

Jeffrey J. Williams

## Higher Exploitation: An Interview with Marc Bousquet

For the past decade, Marc Bousquet has been one of the most trenchant critics of labor practices in higher education, especially in the humanities. He disabused received wisdom about the job market, showing how its depressed state resulted not from a natural cycle but from deliberate strategies, in his essay, "The Waste Product of Graduate Education: Toward a Dictatorship of the Flexible" (*Social Text* 70 [2002]). And he has exposed other dubious practices of the corporate university, among them the rise of the administrative class; the way that professors have become managers, overseeing a pool of cheap teaching labor across the curriculum; and the way that undergraduates have been conscripted into the discounted work force in the current university. These analyses culminated in his book, *How the University Works: Higher Education and the Low-Wage Nation* (NYU P, 2008). Beginning in 2008 he has taken his commentary on higher ed to the blogosphere, with a regular column for the *Chronicle of Higher Education* in conjunction with his site [www.howtheuniversityworks.com](http://www.howtheuniversityworks.com).

Born in 1963, Bousquet grew up in Buffalo, NY, where his father was a manager for the Social Security Administration. He did his undergraduate study at Yale (BA, 1985), where he had courses with several of the Yale Critics famous at the time. Afterwards, he moved to the East Village in New York to write, working as an advertising copywriter and ghostwriter. In 1991 he decided to return to academe, entering the PhD program at CUNY (PhD, 1997). After a year at Indiana University, he got a tenure-track job at the University of Louisville in 1998, moving in 2005 to Santa Clara University. While he was in graduate school and at Indiana, he founded *Workplace: A Journal for Academic Labor*, which published its first issue in February 1998. He also co-edited, with Tony Scott and Leo Parascondola, *Tenured Bosses and Disposable Teachers: Writing Instruction in the Managed University* (Southern Illinois UP, 2004) (an abridged version of the introduction appeared in *minnesota review* 58-60 [2003]) and edited *The Politics of Information: The Electronic Mediation of Social Change* (Alt-X Press, 2004). His pathbreaking and provocative work, then only in articles, led to a special issue of *Works and Days* 41-42 (2003), guest edited by Teresa Derickson, that reprints five of his essays and fourteen responses to his work.

This interview took place on 15 November 2008 at Marc Bousquet's house in Los Gatos, CA. It was conducted by Jeffrey J. Williams, editor of *the minnesota review*, and transcribed by Heather Steffen, managing editor of the review while a PhD student in the Literary and Cultural Studies Program at Carnegie Mellon University.

**Williams** Your new book, *How the University Works*, diagnosing problems with higher education, notably the disposability of grad students, the managerializing of faculty, and the exploitation of undergrads, just came out and has become something of a rallying cry, especially for younger academics. Maybe you could talk about how you came to be a critic of the university.

**Bousquet** For me the entry point was the problem of graduate education, because that's where I was located. I was a graduate student and I was experiencing what eventually became clear to me as casualization. Eventually I realized that casualization was a pervasive structural mode of employment throughout the university. So I started asking, what is wrong with the analysis we have been making so far? The common sense was that we were enmeshed in a job market. That seemed to me a profoundly inadequate heuristic. People kept coming to the conclusion, "Oh, what we have are too many graduate students, what we have is a surplus, the supply is too large. There's a simple solution: all we have to do is just to shrink the supply to meet the demand." The "job market" heuristic was such an elegant formulation that it was very hard to dislodge.

In fact, shrinking the supply wasn't working, and could never work, because administrations retain total control of the "demand" for labor—in many disciplines, administrations are perfectly willing to use faculty without doctorates. For that matter, a lot of the work formerly done by faculty is done by persons without an MA or, increasingly, without a BA. In the absence of meaningful regulation, studying the academic labor system as a "market" in tenure-track jobs has little validity.

**Williams** This was not met with an entirely approving response, especially from the powers-that-be, for instance at MLA. You call the lie that it's an apprentice model, since most grad students are disposable labor. What kind of response did you face when you started saying these things?

**Bousquet** One of the reasons it was not met with universal acclaim was that there's not an easy solution. The reason the job market

heuristic was so tenacious was because it made it seem as if the solution was easy: it was just that these other people in those other graduate programs were refusing to shut down their operations, causing the surplus. If you understand what is really happening, which is structural casualization up and down the chain, it's not just graduate students who are being casualized. It's also undergraduates who are serving as a massive casual labor force. They're doing the work of staff, doing the work of faculty, grading, tutoring, and even serving as research assistants, just like graduate students.

**Williams** How would you define the approach you take? In some ways, it seems a kind of ideology critique, where you're exposing false consciousness. Why is it that people are blind to what's going on?

**Bousquet** Understanding my approach is ultimately understanding the intersection of left politics and labor consciousness. Those two things have, I think, really diverged in the past three decades, so the left-labor intersection is a fragile one in higher education now. It's possible that we may be at a moment when those two things are coming back together.

But for me, coming from both a theoretical orientation, a theorist's grasp of Marx, and a cultural materialism, to also see the vital necessity of on-the-ground labor organizing, there was a moment in consciousness that I had to press through, to live it and feel it and figure out what that meant for my future and for whatever commitment I have to the profession. It seemed as if it was always coming up in conversation: what is happening to us? How do we approach it? So it's very much an embodied set of commitments—that is, not an activism for others and not a leftism about some other place and time, but a leftism of this moment and from our position. It's not some kind of sympathy, "I sympathize with your problem over there, I feel your pain," but rather, "How does fixing your problem also solve my problem? How are our problems interconnected? What is a sort of working basis for an actual solidarity?"

