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Work Theory

Vincent B. Leitch

Disorganization of U.S. higher education has been going on since the 1970s, but most visibly during the past decade.¹ Consider. Tensions have increased within and among new, for-profit entities, online ventures, two-year community colleges, traditional four-year and comprehensive institutions, and research universities. Everywhere the proportion of faculty has decreased in relation to staff, administrators, and nonacademic professionals (for example, information technologists, public relations specialists, student advisors, fund-raisers). Salary and resource differentials amongst the faculties have risen with medical, legal, business, and engineering faculties pulling significantly ahead of those in, for example, philosophy, fine arts, history, foreign languages, and English. Meanwhile, administrative pay has ballooned. While the wages for faculty have flattened out in the large mid-

This article started life in 2003 as a conference paper invited by the Modern Language Association Committee on the Status of Graduate Students in the Profession for a forum on academic labor and theory. I thank the chair of the committee, Alison Harvey, for the invitation. Several colleagues kindly assisted with facts and figures—Daniel Darvay, Shaun F. D. Hughes, Nyla Khan, and Dennis Marks—and Richard Dienst and Jeffrey Williams generously read early drafts. In addition, *Critical Inquiry's* editors offered helpful suggestions for revision.

1. See Scott Lash and John Urry, *The End of Organized Capitalism* (Madison, Wis., 1987). Extending Lash and Urry, I am using *disorganization* here to describe disaggregation and its mystifications resulting from today's neoclassical/free-market/neoliberal economic practices, ranging from restructuring, deregulation, and outsourcing to privatization, union busting, and temping to 401(k)-style individual "pensions," growing group and salary differentials at workplaces, and rampant, *sauve-qui-peut*, free-agent codes of professional conduct. Such disorganization characterizes the system of contemporary capitalism and the higher education sector. See Thomas J. Peters, *Liberation Management: Necessary Disorganization for the Nanosecond Nineties* (New York, 1992), especially part 5, for an ecstatic new management theory rooted in a free-market ideology of disorganization (subcontracting, temporary contracts, fast projects, and quick-changing fashion and opportunism as models).

dle, currently ranging from roughly \$40,000 to \$75,000 for most full-time, tenure-track humanities professors, differences between high-end endowed chairs and low-end adjunct teachers have helped generate a historically more stratified and tension-filled internal class system. Simultaneously, the professoriate has been reengineered, with more than 50 percent of all contact teaching hours now performed by casualized teachers, that is, tenure-ineligible instructors and lecturers, part-time faculty, short-term postdoctoral staff, and graduate teaching assistants.² Moreover, part-time academic labor has doubled since the 1960s, going from 20 to more than 40 percent of the teaching labor force.³ Although the job market in many disciplines collapsed in the early 1970s, doctoral programs have continued to turn out numerous Ph.D.s, less than half of whom in many fields have found full-time, tenure-track jobs, the rest joining the ranks of casual labor or leaving the profession. At the same time, funding has relied increasingly on outside grants, private and corporate giving, profits from intellectual property and ancillary services, plus of course rising student tuitions, the latter ever more dependent on consumer debt (personal loans and credit cards). In retrospect, it seems clear that the numerous changes of the past three decades amount to a significant transformation of U.S. higher education.

Today's postsecondary education sector, of course, reflects the larger downsizing of the welfare state built up from the 1930s to the 1960s and disassembled since the 1970s, notably during recent neoconservative decades. It is no surprise that faculty unions have emerged in this period, with the American Association of University Professors (AAUP), American Federation of Teachers, and National Education Association in the forefront.

2. See Coalition of Graduate Employee Unions, *Casual Nation: A Report*, www.cgeu.org/links.html

3. See Gary Rhoades, *Managed Professionals: Unionized Faculty and Restructuring Academic Labor* (Albany, N.Y., 1998), pp. 134–36, and Rhoades and Sheila Slaughter, "Academic Capitalism, Managed Professionals, and Supply-Side Higher Education," *Social Text*, no. 51 (Summer 1997): 20.

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By the mid-1990s more than 60 percent of full-time faculty in the public sector were unionized.⁴ Private institutions as well as research universities held out, with notable exceptions such as the University of California, Santa Cruz, City University of New York, University of Florida, State University of New York system, Rutgers University, Temple University, and Wayne State University. Significantly, faculty union contracts have rarely covered casual labor, a historical oversight, with the result that contingent faculty and graduate students have been largely left to their own devices. This is disorganization at arguably its worst. Although there was a teaching assistants union as early as 1969 at the University of Wisconsin, it wasn't until the 1990s that TA unionization spread. By 2000 there were twenty-six graduate student unions on sixty-two U.S. campuses and twenty more in Canada.⁵ The numbers continue to increase.

