

Marc Bousquet

## We Work

I once shocked a colleague by responding to one of those newspaper stories about a prof “caught” mowing his lawn on a Wednesday afternoon by saying that many tenured faculty were morally entitled to think of their salaries after tenure as something similar to a pension. After all, in some fields, many folks will not receive tenure until they’ve been working for low wages for twenty years or more: a dozen years to get the degree, another three to four years serving contingently—and then, finally, a “probationary” appointment lasting seven years at wages commonly lower than those of a similarly-experienced bartender.

In the humanities, the journey to tenure is often a quarter of a century and rarely less than fifteen years: if you didn’t go to a top-five or top-ten graduate school in your field, you probably taught several classes a year as a graduate student, usually while researching, publishing, and doing substantial service to the profession—writing book reviews, supervising other faculty and students, serving on committees, etc. Call it, charitably, a mean of twenty years in some fields. Averaging the probationary years, contingent/post-doc years, and graduate student years together, you get an average annual take in contemporary dollars of \$25,000 or less. The low wage is only the beginning of the story. There’s the structural racism of the wealth gap, to which I’ll return, and the heartbreak and structural sexism for families trying to negotiate childrearing during that brutal two decades. In most fields, most of those who begin doctoral study with the intention of an academic career fall away long before grasping the brass ring.

So at the end of all that, you have a person who is earning within ten or fifteen thousand dollars of \$70,000 and has perhaps fifteen or twenty years of career ahead of them. All of the reasonable studies of faculty work suggest that this person will put in between 50 and 55 hours a week for most of those years, more or less voluntarily. There are plenty of enforcement mechanisms to make sure that most faculty will teach, serve, and do scholarship in some rough proportion to their abilities and inclination, but after a quarter-century of strict selection and socialization, it is rarely necessary to invoke them to get the faculty to do their jobs.

By comparison to the twenty-year probation leading to academic tenure, police officers, kindergarten teachers, and civil servants earn tenure or job security in a year or two, often less. During training, a

high-school-educated police recruit in 2009 generally earns a salary of between thirty and forty thousand dollars, or about twice what a doctoral student earns during graduate school. Today's starting salaries for 20- or 21-year-old metropolitan police officers and state troopers are generally in the forties. They receive bonuses for completing two- and four-year postsecondary degrees, as well as tens of thousands of dollars in supplemental pay for overtime and special duty. In Cincinnati, for example, a recruit will earn \$31,000/year during a six-month training period, and then begin work at \$46,000. Five years later—at age 26—they will expect to earn a base pay of \$56,000, or about what junior faculty in many arts and sciences fields are being offered after their twenty-year apprenticeships, in their early forties.

The 26-year-old police officer earning about the same base pay as our 40-year-old assistant professor can expect to work as little as another fifteen or twenty years, keeping up with inflation whether or not promotions are awarded, collecting additional fair compensation in such forms as the Cincinnati metro police site promises, “overtime earnings, court pay, certification pay, training allowance, and night differential pay.” The Ohio Police and Fire Pension Fund estimator estimates that in 2009 a 48-year-old retiree who had done nothing to save additionally and earned just under \$70,000 in his final year as a 27-year veteran would receive a pension of about \$42,000. That 48-year-old would then be free to work another job—a corporate security position, or a supervisory position overseeing poorly-paid retail guards, or real estate, or whatever, earning, say \$60,000 a year, for a total annual income of six figures. Or the retired officer could work part time, twenty hours a week or so, and still pull in about \$80,000 or \$90,000—likely quite a bit more than our largely fictional time-serving 55-year-old associate prof is pulling in on the imaginary twenty-hour work week of just showing up to teach from old notes. Pension benefits for military service and certain civil service positions are similar: your average worker aged 48 to 55 without too many promotions but with a quarter-century or more of service will be eligible for pensions of between thirty and sixty thousand dollars, or the equivalent of between about \$800,000 and \$1,500,000 in your Fidelity or TIAA-CREF accounts.

No matter how you slice it, most public servants earn a better return on education and effort over the course of a career than most faculty, including those on the tenure track. It's hard to make a case that the rather unusual instances of lifetime associate profs who skate by on twenty- or thirty-hour work weeks are gaming the system. Instead, they are the unusual few who have refused to allow the system to game them. Whatever one thinks of these rare

birds, one has to acknowledge the strength of character it takes to refuse the overwhelming appeal of the administration, the ideology of the profession, and the continuous hailing of their students and colleagues to give so much more than the standard set by other workers in the public service.

Furthermore, comparing professorial salaries to career patrolmen and high-school-educated infantry is bending over backward to prove the point. A more accurate and fair comparison would be to college-educated military officers. Someone who retires after just twenty years of service with the rank of captain (Officer-3 on a scale that rises to Officer-10) is eligible for a pension of almost \$70,000 a year. Retiring at Officer-3 represents very few promotions over the years—possibly indicating a relatively undistinguished career.