**Williams** It seems key that your analysis came out of your time in grad school at CUNY in the nineties. When did you start at CUNY?

**Bousquet** 91. I left in 97.

**Williams** Just to loop back for a second, I want to ask about the route you took to get there. How did you end up in grad school?

**Bousquet** Well, I had worked as a professional writer in advertising and also as a freelance speechwriter and copywriter. I wrote the covers of other people's books for some years, and I had a wonderful life living on the Lower East Side. Quentin Crisp was my upstairs neighbor for a while. It was a really interesting moment, as Reaganism was marching ahead in the late eighties, to be living on the Lower East Side.

Essentially I worked Tuesdays. In a stressful week I worked Tuesdays and Wednesday mornings. I didn't have highly developed needs, and real estate wasn't what it is now in that part of the city. I lived with writers, actors, and artists in café culture. This is all of course before the Starbucksification of lower Manhattan, but there was a very active café scene.

I ultimately felt that I didn't have traction in the outside world, and I was casting about. I had resisted the professorial impulse for seven or eight years before I went to graduate school. I went to graduate school in large part because I started doing some literacy work on the Lower East Side and realized that this was one way in which I could have traction. I anticipated that going to graduate school would give me some purchase on the public sphere that wasn't the purchase of a freelance journalist. But I didn't realize that it would implicate me. I expected that I would have a place in the public sphere, but I didn't realize that it would be about the situation in the academy. Like most of us, I think, my imagination was that the academy gave you a bully pulpit to talk about everybody else's problems. I had no idea that I would end up in the academy talking about the problems of the academy practiced by higher education employers.

**Williams** To take another step back, you went to Yale from 81 to 85, if I recall correctly, and you did literature. Did you want to be a writer?

**Bousquet** I was at Yale at really the fullest blossoming of the Yale School. It was the epicenter of high North American deconstruction. I wrote, I'm sure, an intensely embarrassing senior thesis that was influenced by deconstruction for John Guillory.

**Williams** Guillory was your advisor?

**Bousquet** Yeah. One of the reasons I didn't go to graduate school was because I was having a reaction to what we might characterize as the priestly craft of reading. What deconstruction ultimately did—which is different from what deconstruction could have been

in a different world—as it percolated through to the Ivy League undergraduate consciousness, was to become an advanced form of close reading that provided a way of maintaining ambiguity, complexity, and irony for people who would then practice the production of ambiguity, complexity, and irony in the tax code for a million dollars a year. Ultimately, deconstruction—not by design but in the world—became a way for people who became tax attorneys to develop their skills. That’s of course not all that it accomplished, but that is one of the very important things that it accomplished.

But I didn’t know where to take the dawning awareness that what I did as an English major at Yale had political consequences, and some of the political consequences were deeply complicit. I had no idea what to do next with that thought.

**Williams** So you decided not to join the priestly cult of reading and went to New York to try out the writing trade?

**Bousquet** I said, “Well, I’ll see whether I can make my living by writing.” I knew I had to work in order to live, but I drew a line that I wouldn’t cross. One of the things I explored was advertising. I basically walked into an advertising agency with absolutely no background, no preparation whatsoever, and said, “Give me a job,” and one of the people to whom I did that said, “Well, okay, write this,” and I came back half an hour later, he liked what I wrote, and he gave me the job. I hated what I was doing and I kept quitting the position. Every three months I would say, “It’s not you, it’s me. I’m just not cut out for this particular profession,” and they would listen to my speech, and at the end they would say, “Well, what would it take to keep you here?” It was this fascinating exercise. I would make up a ridiculous number, and they would say, “Okay.” And this went on for about a year and a half, at which point, without trying, I had saved up enough to live on for about three or four years. I was making more than I do now, without even counting inflation—I was making a dean’s salary, a business dean’s salary, as a twenty-three-year-old.

That’s the reason why I wasn’t working very much. I could pick and choose freelance jobs for quite a long time. And so I had this long period of leisure really, and I read enormously. I read all of Melville, all of Henry James. I didn’t read a lot of American literature at Yale at the time. I’m very ambivalent about core curricula and the way core curricula are ways for faculty to fight over the allocation of student hours and funding, and one of the things I appreciated about being an undergraduate was that there were extraordinarily modest requirements, maybe two or three courses out of thirty-six

courses that were required. But the overwhelming majority, maybe three-quarters of my classes, were English literature classes—you know, the Romantic poets, Wallace Stevens, and Milton. Aside from Wallace Stevens, I read very little American literature.

**Williams** Who taught you at Yale? The famous group of “Yale Critics” was still there.

**Bousquet** I had one class with Bloom, one class with Hillis Miller—everybody you’d expect. But during this period of leisure on the Lower East Side, occasionally working, I read enormously in American literature—never with the idea that I would join a faculty, maybe with the idea that I would write a novel or that kind of thing.

