought into serious question" (74). While few dispute the need to construct a new consciousness, a war of words itself—or, a war of ideologies—will not alter unfair working conditions. The overwhelming thrust of these essays, consequently, encourages further unionization,

stronger coalitions, and an unequivocal refusal of the economic bottom line. In other words, this collection calls us to identify and theorize the labor of writing instructors.

Randy Martin, editor of *Chalk Lines: The Politics of Work in the Managed University*, goes so far as to argue in his foreword to the collection that writing instructors should see themselves as industrial workers. Because U.S. universities formed in concert with industrialization and have evolved with changing occupational needs, he contends that the role of instructors follows a process of industrialization rather than a pre- or post-industrialization schema. While some might cringe at being called an industrial service worker, this claim highlights the fact that higher education is an industry for the production and dissemination of knowledge—what Karl Marx calls the teaching factory and Stanley Aronowitz calls the knowledge factory. Such an assertion also implies that our working conditions have not significantly changed since the advent of the repetitive, nineteenth-century workplace. Anyone familiar with John C. Brereton's documentary history of writing instruction, *The Origins of Composition Studies in the American College: 1875-1925*, knows that the debates about teaching, assessment, and disciplinarity have more often repeated themselves than they have moved forward. The turn-of-the-century essays excerpted in Brereton's text discuss the usual topics—emphasis on style versus content; the value of reading versus writing; whether to require or abolish first year composition. But they just as often discuss the labor of teaching composition. In fact, many of the debates center on how much labor is extracted from instructors of writing and how much that labor is or is not remunerated. One teacher in Brereton's collection—who was given an appointment as an instructor of English at Harvard after only one year of graduate training—claimed to have read an amazing 700 papers per week. His story resembles many contemporary writing instructors:

> Whenever I entered my room I was greeted by the huge pile of themes on the table, awaiting my attention. I read very few books the whole year—there was no time. I never went to bed before midnight. If I were sick for two or three days, a substitute had to be found, for it was only by steady daily reading that I could keep pace with the manuscripts pouring in like a flood, threatening to engulf me every day . . . And I learned what teaching English composition meant. (288)

The adjuncts, part-time, temporary, and non-tenure-track workers who toil under inequitable labor conditions are not a new phenomenon that has risen from the wreckage of the postmodern or global university. As Ruth Riefson's essay in *Tenured Bosses* reminds us, these workers are the low-wage, reserve army of workers requisite in the capitalist industry of knowledge production and dissemination—an industry that has thrived off such labor for over a century.

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Tenured Bosses has three areas of focus, all of which explore composition studies as an educational industry. Several authors point to the contradiction between teaching critical pedagogies and laboring within a highly stratified and rigidly managed workplace. Others attempt to explain why composition studies has rationalized this contradiction within its institutional identity—these authors call for a new kind of disciplinary consciousness. Finally, many essays respond to Lenin's famous question, "What is to be Done?" by offering concrete ideas for organizing within and between universities, raising public awareness, and resisting the further encroachment of corporate logic into the university.

Of course, labor organizing cannot move forward as long as composition instructors refuse to direct their well-tested theories of textual and cultural analysis at the working conditions in which they teach. Christopher Carter's "Bureaucratic Essentialism and the Corporatization of Composition" illuminates this contradiction—a contradiction that has spread with the notion of student-centered pedagogies and teaching-first institutions. According to Carter, there exists a significant distinction "between pedagogical theory and workplace practice" (190). While our pedagogies respect and value students as individuals with particular needs, interests, and abilities, our labor practices make each instructor equivalent and, therefore, replaceable. Programmatic administrators have learned the predictable mantras: there's nothing I can do; it's budget cuts; it's not in my hands. These same administrators will tell instructors to be available to students during office hours, on email, as well as before and after classes. They praise instructors who instill students with a sense of independence and ability to critique the status quo, but label the same strategies hostile and uncollegial when practiced within the department. For Carter, these bosses have succumbed to an administrative consciousness, furthering "the illusion that material progress presupposes corporate complicity" (191). Walter Jacobsohn's "Composition and the Future of Contingency: Labor and Identity in Composition" cuts to the heart of this contradiction. He believes that "the socially progressive intentions of composition theorists often get turned on their heads and become instruments of control over those actually teaching" (194). This happens, for instance, when a progressive curriculum becomes institutionalized in order to offer consistency throughout an unstable, temporary faculty. In order to make genuine change, he argues, we need to leave the twin myths of an ideal curriculum and an ideal workplace behind. In place of these superlatives, we can begin working for concrete, if not always perfect, changes. We must, that is, betray a well-groomed academic consciousness in favor of a, no less intellectual, worker's consciousness.

In the spirit of V. N. Vološinov's *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, these essays acknowledge a duality of realities. They describe an official discourse about university work that stresses professional roles and rewards, as well as an unofficial discourse about university labor that reveals strife, struggle, and uncertainties. According to Volosinov's theory of lan-

guage, anyone who espouses an official version of university work is simultaneously aware of the less pristine unofficial reality of university labor. We acknowledge the power struggles and differing positionalities among temporary instructors, tenure-track instructors, WPAs, and the central administration; yet, for individual and professional security, we proclaim the official representation of composition studies as unselfishly extending literacy skills to students across racial, class, and gender lines. According to this narrative, the instructor who looks too hard at departmental lines of demarcation somehow betrays the larger and more noble goal of teaching language practices to those who would otherwise be disenfranchised. George Lukács, in his famous essay on class consciousness, discusses the role of self-perception within capitalism writ large, but his argument applies equally to the much smaller scale of the university. Lukács states that "if a class thinks the thoughts imputable to it and which bear upon its interests right through to their logical conclusion and yet fails to strike at the heart of that totality, then such a class is doomed to play only a subordinate role. It can never influence the course of history in either a conservative or progressive direction" (52). If we acknowledge the problems with our labor conditions and yet do not see relationships among our pedagogies, departmental politics, and universities' practices, we forfeit agency. *Tenured Bosses* works to displace this official consciousness and reclaim a sense of workplace agency by emphasizing a relatively quiet unofficial consciousness.

