

# To Delight and to Instruct

If the purpose of art is the same as the purpose of teaching, is teaching therefore an art?

TUESDAY, JULY 15, 2008

## How the University Works

Some months ago, I was asked to review a book on this blog, which was an unusual request, but one about which I was enthusiastic: Marc Bousquet's *How the University Works*. Bousquet now has [a blog of the same name](#), one that I've been reading enthusiastically for some weeks now. I have bookmarked his [Academic Labor Bookshelf entry](#), and returned to it for some of my own work.

Anyway, I've been working my way through the book, and thought now might be a time to comment on it here in this space (especially since I've had that free copy of the book for several months). I might wryly note the funny little catch-22 with reviewing this book in this space: you know, a book on academic labor policies, being reviewed on a site where the labor can't be counted toward annual review, tenure, or compensation. But that's not a real critique, though—I am very much invested in the cycle of writing, reading, and responding in academia for its own sake. And what's more: Bousquet's got his sights set on labor abuses much more pervasive than a measly free review.

Anyway, let me start with the only thing that annoys me about the book: tone. Bousquet writes like a 60s radical. In many many ways, this is a good thing, particularly given the activism undertaken by the book. But for academic reading, I find it a troublesome rhetorical choice. The tone is often so sabre-rattling that I find myself looking for reasons to disagree, even when I already agree. I am deeply invested in understanding the politicized nature of the university, and in addressing the university itself as a site of activism, but the activist rhetoric of Bousquet's book throughout makes me feel defensive, even when I am not the object of his critique. This can be true of his online persona as well: quick to call less-than-helpful commenters "trolls," combative with even friendly voices, sharp in his retorts. It's not an ethos to which I personally respond particularly well, and he comes off sounding like a bully, even though he is consistently fighting for the underdog.

That little issue aside, I find the book itself to be a trenchant critique of an increasingly dire situation: the exploitation of labor by and through academe. Bousquet's general argument seems to be that the increasing corporatization of the university revolves around a particularly deleterious set of labor practices that has generally trended toward more middle-and upper-management practices in a growing stratum of administration on the one hand, and the increasing casualization of teaching labor on the other hand, companion trends that have specifically abusive effects on that very casualized labor, on students (who in some cases, may fall into both categories), and finally on tenured and tenurable faculty as well.

Some components of this system that Bousquet calls particular attention to include the following:

- The smooth and steady transformation of teaching and education into "information delivery," and automation and commodification that at once seems to point us toward the boom of digital diploma mills, and at the same time exercises the same logic of uniformity that has made fast food such a profitable enterprise—less-skilled labor can deliver information without

## DRAMATIS PERSONAE

My Photo



**Horace**

I'm an Associate Professor of English at by-the-River University (BRU), teaching Brit. Lit, Modern Drama, Gender Studies, and Writing. I am espoused to Willow, with three children: Rambunctious and Imperia (the wonder twins) and Junebug.

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necessarily having the expertise, or the working conditions, to foster a thriving environment. This all adds up to less-empowered teachers (who for various reasons are given less control over curriculum), students (whose individual needs and skills are less-accounted for in the classroom), and graduates (who become too easily acculturated to accepting an "informatized" mode of citizenship).

- The transformation of tenured faculty into management via "administration" often serves to reinforce the current climate of academic capitalism, rather than alleviate it, particularly because it underscores the complicity of academics forced to be "pragmatic" in advancing the claims of the inevitability and necessity of a corporate academy.
- "Students who work," a supremely exploited class of laborers both in the academy, and in corporations like UPS that partner with universities to create "job opportunities" that are so strenuous that they frequently make getting an education all but impossible. Bousquet's chapter on UPS reads like an Eric-Schlosser-style expose of the seedy underbelly of practices that universities unwittingly, and sometimes enthusiastically endorse. This chapter has been widely cited as among the most eye-opening, though having worked in a career center elsewhere when UPS came a-calling, I have seen all to well the "opportunity" they offer. I believe you can download a pdf of the chapter on Bousquet's site.
- The casualization of graduate labor, particularly in composition classes, puts Writing Program Administrators (WPAs) in the position of lower management, exploiting graduate student labor under the guise of a certain kind of educational heroism. Bousquet has written about rhet/comp before, in *Tenured Bosses and Disposable Teachers*, and is a veteran of Graduate Caucus labor efforts. Though my sense is that he is a little uncharitable to the position of WPAs, tagging them with the ironic "heroic WPA" tag, he is dead on that the increasing disciplinarization of composition studies represents a move toward management science via teacher training. This has a double effect of making WPAs complicit in corporatization practices (by continually authorizing and implementing an information delivery model of education via casualized student, contract, and untenurable laborers), while at the same time guaranteeing their status as second-class faculty whose "discipline" is grounded "merely" in pedagogical praxis. I want to re-read this chapter more carefully, for my first reading of it struggled with tone issues, but his impulse toward organized labor strikes me (no pun intended) as a useful one.
- The rhetoric of a meritocratic job market has encouraged those who do make the tenure track to distance themselves from freeway fliers, adjuncts, and contract labor, which in turn enables the university at large to effect the employment of those laborers at substandard conditions, clearly preferring less expensive teaching labor to quality teaching labor. The growth, then of the university's reliance on casualized labor continues to fuel the hiring crisis in the humanities, leaving the tenured faculty in the position of merely securing reputation, while passing off much of the (least desirable) teaching duties to less-empowered faculty.

It's a bleak picture generally, though Bousquet remains committed to the idea of organizing at all levels. While I am all for unionizing (and was briefly a part of that effort as a grad student), I wonder how far this will go toward dismantling this system. Bousquet, rightly, seems to think that it is at least a necessary step.

So how, as TT faculty, might we approach this? First, Bousquet notes, we must recognize that that even when we have the cushy TT positions, that this is our problem, too. He draws out the following postulates:

1. *We are not 'overproducing PhDs'; we are underproducing jobs.*
2. *Cheap teaching is not a victimless crime.*
3. *Casualization is an issue of racial, gendered, and class justice.*

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4. *Late capitalism doesn't just happen to the university; the university makes late capitalism happen.* (40-44)

In the end, we must fight for the rights of our contingent faculty to organize, and exercise solidarity with those faculty, rather than treating them as pariahs, substandard teachers, or mere apprentices. And when we can, we must make decisions that decrease the casualization of contingent labor rather than increase it.

But don't take my word for it. Check out Bousquet's book, and try to look past the tone, which, for all I know, may be a necessary stance for him to take as one of too-few pro-labor voices crying out in the corporate-academic wilderness. It's an important cry.

Posted by [Horace](#) at 4:00 PM 

Taxonomy: [Academic minutiae](#), [Politics](#), [Teaching](#)

### 3 Comments to Consider:

**uk said...**

Wow, great book review and I think I'll have to grab the book myself! Looks like it could be great for a long trip!

5:33 AM

**M said...**

Horace: Stick to your guns on the tone question. A radical critique of the university is only going to generate real action if it persuades people who are uncertain or even start from a position of disagreement. It's B's tone, shared by too many academics, that helps fuel the conservative anti-academic fires. In other words, I can't see anyone making it through this book who isn't already converted, and that isn't enough.

3:57 PM

**Andi said...**

Great review, Horace. I will try to get this book myself but will, given your notes on tone, use it as a reference and perhaps not as a gift to give our administration in itself. Thanks.

8:59 AM

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