**Williams** So you ended up back in school, at CUNY, in 91.

**Bousquet** I went to CUNY because I wasn’t going to leave New York and CUNY gave me a massive recruitment fellowship. There are three choices in New York, CUNY, NYU, and Columbia, and I had philosophical differences with the English department at NYU at the time and Columbia wanted me to pay up front for an MA.

I was very ambivalent about going to graduate school; I thought, “Well, I’ll give it a try.” But there were two additional motivations. One was that I was very interested in melodrama, and CUNY was the center for melodrama studies. Dan Gerrould and Walter Meserve were both at CUNY. They were the leading figures in melodrama studies. The other was that, for the first time in my life, I had an experience of public education because I was tutoring, and I was flirting with a sense of mission. I had this kind of idealism about being involved with the City University of New York.

I was hooked in by getting to know some of the really interesting people at CUNY. Certainly there were some very disappointing things; it’s a different kind of ride than you get in an Ivy League institution, as I quickly discovered. But there are also things that are irreplaceable, one of them being Stanley Aronowitz, another the experience of being in a public institution with access as its mission. And once I started teaching, it was almost impossible to leave. Columbia can’t offer you the opportunity to teach CUNY students, and teaching CUNY students, for someone of my background, is an eye-opening experience, meeting people whose backgrounds are incredibly diverse, not only to you but to each other. Depending on what sort of classroom you run, you’re in the middle of an incredibly emotionally and intellectually engaging experience for everyone

concerned. It's tremendously dynamic because of the variety of perspectives that are being brought to the material.

**Williams** So when you were growing up, you went to private school? Catholic school?

**Bousquet** Yes.

**Williams** What do you mean about a mission? A Catholic charge, or a general idealism?

**Bousquet** I meant more in the Deweyan sense—that is, education for democracy. The building I eventually lived in on the Lower East Side was literally across the street from the Nuyorican Café, and the building next to me was a squat filled with anarchists and a heroin gallery. You'd look out my fifth-floor apartment window onto the street facing the Nuyorican, and, spray-painted on the wall, you would see the anthem of Missing Foundation, this New Jersey working-class anarchist revolutionary band. Their anthem included the refrain, "This is 1933,/this is Hitler's Germany," and their symbol was borrowed from the Untouchables. Eliot Ness's thugs, when they hit a speakeasy, would chalk an upside-down martini glass with three slashes coming out of it to indicate the party's over. The Missing Foundation used the anarchist symbol, they used an MF—not just the foundation is missing—and the upside-down martini glass, as a way of saying to the gated communities that were sprouting like mushrooms as a result of Reaganism, "Your party's over." Many of us are hoping that is now going to be the case under an Obama administration.

**Williams** Do you think so?

**Bousquet** I think our hopes that Obama will end the class war from above are futile, but I'm glad that we still have our hopes.

**Williams** Where did you teach while you were at CUNY? I know CUNY has a far-flung system, unlike other public universities, where you may teach in Staten Island or LaGuardia Community College or Hunter, depending on where they need you.

**Bousquet** I had a substantial non-teaching fellowship, but like any other CUNY graduate student, I was free to take on an adjunct teaching gig at one of the more than a dozen CUNY campuses. So I had the chance to teach at a community college. I was like,

“Well, what’s that like?” Teaching at Queensborough Community College was a transformative experience for me. It got closest to that experience of tutoring on the Lower East Side, because you have those moments when people are not just getting it, but getting it in a way that is personally transformative, and that’s something that is so special, so gratifying to all concerned, because it is an affective experience. People get hooked on it, and I was hooked. So I taught at Queensborough, I taught at Baruch, I taught at a variety of different CUNY campuses. The variety of institutions was itself like an additional frame of education for me.

**Williams** So that started your interest in comp? Did you teach comp or literature?

**Bousquet** I taught composition, but, like most of us, I wasn’t taught much about the teaching of writing and I wasn’t particularly thoughtful about the teaching of writing at that time. Really I was a cultural studies person, or became aware of myself as a cultural studies person. Stanley Aronowitz, who, with Cornel West, is one of the great talkers I’ve ever been in the same room with, made me see that cultural studies was a way of negotiating my ambivalence about high reading and pressing through that without leaving what I liked about it behind, toward something with greater traction in the world and a sense of engagement that felt plausible to me as an individual.

As a cultural studies person I remained ambivalent about literary studies per se and did research in what we would call today “participatory culture”—the invented traditions, the ritual life, the performance cultures of nineteenth-century voluntary associations. This was one way of looking at the rhetoric of ordinary persons rather than the unique utterances of highly-trained or extraordinarily talented individuals. At the time, we were asking, “Is it possible to do a historical cultural studies?” and I was one of the people doing a historical cultural studies, asking what were the ordinary efforts at practicing culture of everyday individuals. We were all feeling stultified by spectator culture, by mass culture, as simply the consumption of culture, so we were pressing through to ask, “What would a greater participation in culture look like?” The answer to that became electronically-mediated communication.

**Williams** Really? I know that your dissertation was on nineteenth-century American literature and that’s how you were billed when you were coming out, as a nineteenth-century Americanist, which people might not be aware of. You were working on plays and playbills,

showing how plays were more common than had been thought. How did you come to be interested in electronic communication?

