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NARRATIVES

"IT WAS AT ONCE ONE OF HER MOST CHERISHED COMPLAINTS AND MOST SECRET SUPPORTS THAT PEOPLE DIDN'T UNDERSTAND HER." HENRY JAMES, *_IN THE CAGE_* (1898)



WEDNESDAY, JUNE 11, 2008

on Marc Bousquet's *How The University Works*



ME



VIENNA
a fledgling professor
recently promoted
from adjunct whore

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what follows is a guest post courtesy of mr. whore. i will be responding to it and to bousquet's book in the days to follow. without further ado, i give you, mr. whore.

The first time I fully understood what Althusser meant by “interpellation” was when I went to the British Library in London as a grad student. I did my little interview (this was about 10 years ago now), got my card, and spent the next week or so coming and going, reading and writing, and basically trying to figure out just what it was I needed to go all the way to the UK to consult. In later years, after I got a little better at research, I would have known how better to use my time. As it was, I consulted many texts that were easily available at libraries back home in the US. That didn’t bother me, then (partly because I didn’t realize it and partly because I got to go to the bar where Marx used to drink while doing research for Capital - a historical fact fully exploited by the bar itself, of course). What mattered was that I was in London at the BL doing research. I felt more like a scholar than I ever had, even though I had been doing research and writing a dissertation for a couple of years already. It was there that the institution (the BL; the academy) “hailed” me; it said, “hello scholar, will you be doing some more rigorous research again today? Looking at original sources? Laughing with the other scholars in the café?” And I said “yes.” I am a scholar. I wanted to be a scholar. I thought of my parents, neither of whom had attended college. This would all sound real enough to them given that what I was doing with my life - in my late 20s, no less - could seem a bit flimsy. And of course I thought of the tourists, the ones with no cards who could only look at the exhibited materials in display cases out front. I had a purpose - and a locker. I was a scholar.

Now why would I want to use the critical thinking skills I was supposed to be developing in grad school to interrogate that? In being hailed and in responding to the institution (in this case) of higher education I was finally assuming the identity I desperately wanted to assume. I was finally feeling like a member of a profession, a class - one which I’d always thought (and still often think) would reject me (state school education, state of the market, etc.). And yet while this little feeling of acceptance was harmless enough (though vain), this identity I was assuming was one that separated me - like all the best identities do - from those who had not been hailed: my uneducated parents, say, or the tourists, or some of my fellow graduate students, or me the previous week.... I was hanging with the scholars, now. Some of them were kind of old and looked mean. But others had funky eyewear and cool shoulder bags. I could get along with these folks, surely.

margo, darling
 maude
 medieval woman
 new kid on the hallway
 not of general interest
 notes of a neophyte
 ortho
 polyopia
 portia
 professorial confessions
 profgrrrrl
 seeking solace
 sek
 sfrajett's city 2.0
 sisyphus
 slaves of academe
 squadratomagico
 tenured radical
 The bitter and the Sweet
 the constructivist
 the smoking section (vila)
 uncool

OTHER SOURCES

chronicle of higher education
 common dreams
 inside higher education
 london review of books
 prafsblawg (legal theory and
 intellectual honesty)
 the guardian
 the minnesota review
 the new yorker
 the valve
 truth out

BLOG ARCHIVE

▼ 2008 (75)

▼ November (2)

i feel kind of emotional
 unease

► October (8)

► September (5)

► August (2)

► July (6)

The reason I bring up this rather tedious incident from my years in academic training is because I was reminded of it while reading Marc Bousquet's book, *How the University Works* (NYU Press, 2008). "It is obvious today," Bousquet writes, "that managerial values interpellate the faculty and students as well, framing not just possibilities for action (what can be done) but possibilities for knowing ('this is the world'). In this way, tenured faculty, even unionized tenured faculty, accept the managerial accounts of 'necessity' in the exploitation of part-time faculty, graduate students, and the outsourcing of staff" (93). Tenure, it seems (and I just went through it this year) functions a lot like the BL episode. It is something I worked for - very hard. It is something I wanted - very much. This in itself is not bad (and I do not think Bousquet suggests that is bad). But it is a form of hailing: when I / we accept our acceptance (in this case) as scholars, we are separating ourselves and perpetuating, however inadvertently, the institution - the system - into which we've finally and fully been assimilated.

This would be okay if we used our vaunted critical thinking skills to then reflect upon and critique the system itself - enjoying its advantages, say, but not becoming enslaved to them. But Bousquet's book suggests that this is not the case. "Under current conditions," he asks, "to what extent do the tenure-stream faculty represent the possibility of an opposition, a counterculture?" His answer: "With the spread of acceptance among the tenure-stream faculty of academic-capitalist values and behaviors, and acquiescence to an increasingly managerial role with respect to the contingent, there is little evidence of anything that resembles an oppositional culture" (13). I would suggest that part of this relates to the Democratic-liberal leanings of most Humanities faculty members - the complete inability, that is, to imagine a party-political platform outside the two-party framework. The recent visit to Furman College by Bush is an example. Faculty members protested. Fine. This was a platform for Bush to talk without criticism or feedback, they said. What if the speaker was a Democrat? Would that be okay? Vote for war? Check. For domestic spying? Check. For Torture. Check. For Alito. Check. Great. The Dubai Ports deal suggests that the only true victory the Democrats have gained over the Republicans in recent years came at the cost of being even more racist than they are. Critical thinking in action. Tenured faculty unite.