So after twenty years, a low-ranking commissioned officer can cash in and collect a decent professor's paycheck for doing not a darned thing. If he does choose to exert himself, he can go to work as a corporate middle manager, earning about what a dean earns. Either way, after twenty years, it's his choice. He can work a bit and whack down a dean's salary. Or not—and still collect more than our hypothetical time-serving prof pulls in for actually working. Similar comparisons can be made in state or federal civil-service employment, in K-12 teaching and in many private-sector careers.

When you get right down to it, considering the long years of preparation and strain, it's hard to find any position so poorly compensated as tenure-track college faculty—except, of course, most of the rest of college faculty, the majority of whom don't ever become eligible for tenure and earn even less.

Now you may well say that all of this tawdry consideration may not make for much of a credo. But we can take this line of thought in a number of interesting ways, many of which are fairly important for anyone thinking about the situation of culture and critique today.

One way to take this line of thought is toward straightforward observations regarding the social logic and policy environment of the United States: the low regard in which education is held, the possible virtues of greater rationalization of faculty careers, and so forth. I've already suggested that public institutions in the United States should treat faculty salaries like the civil service or military pay grades—winning some startled coverage in the mainstream press, though there are plenty of real-world precedents for this kind of rationalization, including in the United States where many unions at public institutions have achieved step scales with excellent results for faculty retention and satisfaction.

Another route is analytical and psychological: we should probably pause to look at this irrational system of compensation and to ask, why does it function so well? Despite the injustice and impracticality of the arrangement, large numbers of young people continue to present themselves to the meat grinder of doctoral study. Most fall away, but a sufficient number persist, and of the persisting few, only the tiniest fraction take advantage of tenure to refuse steadily mounting demands. These are questions that corporate managers have been examining for decades with a keen sense of envy. How to emulate the academic workplace and get people to work at a high level of intellectual and emotional intensity for fifty or sixty hours a week for bartenders' wages or less? Is there any way we can get our employees to swoon over their desks, murmuring "I love what I do" in response to greater workloads and smaller paychecks? How can we get our workers to be like faculty and deny that they work at all?

An established analytical path on this question is the idea that in the great marketplace of labor, some of those who must sell their labor-time in order to live will discount their wages for the more pleasant occupations—that in some professions the presence of a "psychic wage" encourages workers to accept a lower cash price. There are certainly problems with this observation: for instance, all too conveniently it is offered as an explanation of the lower wages of the workplaces and job descriptions in which women predominate. In the United States, the psychic wage theory correlates less closely to variations in wages of comparably-difficult positions than race and gender: other things being equal, the job description is likely to pay more if mostly white men are doing it.

Nonetheless the notion of a voluntary discount of wages helps us to understand the group psychology of the professoriate. If a person can make millions as a tax attorney with less effort than they can impoverish themselves for poetry, why do it?

At least to an extent the foregone millions of the could-have-been tax attorney inside the literary critic earning a bartender's wage gives us a sense of just how much a human being values even a small degree of workplace autonomy—or the chance of having that autonomy. Every year, thousands of young people, having been warned about the poor chances of winning a tenure-track job, nonetheless gamble their futures on the possibility of spending their lives doing something for love (rather than for the hate and greed that is parsing the tax code for the shareholder class). From the fact that most people at some level refuse to even attempt to sell their labor-time in this way, we can probably deduce something hopeful about our common humanity, that we collectively prefer not just

autonomy, but integrity, even when tempted by a million dollars a year.

We can probably deduce something hopeful about the professoriate as well. Despite our role in the reproduction of a class society, and the collision of many of our highly-educated tastes with those of the leisure class, we are more like the mass of humanity in choosing as much integrity and dignity as our circumstances permit over the false rationality of the highest possible price for our labor-time. If a willingness to give up wages to “do what we love” is a marker of a broader refusal of capitalist inhumanity, it is something that unites the faculty with most other people, rather than divides them.

This human drive—toward integrity, autonomy, and dignity in our work—is so powerful that capital’s latest round of innovation depends on it, far more so than it depends on “technological” innovation of the production process. Contemporary management innovation in and out of the academy revolves around creating workplace conditions that they hope will induce workers to freely discount their wage. In the administration of higher education, this means a delicate balancing act, in which management continuously tries to seize control of institutional mission without killing the academic goose laying its golden eggs. The history of workplace change in higher education over the past forty years is a slow, grinding war of position or culture-struggle, with administration continuously pushing to see just how partial or inauthentic it can make the autonomy, integrity, and dignity of academic endeavor without inducing the faculty to fall out of love with their work.

