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Class, Culture, and the Decline of the University

(on Joe Berry's *Reclaiming the Ivory Tower: Organizing Adjuncts to Change Higher Education* [New York: Monthly Review P, 2005]; Marc Bousquet's *How the University Works: Higher Education and the Low-Wage Nation* [New York: NYU P, 2008]; Frank Donoghue's *The Last Professors: The Corporate University and the Fate of the Humanities* [Bronx: Fordham UP, 2008]; Henry Giroux's *The University in Chains: Confronting the Military-Industrial-Academic Complex* [Boulder: Paradigm, 2007]; Anthony Kronman's *Education's End: Why Our Colleges and Universities Have Given Up on the Meaning of Life* [New Haven: Yale UP, 2007]; and Christopher Newfield's *Unmaking the Public University: The Forty-Year Assault on the Middle Class* [Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2008])

The postwar era was the golden age of the American middle class. Between 1947 and 1961 alone, the average income of American households nearly doubled. The biggest gains were experienced by those with a college degree, who made up an increasing percentage of the population (US Census Bureau, 1963). The postwar era was also the golden age of the university, the institution most associated with the expansion of the American middle class. As a result of the GI Bill and other public programs aimed at increasing access to the expanding higher education system, college enrollments increased by five fold in the three decades after the war (Williams, "Post-Welfare" 192-194). Between 1955 and 1974, the number of black students enrolled in college rose from 95,000 to 814,000 and the percentage of women in the student body increased from one-third to one-half (Keller 8). The universities themselves benefited from a surge in public funding for research, fueled by the popular principles of the New Deal and the ideological and material demands of the Cold War. The problems of Cold War politics and culture notwithstanding, it was a good time to be a college student.

Since the postwar years, the situation has been characterized by the proverbial "middle-class squeeze." Between 1968 and 1994, the middle sixty percent of households saw their incomes fall from 53 to 47 percent of the national aggregate, while that of the top quintile rose from 16.6 to 21.2 percent (US Census, 1996). Notably, today's college-educated adults have a lower income status than they did in 1970 (Pew Research Center). In isolating the cause of what some

refer to as the decline of the American middle class, commentators usually point to the recession of the early 1970s associated with the repeal of the gold standard, the subsequent oil crisis, and the inflation of the late 1970s.

Some observers have also drawn attention to the role of culture in the economic decline of the middle class. In the 1970s, argues David Harvey, the postwar social compact between labor and management was gradually eroded by an evolving business ethos in which the emphasis on investing in workers over a lifetime gave way to a focus on calculating the cost of such investment in the short-term. Contrary to the notion of the ivory tower, the university has always existed in relation to a larger societal context. Over the last four decades, the system of American higher education evolved in tandem with this broad economic and cultural shift from the principles of the welfare state toward the ideology of the free market.

Countless numbers of books have announced and analyzed the decline of the university. Most of these have been written by academics, many by humanities professors. This is not surprising, since of all the disciplines, literature, philosophy, and history have been the most affected by the post-1970s shift. The humanities have not only suffered economically, from cost-cutting measures, but also existentially, due to administrators and middle managers whose policies and rhetoric imply that the study of literature, philosophy, and history has little value in a market-oriented culture. Humanities scholars should take pride in being at the forefront of defending the loftier interests of higher education. That said, accounting for the political and economic as well as cultural problems confronting the university poses an analytical challenge that few critics of the contemporary university have been able to master. One of the key challenges has been to understand and respond to the relationship between the cultural and economic aspects of the problem.

Within the humanities, early analyses of the university's post-1970s decline were dominated by self-ascribed conservatives who saw the problem as almost entirely cultural, wherein culture had virtually no connection to economics or class. Led by Allan Bloom, the culture warriors branded multiculturalism, egalitarianism, and political correctness corrupting influences on the humanities and on the university more broadly. Whether humanities professors were portrayed as the root cause or the blind perpetrators of such corruption, they were seen as ultimately responsible for the decline of the university and of American society more broadly. Bloom and others advocated a return to more traditional readings of the great books—"the best that has been thought and said"—as the best

antidote to the cultural poison that had seeped into the body of higher education.