**Bousquet** Well, Lisa Nakamura, who was in graduate school with me, is the person who got me into the internet. Lisa and I would chat—you remember, IRC, relay chat. Lisa, like me, was someone who would spend an awful lot of time studying Henry James. I think her dissertation may have been a straight-up Henry James dissertation. I had a chapter on James and private theatricals. I was beginning to understand the reason for my interest in other than mass culture was the same reason that I was interested in where this whole internet thing was going.

One of the things that happened in graduate school was that I was strongly advised not to abandon literary study for practical reasons. That is, if I had any inclination at all to talk about the culture that ordinary persons were creating in connection with the culture that recognizable named literary figures were creating, that would be a practical thing—at least if I were going to be searching for a job under the auspices of the Modern Language Association. And that was good advice. It was relatively easy for me to make the case that I was a plausible candidate for a job in, say, nineteenth-century American literature, which at the time was the sort of position that was offered fairly frequently, and the research was interesting to people. I was anxious about getting a job and so forth, but in the end it wasn't really that hard for me to find a position. I found a position within months of filing my dissertation, at Louisville.

I had already gotten, before I had finished my dissertation, a visiting position at IU-Bloomington. The Louisville position was a watershed for me. In part I was hired because the dissertation was an analysis of the rhetorical character of culture produced by ordinary persons, and Louisville has a PhD program in rhetoric and composition. They had had a history of tension between the literature program and the rhetoric and composition graduate program because they didn't have a PhD in literature, and the rhet/comp PhD got internal funding, state funding, and also captured some bequests and endowed money. So they hired me as someone they hoped, because I had an interest in new media and I had done this research in the writing of ordinary persons, would provide a bridge between the alienated literature faculty and the rhetoric and composition program. I was really captured by that opportunity in all kinds of ways, and became quite active in that program.

**Williams** I want to ask you about Louisville, but to fill in your time

at CUNY, that was when you first became involved in unions. Tell me about that.

**Bousquet** It wasn't accidental. My first connection to teaching as a profession came in the volunteer mode, volunteering on the Lower East Side. It struck me as I started teaching at CUNY that I had the same passion for teaching (quite a bit more, actually), and I understood what a profession could mean to a person. I also realized that, even though I was being paid, I was being paid so little that it constituted a form of near volunteerism. The first person to steer me to a union meeting was actually my boss, the first writing program administrator that I ever worked for, who said, "There's a union meeting, you might want to go to it."

**Williams** What year was this? And who was it?

**Bousquet** This is maybe 93 or 94. It was George Otte, who also helped get me interested in new media pedagogy. He's a big deal in the administration now—I think he's a VP for IT at CUNY. It was an exciting moment at CUNY. All of the complexity of the movement was there because you had one of the largest and in some ways most successful academic labor unions in the country, but you also had an active program of second-tiering with the Unity Caucus in control. Irwin Polishook and that crowd had essentially been preserving the deal of the tenure-stream faculty by negotiating a bad deal for part-timers and allowing the part-time tier to explode. The philosophy of the CUNY Professional Staff Caucus had been, "Anything you want, as long as we can continue to get four-percent salary increases for our client base, the people who are currently hired as tenure-stream faculty, and everybody else can go to hell." So there had been a move by the adjuncts, led by Vinnie Tirelli, to decertify the union. That ultimately failed, but what grew out of it was something called the New Caucus, which was an alliance between progressive tenure-stream faculty and the part-timers and the graduate students. Barbara Bowen and Stanley Aronowitz were a big part of that. There was a lot of energy there, and that alliance eventually took power and I think it has improved the lives of adjunct faculty, but not as quickly as we'd all hoped at the time. I was active in the adjunct project.

**Williams** I remember your being especially active in the MLA Grad Student Caucus. You seemed to be the burr on the seat of MLA powers-that-be.

**Bousquet** That led to the “Waste Product” essay. When I got online, the grad student discussion group via email was taking off. I believe that the first such discussion group was based at Rutgers, out of a group of dissident graduate students who were connected to an organization of adjuncts at Rutgers. These graduate students revived the Graduate Student Caucus, and one of the things they’d done was institute the discussion list. On that discussion list, with a bunch of others, is where I first formulated the “Waste Product” thesis, that we’re not just disposable but really have to be disposed of, and that a lot of the institutional rhetoric is aimed at dispensing with us.

**Williams** What was your role in the Grad Student Caucus? You were an officer, if I recall correctly, in 95 or 96?

**Bousquet** After I set myself up as an analyst of our material condition, I set myself up to be recruited into some sort of leadership position. I served as the president for a year or two. The main thing I did was recruit other people and try to figure out how to grow the group of people and how that group of people could have an impact on the Modern Language Association. So we studied the constitution, we figured out how the nominating committee worked, we learned how the petition process worked, and we ran people we viewed as sympathizers, like Paul Lauter and Cary Nelson and Michael Bérubé. This caused a crisis in the Modern Language Association, that’s been written about by Cary and Michael. One of the responses was that they changed the constitution, essentially to prevent Cary from becoming president of the Modern Language Association. We got him onto the executive board, and then they revised the constitution to say that someone who had served on the executive board couldn’t immediately run for the presidency. All the ways they could to manage and control the influx of graduate students voicing their demands, they did. One was, when we said a member of certain committees had to be a graduate student but didn’t specify how the graduate student would be appointed, Elaine Showalter quite unapologetically said, “I’m naming my advisee to this position because I think someone should represent the voice of those who are not disaffected.”