There is no oppositional culture that has any purchase in mainstream, professional America. No wonder there isn't one in the academy when more and more, as Bousquet suggests, it is only people who can afford to teach that do so. Bousquet offers some possibilities for finding one - and these possibilities come from students themselves.

We should be paying more attention.

But this is to digress too much. I am fully convinced by Bousquet's point that an oppositional culture will rarely be found among the tenure-stream faculty. Indeed, Bousquet's book suggests to me that tenure is as secure as ever: it is the prize, the sectioning off of certain faculty to assure that the present system of education-labor continues. It's a "headache" for administrators, perhaps. But it's useful, too, in its ways. We get hailed - first by "tenure-track," then by "tenure." And it's good - tenure.

I do not think that Bousquet is arguing against tenure. What he seems to be saying is that the tenure system is part of the mechanism through which the inequalities of the institution (of higher ed.) get reproduced. Just part. But important. Bousquet suggests that a better view of this system can be gleaned from the important work (including his)

- ▶ June (6)
- ▶ May (7)
- ▶ April (6)
- ▶ March (12)
- ▶ February (8)
- ▶ January (13)
- ▶ 2007 (121)

that highlights the views of “contingent” faculty: graduate students, part-time or adjunct faculty, lecturers. This is part of what Bousquet calls the “casualization” of labor (and not just academic labor) - a process that will require “tenure-stream” and “contingent” faculty to work together to disrupt (see p. 82). Tenure-stream faculty see themselves as closer to management. What will it take for them to see the degradation of the system itself and to find solidarity with faculty - contingent faculty - rather than with management? The result of such solidarity would not only benefit academic workers, writes Bousquet, but students too, even society.

After recently reading Bousquet’s book I suggested to AW that I might blog about it to the readership she has amassed - and she generously agreed to let me. At first I thought it was inappropriate because she is the adjunct whore. Or the whore formerly known as adjunct. And I am now tenured. She, in other words, should be doing this (and she will, I know). But after looking again at Bousquet’s book - which is a fantastic book, if I have not yet made that totally clear - I realized he is writing in large part to me (or people like me): to tenured or tenure-stream faculty. The “contingent” workers whose conditions he rigorously chronicles are (philosophically) like Marx’s proletariat. They see more than those at the top. The key to progress - in labor and in education - will be to get those workers who don’t know they are “workers” (tenured and tenure-stream) to recognize that they have more in common with the contingent workforce of the academy than they do with the managerial class that has, it can sometimes seem, learned the lessons of cultural materialism better than we have (see p. 12).

Bousquet himself makes his case through smart comparisons with, say, health care. When Americans are confronted with the idea of socialized medicine, the fear seems to be (often) that what each person of the middle class has will be somehow lessened in order to give a bit to those less secure, class-wise. In academia, isn’t it the same? If tenure-stream and tenured faculty work together with part-time, adjunct, and graduate-student faculty won’t we lose something - travel funds, course load, course selection, offices, number of students, prestige.... Maybe. But maybe not. Bousquet suggests that we re-imagine - that we remake, in fact - the system itself. “Reasonable wages for everyone,” he writes (209). This is a little vague but his point by p. 209 is clear. We can control our own futures - or can have more control - by becoming aware and fighting for more equality in the workplace than we can by acceding to managerial values, which are already nevertheless doing what we fear the contingent work force itself will do (if we were to join with them): casualize work and degrade our living.

MW

PS: Our 2-yr. old looked at the cover of Bousquet’s book while I was reading it the other day. The cover features three rather ambivalent-looking graduates. He said, “they look mad. I want to make them happy.” There’s hope, I think.

POSTED BY VIENNA AT 10:10 PM 

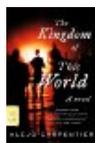
3 COMMENTS:

lil'rumpus said...

Welcome, Mr. Whore! This is just a brief comment (I'll probably put more cents in later...it is not yet 5am and the coffee has yet to take effect...) to say that you write wonderfully and to say thanks for a great post.



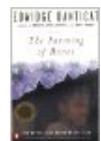
Brother, I'm Dying by



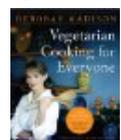
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The Kingdom of This World:
A Novel by Alejo Carpentier



The Narrative of
Arthur Gordon Pym of
Nantucket, and Related
Tales (Oxford World's
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