Since their apex in the late eighties and early nineties, the academic culture wars have lost much of their steam, in part because most scholar-teachers fall somewhere in between the exaggerated extremes mapped out by the polemicists. There are still, however, plenty of books being written in the vein of the old culture wars. Of these, Anthony Kronman's *Education's End: Why Our Colleges and Universities Have Given Up on the Meaning of Life* (2007), which is framed as a response to the increasingly vulnerable status of the humanities within the university, offers a somewhat updated articulation of the old debate. Like the culture warriors of old, Kronman blames the humanities disciplines for the troubles they are currently experiencing. Former dean of Yale Law School, who has now dedicated himself to teaching Yale's version of the great books, Kronman argues that by marginalizing questions about the meaning of life, the humanities have effectively "destroyed themselves" (89). Citing the "modern research ideal" as one of the key factors in this development, Kronman explains that the humanities have put themselves in an inferior position in the disciplinary hierarchy by trying to compete on the same plane as the natural and social sciences. While a compelling critique of historicism and other research-oriented scholarly agendas on the basis that they overvalue empirical inquiry and undervalue transhistorical moral and ethical questions, this argument loses force when Kronman threads it into the old culture wars. By the middle of the book, Kronman's argument that the humanities no longer prompt students to explore life's meaning becomes part of a broad claim against "relativism," "political correctness," and "a pedagogy of diversity" as unacceptable vehicles through which to explore life's meaning. In making such claims, Kronman not only simplifies the teaching that takes place in English and other humanities departments, but also neglects the structural problems confronting the humanities in today's system of higher education.

As several commentators have pointed out, one reason that the academic culture wars now strike many as irrelevant is that in focusing almost exclusively on the internal culture of the humanities, these particular cultural warriors did not take into account the external economic pressures on the university (Williams, "Post-Welfare" 199). (In a recent essay in *Politico*, "Class War Could Replace Culture War," Joel Kotkin makes a similar argument with respect to the culture wars in national politics.) While the academic culture wars waged on, a more sweeping cultural shift was reshaping the social and economic landscape of virtually all of the nation's

institutions, including the university. By the early 1990s, large corporations had become the subject of a broad critique in American culture. Since then, dozens of books and articles have addressed the “corporatization” of higher education as a key if not defining aspect of the contemporary American university. While some, like Jennifer Washburn’s *University, Inc.* (2005), took a popular journalistic approach, and others, like Sheila Slaughter and Larry Leslie’s *Academic Capitalism* (1997), took a more scholarly approach, as a group, these books drew attention to the same fundamental aspects of the university’s corporatization. Corporations, they explained, had inserted themselves into the everyday life of the university by funding academic research, contracting with the university to supply on-campus goods and services, marketing credit card and bank services to students, and putting their CEOs on universities’ boards of directors. Simultaneously, administrators were increasingly adopting corporate principles in their management of the university. In practice, this meant squeezing as much productivity out of university employees as possible at as low a cost as possible, increasing reliance on short-term, flexible labor, and shifting resources from liberal arts to programs to professional and vocational training. These tensions between the interests of business and the interests of higher education are not totally new. As some commentators have pointed out, they date back at least to the late nineteenth century. What’s new is not the presence of business in higher education but rather its extent. At a structural as well as cultural level, it has become harder and harder to distinguish the management of a nonprofit university from that of a for-profit corporation (not to mention the creation and exorbitant growth of for-profit universities since the 1980s).