Teaching assistants have many grievances. Time to degree, in the humanities, for instance, has about doubled since the 1960s, averaging now eight to nine years after the B.A. for literature and language Ph.D.s. People are starting careers in their mid-thirties, often with young families and large debt burdens. By graduation TAs at state universities have taught anywhere from fifteen to thirty-five courses and, not uncommonly, delivered many conference papers and published several articles, often with a book manuscript in progress. Contemporary graduate students have had to professionalize themselves much earlier and more thoroughly than previous generations.⁶ They spend three to five years in the job search where most will not succeed in securing full-time, tenure-track jobs. TAs rarely get a living wage, health insurance, life insurance, childcare benefits, or a role in governance. Even when they get some of these things, they don't get them all. The landmark 1995–96 strike at Yale University, where TAs seeking formal union recognition withheld end-of-semester grades, organized by the campus Graduate Employees and Students Organization (GESO), affiliated with the Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees Unions of Yale's clerical, service, and maintenance workers, symbolizes some of the worst tensions and disorganization of the contemporary higher education system, pitting TAs against undergraduate students and administrators, with many alumni and almost all faculty siding against the TAs.⁷ As the blue-collar

4. See Rhoades, *Managed Professionals*, p. 10.

5. See Coalition of Graduate Employee Unions, *Casual Nation*.

6. See John Guillory, "Preprofessionalism: What Graduate Students Want," *Profession 1996* (New York, 1996), pp. 91–99, and Modern Language Association Ad Hoc Committee on the Professionalization of Ph.Ds, "Professionalism in Perspective," *Profession 2000* (New York, 2000), pp. 187–210.

7. In Andrew Ross's assessment, "few within academe are in the habit of making links between the corporatization of the modern university and corresponding shifts in its labor infrastructure. The Yale strikes have changed all that, and now mark a turning point" (Andrew Ross, "The Labor

affiliation of GESO highlighted the proletarianization of the TA corps, it evidently offended administrators and faculty, comporting ill with the antiquated elitist image of Ivy League professionals kindly doling out patronage to aspiring apprentices.⁸

My first real union job was as a hod carrier in Local 66 on Long Island in New York. That is a quaint term for common laborer in the construction business. As a college-age worker, I wrestled jackhammers, poured concrete, and lugged bricks and cinder blocks up scaffolds. The first time I walked into the union headquarters (this was during the sixties), I was struck by a huge gold banner, declaring in black letters Unionism Is Americanism. I had reason to believe that at the time; today it strikes me as an undecidable. Of course, more than a third of the U.S. labor force was unionized then whereas now it has dropped to half that number. The labor force is in disarray.

When I got lucky and landed my first full-time academic job during the 1970s in a small, private, liberal arts university in Georgia, following two years of searching, I became an AAUP activist on the local and state levels, advocating faculty benefits, rights, and collective bargaining. Although it was impossible to unionize a private, church-affiliated, Southern institution, I allied myself with state system faculty, hoping for spillover effects. In 1976 the Georgia conference (composed of twenty state and six private institutions) won the AAUP Konheim Award, given annually to a model conference, in this case for instituting a bold and successful lawsuit against the State Board of Regents for rescinding over the summer of 1974 \$12 million in annual contracted pay raises. I was on the executive committee, serving as treasurer and director of the Legal Defense Fund. It was a proud yet frantic and frustrating time since, as usual, too few faculty participated, and the organizing work was all overtime and unremunerated. Not surprisingly,

behind the Cult of Work," *Social Text*, no. 49 [Winter 1996]: 25). According to Gordon Lafer's estimate of Yale's academic workforce at the time, "the use of graduate teachers produced a savings of over \$5 million per year and allowed administrators to eliminate nearly two hundred junior faculty positions at that school alone" (Gordon Lafer, "Graduate Student Unions Fight the Corporate University," *Dissent* 48 [Fall 2001]: 65).

