

The Little Professor

Things Victorian and academic.

January 27, 2008

How the University Works

If a random academic came out of nowhere and asked me to identify the most significant claims and/or arguments in Marc Bousquet's *How the University Works*, I would suggest the following:

- a) The need to conceptualize academic workers *as* workers, and not as disembodied minds engaging in some activity that has nothing to do with other forms of labor. This is perhaps even more necessary for undergraduates who are working their way through college, argues Bousquet, because "[b]eing a student isn't just a way of getting a future job--it's a way of getting a job right now" (150). The work-study student who mans the phone in the front office, in other words, is a worker *at this very moment*, and not just a future worker.
- b) Under the current regime, doctoral programs produce "flexible labor" in the form of graduate students, who work as both teaching assistants (at their home institutions) and contingent faculty (elsewhere). In practice, this labor, *not the doctorate*, is the actual point of such programs. Moreover, the doctoral degree confers no advantage on even would-be contingent faculty, who are now outnumbered by those with MAs and ABDs (205). The Ph.D., says Bousquet, is effectively "waste," something to be discarded after its usefulness as flexible labor is finished (27).
- c) Any approach that emphasizes a supposed *excess* of Ph.D.s fatally misdiagnoses the problem, which is not a surplus of Ph.D.s but a scarcity of tenure-track positions: "The concrete aura of the claim that degree holders are 'overproduced' conceals the necessary understanding that, in fact, there is a huge shortage of degree holders. If degree holders were doing the teaching, there would be far too few of them" (41). Universities, in other words, have *chosen* flexible labor over tenure-track positions and non-Ph.D.s over Ph.D.s, despite optimistic rhetoric to the contrary (205).
- d) There is *no* "job market" as such, and references to same simply occlude the actual workings of academic hiring.

And, most importantly,

- e) Any change to the current system can only come from contingent faculty and students *themselves*, and not from "above," as "having administrative power is to be subject to administrative imperatives--that is, to be individually powerless before a version of 'necessity' originating from some other source" (174). In other words, even sympathetic "managers" find themselves hamstrung by priorities set elsewhere. Bousquet adduces the graduate student unionization movement as an example of (mostly) successful collective action, despite legal difficulties, and points to inroads made by contingent faculty unions and advocacy groups.

Of these points, I found c) to be the most provocative challenge to my own thinking, although Bousquet's own proposals to fund graduate student work, which I discuss briefly below, *will* reduce the size of doctoral programs significantly. E) strikes me as correct, although Dad the Emeritus Historian of Graeco-Roman Egypt reminds me that unions at public universities are not "negotiating with the people who have the money," as California unions rediscover on a regular basis. A) will probably work better for students than for many faculty, thanks to the "love" factor (of which more shortly)--which is not to say that I disagree. I'll leave the empirical correctness of D) to the economists out there, but B), unfortunately, certainly seems to describe how many doctoral programs behave. B) is even true when the doctoral program gives students few or no teaching opportunities on the campus itself, since those students then wind up adjuncting at other colleges in the area.

Now, on my part, two queries/meditations and one growl of annoyance (the latter of which is not directed at Bousquet):

1a. **A growl of annoyance.** Cary Nelson's foreword includes this helpful suggestion for fixing the financial state of affairs: "Set a \$200,000 limit to faculty salaries and a \$300,000 limit to upper administrative salaries. Limit coaches to \$300,000 as well. At my institution, even the president's assistants earn \$300,000; I'd cut their salaries by 50 percent" (xviii). All of the cash saved can then be used for more meritorious goals, like hiring tenure-track faculty. There's only one problem, which is that only residents of the most upper echelons of the academic universe will ever see anything resembling a salary of \$200K. Most of us humble academics will never see salaries of \$100K. Even most *administrators* will never see salaries much above \$100K. Nelson's "brave" suggestion will accomplish nothing, except perhaps at the ritziest of campuses; it sounds like a call to sacrifice for the greater good, but who on earth is going to be martyred here?

1. **Affect.** Bousquet notes more than once that contingent faculty are supposedly doing their jobs out of "love" ("I love books and teaching; it's so wonderful that they actually pay me anything to do what I do!"). If pressed, most academics would, at some point, cite "love" for their subject or discipline as a reason for choosing their careers. Contrariwise, ex-graduate students (and sometimes not so ex) have been known to argue that professional study undermined their "love" of, say, literature. Although Bousquet does not say so explicitly, his argument very much tends to the conclusion that the rhetoric of love interferes with the ability of contingent faculty, graduate students, and indeed t-t faculty to recognize themselves as *labor*. This is much the same problem faced by elementary and secondary school teachers, who are supposed to regard the affective profits of their work as more important than their earning power. More to the point, the pressure to choose love over other forms of compensation is both internal and external, as anyone whose students announce that they are going to teach because "I love children!" quickly realizes. The rhetoric of love links faculty to other occupations defined as outside the so-called "real world," such as the arts. One thinks of the bemusement that greeted the New York City Ballet dancers' strike of the early 1970s (dancers want to be *paid* reasonably well? really?), or of how fans ruthlessly sentimentalize that most contingent of creative work for television, soap opera acting (e.g., reading an aging actor's decision to stay for decades as a sign of "love for the show" or "loyalty to the fans," as opposed to a grim assessment of his actual career prospects).