Henry Giroux’s recent book, *The University in Chains: Confronting the Military-Industrial-Academic Complex* (2007), folds this now familiar criticism of the corporate university into a broader socio-political context. Framing the university as part of the intertwined machines of war and business, Giroux calls attention to the fact that the first draft of Eisenhower’s famous speech did not just warn against ties between the military and industry, but also against connections between these sectors and the university. Updating this framework for a post-9/11 environment in which the state co-opts research for military objectives, pharmaceutical and biotech corporations profit from that research, and conservative interest groups intimidate professors who question the neoconservative assessment of the Middle East, Giroux argues that the democratic ideal of higher education has effectively become imprisoned by right-wing forces promoting and perpetuating the war on terror. While framed as a response to the current political reality, this analysis

differs little from Chomsky's and others' critique of the university in the Cold War, when the system of higher education was similarly influenced by the political, economic, and cultural demands of perpetual war.

The vaster and more entrenched the problem, the more difficult it usually is to solve. Generally speaking, the books that emphasize the structural aspects of the university's post-1970s decline do more to expose the threat posed by corporations, the military, and right-wing politics on the university than offer solutions to it. This is especially true of the books that expose the corporatization of the university, in which there is a sense of inevitability about the reigning influence of corporate power. For Giroux, as for many humanities teachers, the answer lies in "critical pedagogy," in which students "learn to think and act critically about the world" (180). This focus on pedagogy makes sense insofar as the classroom is the arena in which the humanities have the most potential impact on the world outside the university. Despite Kronman's and others' claim that the humanities no longer have influence, it is still the case that nearly every college freshman must take at least one writing or literature course. In terms of pedagogical approach, Giroux's call for a politicized (leftist) curriculum certainly puts him at odds with the old culture warriors. His solution resembles theirs, however, insofar as it emphasizes a well-conceived humanities curriculum as the answer to a problem that is not only cultural but also economic.

Against the tendency to either tacitly accept the economic status quo as inevitable or to marginalize economic reality in order to focus on the humanities curriculum, Christopher Newfield's recent book, *Unmaking the Public University: The Forty-Year Assault on the Middle Class* (2008), seeks to integrate the cultural and economic lenses of the problems facing the contemporary American university. Notably, he does so by reframing the culture wars. Tracing right-wing cultural attacks on the university, and especially on the humanities, alongside cuts in federal and state funding, Newfield demonstrates how at a national level, "the culture wars were economic wars" (6). In analyzing the post-1970s decline of the university as a result of the economic culture wars, Newfield highlights the mutually beneficial relationship between the university and the middle class that preceded this decline. The book is a sequel to *Ivy and Industry* (2003), in which Newfield traced the development of the modern university to promote both "human development" and "economic development" (4, 8). Newfield is not concerned by the commingling of business and education per se, but instead by the elevation of economic benefit at the expense of education as a social good.

Over the last forty years, argues Newfield, the conservative culture warriors have eroded higher education as a social good by attacking the key principles that helped extend the benefits of a college education to minorities, women, and the poor—equal opportunity, racial and ethnic consciousness, and public investment in social institutions. “Winning the battle over ideology was not the ultimate prize,” however. That, argues Newfield, was “the reduced cost and status of the middle class that the public university created” (268). In this framework, the increased earnings gaps between whites and minorities since the 1970s are directly linked to the decreased funding of public universities in this period, both of which are products of the culture wars. Newfield is impressively adept at supporting his rather sweeping claims with a mixture of textual and quantitative analysis. In addition to pithy readings of Supreme Court decisions against affirmative action, of *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, and of postmodern theory, he offers analyses of budgets and economic trends within and outside of the university. The quantitative aspect of Newfield’s discussion is especially noteworthy because Newfield, an English professor, uses charts and graphs to challenge the increasing reliance on the notion that resources for education should be allocated only according to the principle of immediate economic costs and benefits. This “market ideology,” as Newfield calls it, is itself a manifestation of the culture war. Even as he questions a blind faith in markets, Newfield does not retreat into an anti-economic realm. In promoting the social good, one of the key functions of the university, he insists, is to be a bulwark of the middle class.

