

ABlog

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3.30.2008

COERCE U.

Like others involved in the labor of social reproduction, educators are under particular pressure to embody and transmit the values of power—which seeks through their labor to reproduce itself and the circumstances most favorable to it. The degree to which schooling can serve anti-egalitarian and anti-democratic purposes, and complicity with capitalist exploitation, is also the degree to which educators can be persuaded to arrangements that are hostile to democracy and equality in their own workplaces.—Marc Bousquet

By reading Marc Bousquet's *How the University Works: Higher Education and the Low-Wage Nation* (NYU Press), I've been gaining some wonderful insights into the coercive structures my intellect is attempting to flourish inside of (a.k.a. my "world of work" nightmare). Bousquet's basic argument is that the higher education industry has to be understood as a labor regime in which the lived experience of a range of hyper-exploited workers can and must become a resource for transforming not only the functioning of specific institutions but our basic beliefs about the nature and purpose of something called "education." These workers include graduate teaching assistants and other types of contingent (non-tenured) faculty; undergraduate students who must work long hours to finance the credit hours that they hope will catapult them into a privileged realm of better-compensated, less-degrading work; and the campus and off-campus workers in a variety of non- or para-professional capacities who keep the physical campus and its virtual spaces up and running.

Countering the powerful image of the university as a sort of sheltered workshop for intellectuals, and a college education as an idyllic interlude before the pressures of the workplace and adult responsibility take over, Bousquet shows how the existence of a privileged "top tier" of tenured faculty who supposedly represent the "real" university masks the reality of instructors and students scrambling to survive. In this view, heeding the siren song of most Ph.D. programs (particularly in the humanities and other areas where the academic "job market" consistently runs with the bears and not the bulls) is the higher ed equivalent of a poor inner city kid's getting suckered by "hoop dreams." Many are called, exceedingly few chosen. The system is designed to spit most aspirants out long before they attain the prize, whether it be tenure or a well-paid career in pro basketball.

Part of the satisfaction of reading Bousquet's analysis is that of seeing elegantly articulated and indeed "called

out” the structural obstacles I’ve been struggling with in my teaching life, particularly my New School job. As an organizer of a union for part-time faculty, I hardly need reminding that “contingent” faculty have a fine vantage point from which to analyze the realities as opposed to the pipe dreams of higher education! And it’s a treat to see the profoundly anti-democratic impulses of most higher-level university administrators, which I see enacted daily in my own shitty little academic microcosm, nailed through research studies and direct quotes from managerial screeds. But in a couple of crucial ways, Bousquet has also caused me to re-evaluate my own entrenched understanding of these problems.

For one thing, his analysis shows me that I’ve been too focused on the university as a self-contained entity dedicated to “growth” and a range of other quasi-corporate measures of success, at the expense of considering what the quoted passage that opens this post makes clear: that this institutional orientation reflects the values and imperatives of the larger society’s bosses and “deciders.” Which is another way of saying that my/our (often pathetic-seeming) local fight for a definition of education that centrally includes democratic values, critical consciousness, and a concern for social justice is also *really* (not just rhetorically) a fight for the functioning of the world beyond the classroom.

Bousquet also makes me realize to my considerable chagrin that I’ve spent years reading my students’ writing about their jobs, years describing the student body at the New School division where I teach as “basically middle-class, but often struggling, with an awful lot of students working so many hours that they have trouble keeping up with seminar assignments”... while continuing to buy into the ideologically poisonous notion that their economic struggles are somehow very much secondary to their primary identities of “student.” I obviously need to think a lot more about the ways in which my students and I share the experience of super-exploited labor. I need to consider how to talk with them about this, and how our mutual recognition of the implications might affect our work together.