8. See "The Yale Strike Dossier," *Social Text*, no. 49 (Winter 1996), consisting of ten articles, which was expanded by seven articles and published as *Will Teach for Food: Academic Labor in Crisis*, ed. Cary Nelson (Minneapolis, 1997). For accounts by strike leaders, see Cynthia Young, "On Strike at Yale," *Minnesota Review*, nos. 45-46 (1996): 179-95, and Corey Robin, "Blacklisted and Blue: On Theory and Practice at Yale," in *Steal This University: The Rise of the Corporate University and the Academic Labor Movement*, ed. Benjamin Johnson, Patrick Kavanagh, and Kevin Mattson (New York, 2003), pp. 107-22. On the immediate reaction of the Modern Language Association leadership to events surrounding the strike, see Crystal Bartolovich, "'In This Life We Want Nothing but Facts . . .,'" *Journal X2* (Spring 1998): 219-35. The apprenticeship model of graduate teaching assistantships is widely abused in universities.

today I advocate TA as well as faculty and part-time unionization, and I recommend regional and national affiliations. In recent times pockets of the union movement have done well. At the same time, I am aware of the shortcomings of unions, ranging from high dues and historical misuse of funds to narrow guild orientations and fixations on pay and benefits to non-democratic tendencies and defensive postures.

As a literary and cultural theorist, I have been asked increasingly during recent years by graduate students how work in theory relates to academic labor. That depends in part on how one defines *theory*. Here is an unremarkable working definition my five editorial colleagues and I sketched in writing our preface for the recent *Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism* (2001):

Today the term encompasses significant works not only of poetics, theory of criticism, and aesthetics as of old, but also of rhetoric, media and discourse theory, semiotics, race and ethnicity theory, gender theory, and visual and popular cultural theory. . . . It entails a mode of questioning and analysis that goes beyond the earlier New Critical research into the “literariness” of literature. Because of the effects of poststructuralism, cultural studies, and the new social movements, especially the women’s and civil rights movements, theory now entails skepticism toward systems, institutions, and norms; a readiness to take critical stands and to engage in resistance; . . . and a habit of linking local and personal practices to the larger economic, political, historical, and ethical forces of culture.⁹

The relations among individual academic job seekers, faculty and TA organizations, the higher education industry, and the broader economy and social order call out for analysis and critique as well as transformation through unionization and other remedies, particularly if one espouses cultural studies. The tools of the theory trade—for example, ideology critique, history from below, deconstruction of norms, institutional analysis, race-class-gender inquiry, not to mention classical self-reflection—all mandate investigation of current professional regimes.¹⁰ Coming from a contem-

9. William E. Cain et al., preface to *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, ed. Cain et al. (New York, 2001), p. xxxiii. I expand the definition of *theory* during the course of this article.

10. Numerous theories are pertinent here, such as Althusser’s take on education as the main ideological battleground of contemporary society; Bourdieu’s concept of cultural capital as essential to modern class advancement; and Lyotard’s trenchant critique of the corporatized university in its current disorganized postmodern condition. See Louis Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York, 1971), pp. 127–86; Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, 1984); and Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis,

porary cultural studies perspective, I, like many others, consider the links of theory, education, and labor to be substantial, long-standing, self-evident, and, to be sure, open to teaching as well as critical analysis and political change.

There is a growing body of literature by theorists concerning the plight of U.S. academic labor today. Let me cite a few sources. In *Will Teach for Food: Academic Labor in Crisis* (1997), edited by Cary Nelson, eight articles analyze the Yale strike and another eight address the current crisis beyond Yale. In his *Employment of English: Theory, Jobs, and the Future of Literary Study* (1998), Michael Bérubé has a chapter criticizing the Yale faculty and another laying out recommendations to ameliorate the job situation for English Ph.D.s. There have been many dozens of relevant articles and reports on labor conditions, published, for instance, in the Modern Language Association's (MLA) annual *Profession* as well as its two affiliated *Bulletins*, brought out thrice yearly by the Association of Departments of English and the Association of Departments of Foreign Languages. Numerous reports and recommendations from the AAUP, Conference on College Composition and Communication, National Council of Teachers of English, and other specialty organizations are relevant here as well. Perhaps most revealing are both the 1997 *Final Report* of the MLA Committee on Professional Employment, a substantial collective document with several leading theorists involved, widely read and occasionally criticized, and the engaged articles appearing in *Workplace: A Journal for Academic Labor*, a pioneering online biannual published since 1998.¹¹ The journals *Social Text* and *Minnesota Review* regularly run pieces on work theory;¹² other journals do so less regularly, although the weekly *Chronicle of Higher Education* is informative. A key website is hosted by the Coalition of Graduate Employee Unions (founded in 1992), which, among other things, reports on its annual conference and contains the cogent document *Casual Nation*, published in December 2000, that depicts the scope of the crisis, providing charts and

1984). Earlier figures from Plato to Christine de Pizan to Marx address advanced education in still relevant ways. Theorists closer to home like Henry Giroux and bell hooks have published many critiques of contemporary U.S. higher education and labor.