**Williams** The potty-trained grad student.

**Bousquet** Yes, and as you know, the voice of the not-disaffected really needs to be heard.

**Williams** So, in some sense your work on the university, capped off in *How the University Works*, organically came out of where you were and what you were doing, and what the people around you were doing. From the “Waste Product” essay, it seems as if you widened your critique of the university, from the job situation to the way universities were managed, and from there you turned eventually to talk about undergrads. How do you see the path that you followed?

**Bousquet** Well, there’s really twin tracks to this particular story. One is the sort of tortured romantic track of the book that I never wanted to write. Each chapter in that book is a moment or beat in the arc of “They keep dragging me back in,” into this discourse of “What’s so messed up about the university as a workplace for faculty and parafaculty.” Another way of looking at it is the more conventional track of each beat being a layer of the onion, as I began to see that the problem was not only systemic to my individual location but to all of these locations. We were assembled together in a smoothly-functioning system, and that system worked just great. It felt broken to be in it, but to those that benefited from this system, it was operating beautifully.

From graduate students, the next most obvious move was to understand the working condition of the majority of faculty, which is to say faculty on contingent appointments. Today 70% or more of the faculty are serving off the tenure track.

The next move was to start to think about management. I was understanding and elaborating my relationship to the field of rhetoric and composition and thinking about writing about new media and writing as a discipline and the division of labor within English studies. Not only is it clear that writing faculty are casualized to a greater extent than literature faculty, but also the professionalization of many rhetoric and writing specialists, those who got PhDs and forged careers, was structurally related to the demand that they serve as first-line supervisors over this vast corps. Not everyone with a rhetoric and composition PhD aimed at becoming a first-line supervisor, but a very large fraction were destined to become first-line supervisors. The concerns, practices, and attitudes shaped by that experience, in my view, shaped the knowledge produced by the discipline. It is a managerial common sense. That isn’t to say that there aren’t countercurrents, for instance the WPA [Writing Program Administrator] who first introduced me to the idea that academics could think of themselves as workers and sent me to a union meeting. There are embodied resistances and countertrends within that body of people serving as supervisors, but nonetheless

the daily practice of supervision does have an important consequence for the knowledge produced by the discipline.

From there I started to think about management theory more broadly, and I started to think about the history of professionals and managers as workers. To what extent is the professional-managerial class [PMC] a working class? They are people who work in order to live, or they are people who are, for most of their working lives, as I like to say, more likely to own boat shoes than a boat. So the tension is over where their allegiances are. Are their allegiances with capital, where their tastes often are, with those who have had truly privileged lives? Or are their allegiances with other people who work in order to live? That's a real tension because your allegiances can be very much at odds with your background, going in both directions. You can get into the PMC either by having a bourgeois background and saying, "Gee, that looks like interesting work," or you can get into the PMC by saying, "Hey, that's my way out of a working-class existence." So there's all kinds of ways that one can parcel out one's loyalties within the PMC.

And the PMC is changing. One of the things you're seeing is the active deprofessionalization of higher education teaching as a profession, which is the concept of managed professionals that Gary Rhoades has unfolded so well. That's one route, but it's also a very significant question of what's happened to the PMC. The Ehrenreich understanding was that the PMC was afraid their children would fall out; that's why the PMC was so invested in education in the form that would allow their children to stay in that same precarious, but comfortable, existence of the PMC. Now the PMC is anxious about falling out of the class *themselves*. It's not just a question of their children falling out; many professionals and managers live so precariously that they live on the edge, that they will be cast down. And so I've heard more than one academic say, "You know, I used to be so tense about what was happening, but I said, well, I got my way through graduate school by being a bus driver, I could always go back to that." There is this exaggerated anxiety of what might happen as a result of the increasing precariousness of professional-managerial existence.

**Williams** It strikes me that you are moving more now to talk about the PMC and how higher education is a part of its making or unmaking. In general you've turned to look at work, as indicated by the title of *How the University Works*, and one thing that you've turned to that nobody has looked at is how much undergraduate students are working. Maybe you could talk more about your thinking about work.

**Bousquet** It used to be that people thought of higher education as an escape from vicissitudes and an escape from certain kinds of precarity formerly associated not even with working-class but proletarian existence. Education got you out of the vicissitudes and precariousness of proletarian life. Now education is pervasively complicit in the production of precarity throughout the working lives of educated persons across the globe.

The class of educated persons is an interesting question. In the United States, 70% of high school graduates within one year have some encounter with higher education. For as much as half of those people, what is produced by that encounter is the labeling of them as failures: if you have failed, therefore you deserve whatever is coming to you. What comes to people who are designated as failures, people who don't have some kind of college degree or accreditation, is harsher than ever before. We have manufactured a consensus that those people deserve very little, and only people who have some form of success with higher education deserve anything. One unintended consequence is that the people who have "succeeded" in higher education have abandoned any sense of solidarity with the others who are designated failures. They too are now vulnerable to all the same forms of exploitation they allowed to happen to everybody else, and they're just coming to realize it. Higher education has become a form of speed-up and competition, and people have accepted the idea that they should spend their lives competing in a labor market that's rigged almost entirely for the benefit of capital.