Likewise, the history of corporate management’s effort to imitate the success of higher education workplaces can be expressed as, “How can we adjust our corporate culture to resemble campus culture, so that our workforce will fall in love with their work too?” That is, the managers desperately want to know, how can we emulate higher education in moving from simple exploitation to the vast harvest of bounty represented by super-exploitation? “Super-exploitation” is a term of art in materialist analysis, meaning “exploited more than the simple exploitation of regular wage workers,” and usually implying some other, or supplementary, method for extracting surplus value than the putatively “free” transaction of labor-time for a wage. There are any number of paths to super-exploitation, including various forms of forced, conscripted, or partly-conscripted labor. Versions of forced donation of labor still exist globally, in China, South America, Africa, and India, but also in the US informal, fast-food, and personal-service sectors—in such forms as working through breaks, working after clocking out, refusal of overtime—not to

mention prison labor, economic conscription into the military, and so forth.

But in the United States by far the major innovations in productivity improvement all involve ideology, the highly inventive calling-forth by management of voluntary, rather than forced, forms of super-exploitation. So far the most common examples for the average worker involve the donation of additional time represented by the ideology of professionalism. Workers not previously considered professional and not compensated like professionals now routinely donate countless hours to their employers: doing one's email at 6 am, taking phone calls in the evening, writing reports on weekends, traveling and attending employer events on personal time, and so forth. Certainly the massification of higher education experience plays a role in this expansive professionalization-without-a-professional's-paycheck.

In turn the massification of faux professionalism works to erode the privileges of those who were formerly professional, such as higher education faculty—initially in what Gary Rhoades describes as the emergence of “managed” forms of professionalism, and subsequently, as I would argue, in the gradual but steady conversion of residually “professional” positions (professor, lawyer, physician) into ever more straightforwardly managerial positions. That is, the tenure-track faculty now retain professional status in at least partial relation to their managerial function—they manage a vast range of parafaculty (adjunct lecturers, tech support, undergraduate tutors, graduate teaching and research assistants). Just as much legal work is done by paralegals supervised by lawyers, and physicians increasingly function to manage non-physician medical practitioners, nurses of various grades, students, nurses' aides, technicians, secretaries, and other personnel.

Higher education legitimates the explosive growth of super-exploitation and casualization across the global economy in countless ways, especially the fact of its own practice, as I've already suggested in *How the University Works*. In addition to collecting revenue from tuition, fees, grants, appropriations, and commercial transactions of all kinds, contemporary US institutions and their partners are generally structurally reliant on the value they harvest from student time—not just time denominated “labor” but also time allocated to “leisure” and “education.” Low-wage undergraduates, many of them filling positions formerly occupied by full-time staff, are often the largest workforce on campus, but the institution harvests value from their spending, their athletic activities, their blogging and journalism, even the time the dance team spends in practice and in tanning salons. The smoothly-functioning campus is a post-Fordist

company town, with a churning pool of self-subsidizing cheap labor that takes loans to spend in the company store, voluntarily poses for company marketing materials, pays for the privilege of serving as a “brand ambassador” for the campus, and so on.

The substitution of students for full-time workers, as facilitated over four decades by managerial “innovators” in university-corporate partnership, has ricocheted throughout an economy organized around the model of the full-time job (for health insurance, retirement savings, home ownership, etc). Low-wage campus work and cheerful building of the campus brand is just the tip of the iceberg—as low- and no-wage internships, service learning, and the economic conscription of rising tuition force students into more and more hours at low-wage off-campus employment. This arrangement is not just painful to the students; it displaces other workers, both staff and faculty, including other workers with college degrees and even graduate educations. The situation of the graduate student who has been teaching for a decade but can’t get a professor’s job after earning the doctorate (because new graduate students or former graduate students without a doctorate are doing the teaching) is parallel to the circumstance of the journalism majors whose reporting is published by a consortium of Florida newspapers who have fired staff reporters: the journalism student, despite having worked successfully as a student reporter, will have trouble finding a job in journalism because more and more of the work will have been allocated to other journalism majors (who in turn will have yet more trouble finding work, and so on). The super-discounted labor of students is ultimately, therefore, just as costly to the students themselves as to those they’ve displaced—in the end, they’re displacing themselves. The super-discounting of faculty labor is similarly far more costly than it appears at first: one can reasonably ask, what harm is done if some book-besotted fools choose to work cheaply? One form of harm should be obvious: however enjoyable, the work pays so poorly that only those who can afford to subsidize their employer need apply; in many circumstances, the modesty of the wages simply does not support individuals without access to a secondary source of income, typically a professional-managerial spouse or family wealth. This has profound implications for the class, race, and gender of the professoriate, and the curriculum they choose to teach.

Higher education has played a crucial, innovative role in the new order of the global workplace, trading on the willingness of most of us to discount our labor-time in exchange for a little dignity and partial autonomy. It isn’t just faculty work that’s being spoiled; most people’s work is being ruined in similar ways. There are certainly

ways that the faculty's love for what they do is paradigmatic—hence “professing”—nonetheless most people have similarly tried to find corners and pieces of dignity and autonomy in their working lives. Like the faculty, most other workers strive to protect their integrity and avoid the taint of administration. So what has happened to the faculty—because we love what we do, sometimes to the point of denying that our wages matter at all—is important not because the faculty are special, but because we are typical.