In the postwar years, the economic benefits of mass higher education were accorded not only to university students but also, generally speaking, to university professors. While the wage of professors barely kept up with inflation in the immediate postwar years, between 1952 and 1970 faculty salaries rose faster than all but the highest earning professions (Keller 9-10; Marsh and Dillon 546). The golden age of faculty earnings began to decline by the 1980s. According to a recent report from the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, between 2004 and 2008, average faculty salaries increased by only .2 percent adjusted for inflation. As universities continue to pare budgets and increase their reliance on part-time and graduate student instructors, who make a fraction of their tenured counterparts’ salaries, a number of books written by humanities professors have framed the decline of the university in terms of the deteriorating economic status of academic labor. As a group, these books place issues of class at the center of discussions about the university’s decline. To varying extents, some of them also point

to the academic humanities as a potential locus for an alternative middle-class culture.

In *The Last Professors: The Corporate University and the Fate of the Humanities* (2008), Frank Donoghue writes what is essentially an epitaph for the tenured professor. In line with the reigning emphasis on corporatization, Donoghue cites “corporate logic” and “corporate values” in the university as the cause of the tenured professor’s imminent extinction (xiii). Taking issue with crisis terminology, Donoghue frames the current phenomenon as the culmination of a long battle between the forces of business and the ideals of higher education. As far back as the late nineteenth century, he explains, business moguls such as Andrew Carnegie attacked the university as a nonproductive, esoteric institution. Over the next hundred years, these business leaders essentially took over the field of higher education and imposed their values on the university. As the university continues to go corporate, Donoghue predicts that the humanities will virtually disappear from the nation’s for-profit and community colleges, surviving relatively unscathed only in the elite institutions. This pattern, he says, will set public universities in a tailspin, as they compete with the elites for “prestige” and with the vocational schools for profits (92).

Donoghue lays part of the blame on the humanities themselves for so thoroughly integrating corporate principles into the profession. Reviewing the graduate school experience, the academic job market, and the academic publishing system, he argues that competition for the few remaining tenure-track positions is itself characterized by market values that exacerbate the individualist ethos of the scholarly profession and impede the establishment of class-based solidarity amongst humanities professors across the ranks. Although Donoghue, a tenured professor at Ohio State University, would like to see tenured professors take more responsibility for the working conditions of their non-tenured colleagues, he is pessimistic about the prospects: “I offer nothing in the way of uplifting solutions to the problems that I describe” (xi).

While Donoghue sees tenured professors as the potential, but currently passive agents of change, the commentaries that have evolved out of the academic labor movement focus more on the role of contingent labor as leaders in the movement for class-based solidarity. Of all the responses to the university’s decline, the movement to unionize graduate and adjunct employees, which dates back to the postwar period, most explicitly frames the problem and solution in terms of class. “We are workers” has been and remains the central message of the academic union movement. In *Reclaiming the Ivory Tower: Organizing Adjuncts to Change Higher Education* (2005),

a manual for non-tenured faculty who wish to organize a union on their campus, Joe Berry emphasizes the importance of tenured faculty in challenging the system of academic labor. At the same time, he argues that their willingness to do so will depend on the ability of contingent faculty to mobilize (23). Organizing a faculty union is no easy task. In addition to confronting the structural alliance between big business and government, which has resulted in several adverse legal decisions for the academic union movement, academic labor activists face the challenge of convincing faculty to see themselves as part of a class, and more specifically, as part of the “working class majority” (135). This is a key element in the cultural work of class-based activism.

Among the many efforts to promote a culture of solidarity among university faculty as well as between faculty and workers outside the university, Marc Bousquet’s recent book, *How the University Works: Higher Education and the Low-Wage Nation* (2008) is not only the most persuasive political argument, but also the most sophisticated theoretical analysis of the university’s labor system. In sync with many of the recent commentaries on the university’s decline, Bousquet critiques the corporatization of higher education, focusing in particular on the managerial system in which administrators and tenured faculty oversee the army of contingent labor, who in an “informationalized” culture are called up and dismissed at will, like icons on a laptop screen. Unlike many similar criticisms of the corporate university, however, Bousquet challenges the assumption that we have no choice but to accept the principles of the market. To this end, he argues against many of the current responses of the academic humanities to the labor crisis, including the very notion of an academic job market, which suggest that the current and future trends are the result of inevitable, if not natural, forces. Bousquet credits the MLA with inventing and perpetuating this notion, most recently in its recommendation to reduce the size of graduate programs. In so doing, explains Bousquet, the MLA frames the deliberate and hostile policy of slashing tenure-track positions as an inevitable function of “the market.” Rather than responding to the “needs” of the market, asks Bousquet, why don’t we make the market respond to “our needs?” (135).