Another way the conversation could go is to talk about what is often referred to as deregulation, but is really just regulation in favor of capital, that has made it almost impossible for labor to organize itself, for labor even to recognize itself, or for labor even to think about its condition. The way that we have regulated, deprived, and unfunded labor institutions has made it almost impossible for labor-oriented discourse to take place in our public sphere.

**Williams** I think it's typical of your method that you spin the usual common sense around a word or concept like deregulation and show how it's really the opposite or quite different than we think it is. It's not deregulation, but labor has been regulated, in favor of people who are going to employ them. One question that this leads me to is about your style. Your style combines a sort of measured outrage and irritation with pointing out ridiculousness and absurdity. In a way, what you really do is look at rhetoric, for instance of the job market. How would you characterize your method or your style?

**Bousquet** I should reflect more on my style than I do. I'm not sure I've reached the level of intellectual maturity where I'm prepared to reflect on my style.

If you look at the rhetoric of the job market, it really does function not so much as a description of the labor system, but as a way of selling the labor system. That is, it is the mask of the labor system to say, "Oh, it's a market in jobs." So the work was to research the history of job market language within MLA discourse itself, but also to tease out the gaps between this sort of vulgar liberalism, of dimly-remembered chestnuts from Adam Smith in Econ 101, and to tease out the difference between job market theory, which is this pseudoscience practiced by labor economists like William G. Bowen and institutional apparatchiks at the Modern Language Association, and actual labor market analysis. If you look at what happened in higher education and especially the efflorescence of job market theory, it took place in total isolation from what was actually happening to higher education employment. That was what was wrong with William G. Bowen's forecast about demand for higher education faculty through the 1990s: it took place without consideration of the massive evidence of casualization and permatemping. In fact he just swept all of the evidence of casualization and permatemping off of the table and said, in this Dink Stover at Yale sort of way, "Well, of course, any institution will hire tenure-stream faculty when it can afford to do so." You can hear him taking as fact the rhetoric of those who are intentionally permatemping. If you read what was actually going on in higher education administration theory, everyone is figuring out how to shed full-time faculty and full-time staff, and replace them with permanently temporary workers. So he developed a model based not on what was actually happening, not the actual experience of graduate students who were involuntarily dislocated, but on the rhetoric that university presidents like himself were pushing on the rest of us: "Oh yes, well, when this crisis is over, we'll start hiring again." As if that were true!

It reflects at one level a kind of earnestness and paternalism, but it bore no relationship to what administrations were doing, what they understood themselves to be doing, and what graduate students and contingent faculty were themselves testifying about their experience. They were saying, "I'm involuntarily dislocated," and Bowen would read what was happening to contingent faculty and graduate students against that grain and say, "Look how many people are 'voluntarily' leaving the profession! My gosh, we're going to have to increase the number of admissions in order to account for all these people who keep leaving the profession." He ascribed choice to what was an involuntary dislocation, because he chose not to seek

out their testimony. He imposed his vision on them. So the rhetoric of job market put this mask of rationality and inevitability on a choice made by administrations to shed jobs in favor of permanently temporary workers throughout the university as a workplace.

And people just kept waiting for the boom years. That's how the Bowen study was received, and it explains its completely uncritical reception. People were like, "Well, we've had all these lean years, and here's Bowen, he's a labor economist, he's the president of Princeton University, and he says the boom years are a-coming. Thank God!" And then everybody sat on their asses for about eight years—except for graduate students, who now had this additional layer of rationalizing bullshit to dig themselves out of. So rhetoric isn't just superstructure; rhetoric is a functioning cog of the system. It is part of what puts us in place, keeps us in place, and makes it impossible to imagine things differently.

**Williams** It's interesting that, while you departed from the priestly mode of reading, you read rhetoric as seriously as the Yale critics did, except you also read the material situation. So, what to do about this? In the book you advocate a push toward unionization.

**Bousquet** One of the ways in which I'm classically materialist is that I believe that those of us who work in order to live have all the power in the workplace, and our employers only have the power we allocate to them. We have unfortunately gotten in the habit of allocating way too much power to them, and we can take it back. The question is how to do so. One way that people commonly choose to do so in the United States and elsewhere, across the globe both in the present moment and in the past and I'm sure well into the future, is unionization of various forms.

If you make that choice in the United States, it becomes complicated for a variety of reasons. Whether you're talking about the Teamsters or you're talking about AFT, NEA, or AAUP, we have developed a history of selling out younger workers, creating second, third, fourth tiers. In higher education we are especially susceptible to endorsing the multiplication of subordinate tiers of workers, so that we're very happy to sell out the youth in order to conserve the deal of the older workers. That's one thing that we have to deal with. We also have to deal with an incredibly hostile regulation environment in the United States, whether you're talking about Yeshiva or you're talking about the Brown decision and the way that Bush's NLRB absolutely gutted hard-won graduate student organizing rights. You ultimately have to deal with the political structure of the United States and the history of partisan politics.