2. **MAAs.** Part of Bousquet's project is to revalue the devalued doctorate by making flexible labor less appealing than t-t labor. Graduate students should have "reasonable wages" and limited teaching schedules, while contingent faculty should be "more expensive" than the t-t variety (208). Once the t-t faculty seem more cost-effective, to be blunt, administrations will hire them. Contingent faculty with MAAs only, however, play an odd role in Bousquet's discourse: on the one hand, they embody casualization at work; on the other hand, they are arguably the most exploited class in contemporary academia; on the third hand, their working conditions turn them into problematic figures in the classroom. As Bousquet puts it near the beginning of the introduction, while one of an undergraduate's four classes may be taught by a t-t Ph.D.,

In your other three classes, however, you are likely to be taught by someone who has started a degree but not finished it; may never publish in the field she is teaching; got into the pool of persons being considered for the job because she was willing to work for wages around the official poverty line (often under the delusion that she could "work her way into" a tenurable position; and does not plan to be working at your institution three years from now. (2)

He quickly goes on to explain that the problem lies not with contingent faculty, but with the "degraded circumstances" (4) under which they work. But it seems to me, at any rate, that contingent faculty *sans* doctorates occupy an oddly marginal place in Bousquet's own thinking. Even his final suggestions for revitalizing t-t hires and revaluing the Ph.D. rest on the silent elimination of non-doctoral faculty from four-year colleges and universities. While Bousquet brushes off the anti-unionist claim that "organized term faculty 'are organizing themselves out of a job,'" his optimistic assessment that "[e]ven if it were true on some abstract or collective level that graduate employees and the former graduate employees working on a term basis were indeed organizing themselves out of a job, it is only to organize themselves collectively into better ones" (208) still neglects to account for what will happen to MA and ABD faculty if colleges are successfully persuaded to

restore tenure-track percentages to earlier levels. *Who* is going to have a better job?

January 27, 2008 in [Academic](#), [Books](#), [Teaching](#) | [Permalink](#)

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Yes, (c) is the most interesting -- but it doesn't go far enough, because "tenure track" itself is to some extent an illusion. Suppose you're a young geneticist; you get your PhD, and want to move toward tenure. Tenure will be based on research. The job offers are (1) assistant professor, with a significant teaching load; or (2) post-doc, full-time research, more money. Which do you take? At best, you could go either way.

Posted by: Mr Punch | [January 28, 2008 at 08:59 AM](#)



Ah, yes, doing work out of love. This is the same exact problem faced by people who work for nonprofit groups in general, especially advocacy groups -- you are supposed to be doing the work out of "love" (i.e. some form of political or pseudo-political agreement). It's so well known that it has been quantified. It's generally accepted that if you work for a nonprofit, you will get 2/3 of the money that the same work for a profit-making entity will get you, and the difference is supposed to be pay in the form of satisfaction with your work.

One of the many reasons that Ralph Nader was heartily disliked among the people who worked with but not actually for his organizations was that he ruthlessly ignored this tacit agreement. He'd basically play up how important the work was, and how people shouldn't be interested in getting paid for it, and use his star quality to get people to work for \$6,000/year or something. I never could take him seriously on work issues.

Posted by: Rich Puchalsky | [January 28, 2008 at 12:16 PM](#)



Hi, Miriam. Thanks for this thoughtful (and prompt!) reading. You've captured several of the core themes of the book, and raised some good points. You're right, of course, about administrator salary.

Folks that want to learn more about the way that affect benefits employers should read things like Andrew Ross's "The Mental Labor Problem" and Dana Fisher's *Activism Inc.*, which shows the horrendous permatemping of undergraduates working for causes.

http://www.sup.org/book.cgi?book_id=5217

The point about contingent faculty is a thorny one. Like most contingent faculty issues, there's no consensus on it even among contingent faculty leadership. This is not surprising, since contingent faculty *are* the faculty --including grad students, they could be 80% of the total. Increasingly "tenure stream" means "administrator candidate pool."

The thing is: contingent faculty turnover is 30% a year. No real-world plan to restore tenure-stream lines would really be displacing these folks.

Additionally, no responsible plan to restore tenure-stream lines would permit it. Folks working at the institution can be tenured as part of the process.

There are lots of ways of thinking about this. First, individuals that have been on the faculty for teaching contingently,

can be tenured on the basis of teaching if that works for the individual and the institution: tenurability has not historically, is not now, and does not in the future need to be equated with research scholars only.

Second, for the many who are en route to PhDs and are/would be research scholars, there's plenty of precedent and opportunity to provide paths for conversion.