In an effort to strike at the heart of our managed workplace, Marc Bousquet argues that our search for disciplinary legitimacy has come at the expense of our internal labor conditions. He contends, "the heroic narrative of disciplinary success for professional and managerial compositionists has depended in part on the continuing failure of the labor struggle" (16). As composition studies secures its disciplinary position within the university, its instructors endure worsening labor conditions. Importantly, Bousquet points out that *"academic managerialism is a relation between the managed and the managers that ensures the unhappiness of both groups"* (5). This managerialism also ensures, I would add, a compromised learning experience where cost and efficiency prevail over sound pedagogy. The slogan for Campus Equity Week bears repeating: Our working conditions are students' learning conditions. No one in this system—neither bosses, nor workers, nor students—benefits from accepting the current working conditions as inevitable. All forms of capitalism, including university work, transform laborers into commodities who are alienated from themselves, from others, and from the things they produce. In such a situation, according to Marx, "the process of production has mastery over man, instead of the opposite" (175). We must counter this alienation by forging a new consciousness "on the common experience of selling one's labor in order to live and on the desire widespread in the academy but also common in many sectors of service work, to be productive for society rather than capital" (31). Tenured Bosses asks us to think differently about our class position within the university as laborers in solidarity with other workers throughout the capitalist system.

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Unfortunately, composition faculty, perhaps more than other workers, identify with the interests of capital rather than labor. Directly invoking Fredric Jameson's *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act,* Donna Strickland's "The Managerial Unconscious of Composition Studies" suggests that the field of composition studies has generally adopted what she calls a "managerial unconscious." Its pervasiveness results in a dearth of scholarship dealing with management as a sight of struggle. Instead, the administration of writing programs "tends to be presented simply as fact rather than as a particular material condition with a history and with material consequences" (47). Where are, for instance, scholarly essays exploring how composition studies (dis)places a professor from the classroom and into the role of a manager? This work is missing, says Bill Hendricks's "Making a Place for Labor: Composition and Unions," because composition studies asserts its professional identity—a contradictory and problematic identity—as a means of suppressing individual struggles. As a field, composition studies "tends to counterpose against the bad guy of individual self-interest the good guy of professional responsibility and solicitude, a social-work perspective that keeps organized labor out of sight" (Hendricks 91). Privileging professional interests over workers' interests inevitably results in inadequately and unfairly compensated labor. Indeed, Katherine V. Wills's "The Lure of 'Easy' Psychic Income" suggests that "fair compensation can take second place to self-perceptions of an altruistic ethos" (201). This service identity goes hand-in-hand with an economy that increasingly sheds its responsibility to workers and frequently asks consumers to contribute to a system of unpaid labor. From self-serve grocery lines and airline tickets printed on home computers to reality entertainment shows and departmental service, the notion of unpaid labor has become institutionalized in and outside the university. These scholars see our professional obligations, however selfless and however gratifying, as one more liberal justification for unfair working conditions. Institutional change, they argue, requires that we rethink our stake in such identities as an obstacle to collective action rather than a route to personal fulfillment.

For many, the revelation that the university participates in capitalism seems like a commonsense position. A long line of research from Louise Althusser's "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" to Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Caude Passeron's *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture* argues that the university functions to maintain both the capitalist system and its capitalist subjects. What this collection offers is the corollary that if we are workers within a capitalist system, we ought to understand and organize ourselves as workers. We might begin, they say, by applying pedagogical theories within our workplaces. As critical pedagogues, instructors of writing often take up Antonio Gramsci's call to be organic intellectuals who are "aware of the contrast between the type of culture and society which [they] represent and the type of culture and society represented by [their] pupils" (36). We are wedded to pedagogies that highlight the dif-

ferences between a student's interests and the university's interests. And, yet, we have not been able to develop workplace practices that are equally informed by the differing interests between instructors and the university. Such a change in consciousness may seem simple, but it requires a fundamental disidentification with the university as a unified entity along with the abandonment of our lofty goals of being somehow above or outside of the material struggles that define our world.

Although the labor conditions that define writing instruction are particular to its unique history, goals, and ideological significance, they mirror other places in the university. Art departments and language departments likewise rely on overworked, insecure, and underpaid instructors. Similar labor politics also appear in math departments, often the site of the university's only other required course. These inequities are even more exaggerated through distance learning and extended university programs. Rather than bemoaning these labor commonalities, we must use them to forge workplace solidarity with other departments; and, from that solidarity we must convince highly paid academics and administrators that the conditions of their labor also are subject to the restrictions of management, the limitations of an insecure foundation, and the exigencies that benefit capital at the expense of laborers worldwide. As this collection teaches us, our labor should not be performed at our own expense and our critical skills should not begin and end at the classroom doors.

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