So in the end unionization is one choice that people have to make as groups on the ground in their workplace, especially if they are saying, “Well, if we unionize in this place, we are moving uphill against a hostile regulation environment.” On the other hand, most people thinking about labor today say that thinking about labor as a movement is the only useful way, especially in the US context. If you look at how Martin Luther King died, he was speaking at a rally for sanitation workers who were striking illegally. It was against the law for public employees to organize, and they were organizing despite the law. The law changed after the fact of their seizing power. They made that choice. So when I hear from graduate students or adjunct employees how difficult it is for them to organize or I hear them describing the regulation climate that they will have to face, I say, “That’s absolutely true, and it’s an incredibly difficult choice. But other people less secure, less well-positioned than you have made that choice. It’s up to you to inform yourselves about the possible consequences and how you might weather them if you really want to make that kind of change.”

**Williams** Besides your book, you have developed other avenues to talk about the university, notably your blog and your series of video interviews. The blog has become a sort of clearinghouse for progressive issues in higher ed, unlike most of the stuff in the *Chronicle*, which often prints the wisdom of college presidents. What do you see as the function of your blog? What are you doing with it?

**Bousquet** At one level, I wasn’t at all sure that I was ready to emerge as a blogger. While I understood blogging intellectually, I personally was in the habit of writing very long things, as you know as an occasional editor of some of those very long things. And I still had this romantic idea of writing that you bring it to your cave and labor and come out with an incredibly contorted finished product, so I wasn’t at all sure that I was ready for the short form and all the characteristics of blogging—rapid response, finish your thought quickly—that were at variance with my personal habits as a writer. I’m grateful to have had the chance to be at the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, in part because they imposed a certain discipline on me. They expected me to post at a certain rate, and without a little bit of editorial pushing I would be one of those people who posts every day for three weeks and then not at all for three months. So they helped me stay at it in ways that I don’t see myself naturally adapted for. I think I do represent a bit of counterculture at the *Chronicle*, but there are reporters and editors who have some of the same concerns. My hope is that that countercultural voice will continue to provide

some balance to what can be, in the *Chronicle* and in professional discourse at large, an overbalancing in favor of an administrative interpretation of the academic world.

**Williams** In a way it clearly follows your interest is participatory culture. Where do you see it going?

**Bousquet** Because it connects to elements of my teaching and research, it has become an opportunity for me to (a) practice what I preach, and (b) try things that I sometimes ask students to attempt, especially publishing video compositions in connection with issues that they care about. So at one level, if I'm publishing myself on a weblog and I'm also thinking about asking my students to compose activist video, then it becomes an opportunity for me to figure out what it is I'm asking them to do and how can I guide them best. I don't say, "Well, they are young people, therefore they know all about Facebook and YouTube." I see it as an opportunity to get involved and make my own judgments about the best ways to frame pedagogy and help them to achieve their goals in using social media.

At another level, I'm very interested in different ways of framing scholarship. I'm very concerned about the future of academic writing, of academic discourse in the context of the electronic mediation of textuality. What would it mean for scholarship to acknowledge the possibilities and engage more fully the possibilities of having scholarship literally interwoven with an archive? People have been exploring just how that would work, but those practices have yet to pervade the profession.

**Williams** You've also been doing video interviews that you release through YouTube. You have some with the blog, but it strikes me that, by now, you have a fairly large inventory of them, with people throughout higher education. Obviously I'm interested in interviews, so I'm especially curious how you see them—why did you start doing them, what is your process, how do you figure out what to cover, and where do you see them leading?

**Bousquet** I've been doing it about a year, and I've just begun to reflect on the whole process of videography. Really this was quite a leap for me. I just said, "What the heck, why not make it a video weblog?" which was a fateful moment for me. I had shot exactly one piece of video in my entire life. So it's been a huge and fascinating leap to actually start producing video.

There's a lot I could say about that process of learning from my blunders, but I think your larger question is what's the purpose

or where this is going. I don't know. I do find people saying, "Well, with this YouTube thing, you're gathering clips that will lead their way to something else," but it's not at all how I think of it. I recognize that they could become something else. They could, for example, be reassembled in some way in a documentary form, or they could be spliced into someone else's documentary. But for now, it is what it is—that is, a YouTube channel, and people come to it from a variety of different locations, either from reading a book or a journal article, or they come to it from a weblog or from YouTube itself. At some point I guess I may say I'm done with the channel, or I may say I want the channel to do something else. But for right now I have a couple of dozen interviews yet to edit and publish, so it will probably continue in this form for at least another year or two.

One of the reasons for YouTube's success as a platform was that it was set up with a both/and philosophy—that is, you could come to YouTube for a particular video or, because they made excellent use of Flash technology, it was possible to put a YouTube player on any other website. So all of those other websites became portals to YouTube. Every page with a Flash player was a gateway into the world of YouTube. So it's entirely possible for the project or elements of the project to become parts of many other things; it's fairly easily disassembled and repurposed by others.

**Williams** It seems as if you've chosen people who are involved in academic labor issues, but especially people in literary studies. I know you've done a sizeable number, though they haven't all been released yet. How many have you done so far?

**Bousquet** I've taped at least 30 or 35 interviews. Many of the people that I have interviewed have a great deal to say about the profession, but I think what people find most interesting are people testifying about their experience. The interviews that I've done with people serving as adjunct faculty and the interviews I've done with people either as graduate student union organizers or as graduate students conscious of themselves and kind of caught in a generational bind, these are the interviews that I find most affecting, rather than the interviews of authorities on the crisis of the profession.