Lots more to talk about—including the fact that "tenure," as we think of it, is a lousy form of job security. It's too arduous, too arbitrary, relatively insecure, and vulnerable to demagoguery and institutional policy manipulation (ask scholars of German and Italian literature how tenure helped them when their departments were abolished!)

The tenure enjoyed by police officers and kindergarten teachers is generally superior.

More on tenure in a couple of weeks over at HTUW. Thanks again for this kind reading, Miriam.

Solidarity, M

Marc Bousquet

<http://howtheuniversityworks.com>

Posted by: [Marc Bousquet](#) | [January 30, 2008 at 11:27 AM](#)



Marc makes a lot of good points here (because the post does—because the book does!). We have been trying to think through the conversion and job security issues a lot over at [FACE Talk](#) (as well as the overall systemic reform being discussed here). AFT is putting forward legislation in a lot of states explicitly looking to shift work into the tenure-track and also calling for qualified (however the institution defines that) contingent faculty to have priority consideration in hiring (and better pay and benefits for contingents—but I want to focus on the conversion and potential job loss issue).

As Marc says, much to talk out here as it is complicated, but I do think it is important to distinguish between 2-year and 4-year institutions. Two-year institutions have large numbers of contingent faculty, but there is also better movement between contingent positions and tenure-track positions, although those “conversion numbers” look better when you look at the two-year system than when you look at a particular institution. Obviously one reason they happens is because of the degree and research requirements at community colleges are not what they are at 4-year institutions.

But I think the point Miriam lands on with MAs and ABDs (particularly in the 4-year sector) is really critical. We know that in the contingent faculty ranks at 4-year institutions, a significant number of contingent faculty do not have PhDs. So won't they lose jobs if we create more tenure track work? One answer in moving work back to tenure track positions, as Marc points out, is that it will happen through natural attrition—and we have some pretty good evidence that if the system continues to work as it does now, that is probably right—but not completely. There are, of course, faculty members who have taught for a long time and if their position was put on the block to be converted to a tenure-track line, they would not qualify for that position. That is why we have to, as Marc says, protect against job loss in moving work back into the tenure-track.

Another solution is not to obsess about research as Marc suggests and tenure folks for the work they are doing and that the university apparently needs and values, but I am not so sure I want to accept the structural disaggregation of faculty work rather than push back on that. But I have gone on long enough here and will hold that thought. Thanks for the post (and the book of course!).

Posted by: [Craig Smith](#) | [January 30, 2008 at 02:33 PM](#)



Miriam, I don't quite get the "(elsewhere)" in your point b). Many institutions fill adjunct lines with their own grad students, no? UB English hires grad students as adjuncts once they've finished their first five years of grad school.

I'm with Puchalsky (when he's right, he's right) in lauding your, and by implication, Bousquet's, attention to the "Affect" issue, which played such a big role in, say, Stimpson's opposition to grad student unionization. Demanding

loyalty to the corporation on affective grounds is an old reactionary tactic which it's really disturbing to see nominal progressives (Nader among 'em) endorse.

Posted by: Josh | [February 04, 2008 at 07:07 AM](#)



Josh: you're right that such hiring happens at some institutions, but others simply cut their grad students off from teaching altogether.

Posted by: [Miriam](#) | [February 04, 2008 at 08:18 AM](#)



This may sound really Scrooge-like to some but I'd like to get rid of M.A. faculty unless they are those who have actually defined a career for themselves at that level and are involved in professional development of some kind, keeping up in the field, etc.

Graduate students tend to be good as faculty since they are engaged in the field, ditto PhDs for various reasons. But we tend to employ as permanent instructors these stale M.A.'s who are very far behind on almost everything and do not think of the job as a professional would. They get raises and benefits, so they're making as much or more than the assistant professors, but the administration sees them as more malleable and so on, which seems to be why they like them.

Students who didn't do well in high school like these instructors because they don't really teach at the university level ... but they make it very hard to attract majors, since with these people teaching our discipline does not look challenging or interesting. Conversely, when students *do* get to be taught by a graduate student or a research faculty member, expectations are so different that they get really shocked and figure they aren't capable of doing the major.

I would *so* like to convert *some* of those instructor lines into tenure track. Also because to amuse the instructors we let them teach junior and senior level courses, while we teach freshmen ... which means we *do* have enough upper division offerings to support a PhD.

Posted by: [I won't say where I am!](#) | [February 06, 2008 at 11:54 AM](#)



Key in this discussion is John Lombardi's article "Deconstructing Faculty Work"

http://www.insidehighered.com/views/blogs/reality_check/deconstructing_faculty_work

Posted by: LB | [February 06, 2008 at 05:57 PM](#)



Fascinating discussion. I'm an M.A. who worked as an adjunct and attest that I never really put into my field what a PhD or someone more serious about the field I taught in would have.

However, I was a damned good classroom teacher!

Posted by: [Hattie](#) | [February 14, 2008 at 03:25 PM](#)

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