When Bousquet says “we,” he is not only referring to tenured professors, but also to the graduate students, recent PhDs, and non-tenure-track instructors who now teach sixty percent of courses in colleges and universities. Contingent laborers may occupy the lowest rung on the ladder of class and status, but as a result, argues Bousquet, they also occupy the highest rung on the ladder of “understanding the system of our work” (15). While he calls

for tenured faculty to respond to the problem of contingent labor as their problem, Bousquet, a long-time union activist, also points to contingent faculty as leaders in the movement to challenge the current system of academic labor. In contrast to Donoghue, who frames contingent faculty as silent victims of the system, and in line with Berry, Bousquet features the creative voices of contingent labor as part of an emerging counterculture. He profiles one street theater piece by organizers at Portland Community College, for example, in which adjunct instructors hold their office hours in outdoor garbage cans labeled “AD-JUNKED FACULTY OFFICE” (48).

As union activists work to promote solidarity between tenured and non-tenured faculty, they have increasingly broadened the scope of university workers to include undergraduates. In the face of huge increases in tuition and significant decreases in need-based scholarships, a majority of college students work. (According to the American Council on Education, during the 2003-04 academic year, 78 percent of undergraduates worked.) For many of the most economically disadvantaged, work does not lead to upward mobility but instead makes it harder for them to complete their degrees. In highlighting this point, Bousquet profiles a partnership between UPS and colleges in Louisville, Kentucky, in which students work strenuous jobs during the night shift for paltry wages and the possibility of tuition subsidy. Bousquet features the voices of some of these students, many of whom are so consumed with work that they have neither the time nor the energy to worry about school: “Today I had a load of over 1600 packages with no help, the bastards...I’ve slept less than 5 of the last 55 hours” (136). Less than one-third of the students in this program actually earn their degrees. In the meantime, as Bousquet underscores, they supply UPS with a steady stream of cheap labor.

Focusing on undergraduate students as workers seems especially important in light of the economic reality facing college graduates today. Even as tuition and student debt have skyrocketed (average student debt more than doubled from \$9,200 in 1992 to \$18,900 in 2002), the wages of college-educated workers have remained about the same as the 1970 levels (Williams, “Pedagogy”; Bousquet 153). And women and minorities who hold college degrees continue to earn significantly less than their white male counterparts (Clery and Christopher).

Increasingly, not only hopeful union activists, but also more sober-minded critics are drawing attention to potential connections between university faculty and university students as mutually implicated in the corporate university. Despite his claim to offer no solutions, Donoghue, for example, calls for humanities professors to

persuade undergraduates to “look more skeptically upon the promises of college as job training” (88). Universities, in other words, can function as a locus for an alternative middle-class culture that does not automatically elevate the logic of markets above all else.

Notably, Donoghue’s idea puts us back in the classroom, now as the place where humanities professors can teach undergraduates about the problems of conforming to market culture. As in the old culture wars, there are dangers to focusing entirely on a cultural approach to a structural problem. The effort to increase public funding for universities, reduce tuition and student debt, and restore job security for university professors requires political action at the state and national level. Such action, led by an alliance of students and professors as part of a broader labor movement that extends beyond the university, ought to build on the historical connection between the growth of the university and the growth of the middle class. The full value of the humanities will only be realized when anyone who wants to use college as a time for contemplating the meaning of life can actually afford to do so.

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