Here are a few specifics of the New School's current operations that directly reflect elements of Bousquet’s analysis:

1. Bousquet focuses a great deal on the exploitation of graduate student labor under the system—historically much more fully developed at schools like NYU than at the New School—whereby graduate students teach a high percentage of undergraduate courses. While in the past the New School depended on an astronomical percentage of part-time faculty rather than grad student teachers, the institution is now moving to use more low-paid grad student labor. There are undoubtedly several reasons for this, but I’d wager that one is the administration’s desire to minimize the size of its unionized part-time faculty. In a particularly sinister move, the administration is signaling that it may attempt to impose a rule preventing grad students from teaching in any other capacity than as graduate students. (Thus, for example, a student with ESL certification who’s enrolled in an Economics Ph.D. program would be prevented from working as an ESL instructor, or from teaching anything else for which she was qualified, except an economics course under the graduate teaching fellows program.) The Student Senate recently passed a resolution condemning the low pay scale for the grad student teaching fellows.

2. While moving toward more large lecture classes and thus unfavorably altering the faculty/student ratio, as well as continuing to raise tuition, the university is mortgaging its financial health to the construction of a vastly expensive, pie-in-the-sky high-rise, its “signature building” on 14th Street and Fifth Avenue. Students are asking how this will benefit their educations (especially as the lengthy construction process will create, over the

short- and medium-term, an even worse space crunch than we now experience). Community organizations are up in arms about the impact of this monolith on a low-rise neighborhood, and are demanding that the plans be revamped so as not to require the zoning waivers necessitated by the current plan.

3. The university deals with highly exploitative, unscrupulous sub-contractors. Recently, the Laborers' Union has stationed large inflatable rats outside university buildings to protest the fact that a new dormitory project is making use of an asbestos abatement firm whose workers have filed numerous complaints that it refuses to pay a legally mandated wage. The company is also associated with repeated and egregious safety violations.

4. Increasingly, the New School throttles critical inquiry through procedures reminiscent of Chomsky and Herman's "propaganda model" accounting for how the press is controlled within modern democracies. Non-tenured ("term") faculty who break with the prevalent model of "acceptable" discourse, as well as part-time faculty who speak out of turn, are increasingly not reappointed. The rationale, in some cases, is that "you no longer fit the profile we want for your department." In many cases these are teachers who have no ready legal protections, but in one watershed case, Barrie Karp, a popular part-time faculty member with more than two decades at the institution, is under direct threat of non-reappointment in blatant violation of the union contract's job security provisions for long-term adjuncts.

5. The university has done an end run around real faculty governance by allowing the formation, several years ago, of a Faculty Senate that operates in a purely advisory capacity. Relevant here is a passage Bousquet quotes from Robert Birnbaum. "Birnbaum notes the utility to leadership of establishing 'permanent structural garbage cans such as the academic senate' ('Latent Organization,' 233). He observes that task forces, committees, and other receptacles of faculty garbage are 'highly visible, they confer status on those participating, and they are instrumentally unimportant to the institution' (*How Colleges Work*, 171)." There are token student representatives on some committees, including a University Diversity Committee that has a small budget but no power to initiate the programmatic changes required to dismantle structural racism and other serious impediments to equality in a supposedly liberal institution that claims to embrace all sorts of diversity.

6. Historically, faculty tenure at the New School was confined to the graduate division. Now tenure is being "extended to the university" as a whole. The process is creating a further atmosphere of coercion as long-time "term" faculty obsess over whether they will be considered "tenurable" and newer full-time faculty complain of finding themselves under the gun to meet high standards for publication and service while carrying a heavy teaching load, without the sabbaticals and other supports sometimes available to junior faculty in better-endowed institutions.

7. Grievance handlers at Local 7902, the part-time faculty union, are observing a pattern according to which part-time faculty are let go following their tenth semester of teaching. (Appointment to an eleventh semester would secure them reappointment rights under the contract.) Some of these teachers have even been told that they are not being rehired in order to avoid granting them reappointment rights. The practice recalls a passage in Audre Lorde's *Zami*, set in the 1950's, which portrays the young narrator taking a job at a Connecticut factory that takes on people of color to fill unskilled positions for a few weeks, firing them just at the point when they are about to become eligible for union membership.

This practice on the part of the New School's administration also brings to mind a piquant e-mail message

from a Dean at NYU, quoted by Bousquet: “We need people we can abuse, exploit, and then turn loose.” (Dean Ann Marcus, NYU, on the hiring of term faculty; e-mail submitted in evidence before the NLRB, Bousquet p. 95).

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