**Williams** Have you thought of interviewing undergraduates?

**Bousquet** I have. But I haven't recorded any thus far because there are real questions of research ethics that I have to resolve, both in the narrow sense of the ethics of human subject protocols and also the risks that are taken by undergraduates. The structure of

responsibility between faculty researchers and undergraduates as research objects are complicated by video. Many of the easy answers to human subject interaction and what someone can do to themselves by being in an interview are flummoxed by the fact of publishing a video record. There is some tension between the goals of the research, which are to maintain maximum frankness and care for the subject's best interests. You have to ensure that you aren't facilitating someone doing themselves harm by, say, speaking ill of an employer, someone who has to work in order to live making it hard to find themselves future employment. So I haven't resolved that. But the larger question of the undergraduate situation is one I think that we share, with your work on student debt and my work on undergraduate labor, which I think are complementary projects.

**Williams** That is true. About how long are the interviews?

**Bousquet** The clips themselves run from no shorter than three minutes to no longer than eight minutes, averaging about five, which I think is typical of the YouTube format. There are obvious limits to that, but it's freeing to have the opportunity to edit a longer discussion down into a very focused discussion, so in each clip I might help the person to speak intensively to one or two points, and then maybe have a second clip that speaks to an additional point. That's a good thing, but a lot is thrown overboard by not having the long form, and there are other people who are effectively making use of YouTube for long-form interviews in chapters. It's encouraging serial productions and video blogging and so forth. But I'd be the first person to say that there are defects as well as advantages to some of the choices I've made, and actually I've reconsidered some of the choices I made early on and do things differently in later videos as a result.

**Williams** What's one of the things that you do differently? In technique or content?

**Bousquet** Originally I chose to put up interjection cards as a way of dealing with the gaps between my subjects' comments rather than loop in my own voice or preserve my own voice from the interview. In fact, many of the interviews are recorded with a mic only on the interview subject and not on me at all, so sometimes what I say is completely lost and would have to be reconstructed. But in other versions I've chosen to preserve that sense of dialogue. I think it depends more on the situation and the nature of the interview, and it's okay for the clips not to have an entirely consistent style. They

all have the same trailer. On the other hand, the trailer gets old too. At first it was a really cool thing to have this sort of spooky, trip-hop themed trailer run over clips of a commencement march, of a couple of different commencement marches edited together. People responded pretty well to that. But on the other hand, maybe that trailer isn't the right introduction to every single clip.

**Williams** How long do you usually talk to people for—thirty or forty minutes?

**Bousquet** Anywhere from about twenty minutes to as long as an hour and a half. The longest interviews I've produced so far are four-parters with multiple subjects, so if I have four or five graduate student activists who are willing to sit down and put their faces on camera and I talk to them for an hour and a half, I may end up with 32 minutes of video in four segments.

**Williams** To wrap up, I should make sure to ask what you're working on now. I know you're thinking of writing a short book on student labor, and there is still your interest in participatory culture, in the nineteenth century as well as, I guess, video blogs.

**Bousquet** The first project is a long history of participatory culture. Participatory culture didn't emerge out of whole cloth in the 1990s with the efflorescence of the internet. We had a participatory culture constantly struggling with dominant culture and mass culture from before the revolutionary era. So I pick up the story in the early nineteenth century and talk about the efflorescence of invented tradition and participatory culture in the 1830s and 40s. The rubric for that is Tom Sawyer as a temperance cadet, seeing Tom Sawyer as essentially an impresario of invented tradition, whether you're talking about abolition associations or temperance associations or labor organizations, like the Knights of Labor and so forth. You need to understand these as people who were actively composing culture, and actively composing culture to an activist social purpose. So that project is front and center, in large part because the research is complete and I don't have any methodological issues. I feel that it's compatible with the work that people like Henry Jenkins are doing in engaging the possibilities of participatory culture around contemporary social media. So it's timely and it's researched and it's unfolding.

The student labor project flows out of the research I did for the last completed chapter of *How the University Works*, the chapter on the exploitation of undergraduates in what I like to call extreme

work-study conditions. 80% of undergraduates work, and those that do work, work an average of 30 hours a week. The average age of the undergraduate is 26 years of age. So you're talking about an entire generation that is experiencing higher ed not as a rite of passage, but as a decade or more of continuous indebtedness, long-term precarity, and exploitation in the service economy in typically ultra-low wage jobs that don't afford them a living. So they have to take on student loans that are increasingly burdensome, but also typically credit card debt, and in many cases they're also supported by families. It takes a village just to produce this profoundly indebted, or I think as you accurately and evocatively suggest, indentured subject. It's no longer enough for one individual to sign a piece of paper and indenture himself; this indentured person still needs the support of a village.

This chapter is available online and it's the chapter people teach to undergraduates. It was researched to produce an ethnographic account of what it's like to be an undergraduate that's truly exploited in very profound ways. People find it very evocative, and it is clearly such a widespread condition that a book needs to be produced about it. I've gotten human subjects approval for some of the research, but I think it would be best conducted with larger grant funding. I think it's probably best conducted as a team project. Especially as we may actually have a receptive policy universe, I think it's really best conducted as less of a provocation than *How the University Works* and more of a free-standing, sober account of what we've done to a generation of our youth. So I'm completing the other book while I take a deep breath and figure out what is the best way of doing the most useful kind of book about undergraduate labor.