11. See MLA Committee on Professional Employment, *Final Report*, www.mla.org/resources/committees. For critiques of this MLA report, see Marc Bousquet, "Foreword: The Institution as False Horizon," *Workplace* 1 (Feb. 1998): 6–10, www.workplace-gsc.com/features1/bousquet.html, and Nelson, "What Hath English Wrought: The Corporate University's Fast Food Discipline," *Workplace* 1 (Feb. 1998): 1–24, www.workplace-gsc.com/features1/nelson.html, esp. §28: "English more than any other discipline has helped pave the way for the alternative academic workplace and the full proletarianization of the professoriate. About this, the MLA's committee has not a clue."

12. See, for example, *Social Text*'s "The Yale Strike Dossier" and the issue "Activism and the Academy," *Minnesota Review*, nos. 50–51 (Oct. 1999).

graphs and advocating unionization across all fields. There are, of course, other sources and theoretical documents, such as the wide-ranging collections *Chalk Lines: The Politics of Work in the Managed University* (2000) and *Steal This University: The Rise of the Corporate University and the Academic Labor Movement* (2003), plus Gary Rhoades's critical study of union contracts, *Managed Professionals*.

The most trenchant theorist of the current academic labor situation is Marc Bousquet, founding editor of *Workplace*, onetime chair of the MLA's Graduate Student Caucus, and currently tenured associate professor of English. A representative piece, published in 2002 in *Social Text*, is his "The Waste Product of Graduate Education: Toward a Dictatorship of the Flexible." Bousquet suggestively outlines three contemporary waves of theorizing about U.S. academic work, including (1) 1960s–70s ideas and strategies surrounding initial faculty drives for unionization; (2) 1970s–80s market doctrines attending casualization; and (3) 1990s–present labor theories coming from graduate student union organizing. As an activist in the latter new social movement, Bousquet works on two main fronts, criticizing the hegemonic yet obsolete (neo)liberal job market theory of the 1970s, which the MLA and most faculty (leftists included) still propound, while developing his own account of what's really going on. Forget supply-and-demand explanations of the so-called job market, argues Bousquet; earners of doctoral degrees are the waste product, the "excrement," of the higher education system for whom degree completion typically signals the end, not the start, of a lengthy teaching career. The system of academic labor needs new graduate students to do most of the teaching, not new Ph.D.s. Degree holders are being replaced by nondegreed labor in harmony with the corporate downsizing of late capitalist times. All of this reflects as well as aids and abets the ongoing disorganization of the academic workplace. Here is Bousquet:

that labor system exists primarily to recruit, train, supervise, and legitimate the employment of nondegreed rather than degreed teachers. This is not to say that the system doesn't produce and employ holders of the PhD, only that this operation has become secondary to its extraction of teaching labor from nondegreed persons, primarily graduate employees and former graduate employees now working as adjunct labor—as part-timers, full-time lecturers, postdocs, and so on.¹³

13. Bousquet, "The Waste Product of Graduate Education: Toward a Dictatorship of the Flexible," *Social Text*, no. 70 (Spring 2002): 86. See also Bousquet, "The Rhetoric of 'Job Market' and the Reality of the Academic Labor System," *College English* 66 (Nov. 2003): 222: "Under the actually existing system of academic work, the university clearly does not prefer the best or most experienced teachers, it prefers the cheapest teachers." For a forum consisting of a dozen articles centered on four essays by Bousquet, see the special issue edited by Teresa Derrickson entitled "Information University: Rise of the Education Management Organization," *Works and Days* 21

With casual labor accounting for more than 50 percent of all teaching contact hours, it is hard to dismiss Bousquet's argument. Casualized workers constitute a reserve army of labor, exploited more or less everywhere in the U.S. Were the contingent workforce capped at, for example, 15 percent of an institution's total instruction, as recommended by the AAUP in 1992,¹⁴ the gross oversupply of Ph.D.s would turn into a shortage. So it is a mystification that there has been in recent decades a decreased demand for Ph.D.s; demand has been met by squeezed labor.

If you happen to be a doctoral student, such theory is, I believe, required reading. If you are faculty, staff, administrator, trustee, regent, or politician, not to mention undergraduate students and parents, it points to questionable stewardship, if not willful blindness or plain indifference. It vividly exposes a "pyramid scheme," to use Cary Nelson's provocative term,¹⁵ underlying the free-market practice of permatemping that today affects large segments of the labor force (not just academe) systematically stripped of benefits and subject to social insecurity.¹⁶

(2003), with an afterword by Bousquet, which calls for, among other things, a project of "affective mapping" that links TAs' personal feelings of desperation, betrayal, and anxiety to the objective conditions of their work.

14. See AAUP Committee G, "Report: On the Status of Non-Tenure-Track Faculty," *Academe* 78, no. 6 (1992): 39–48, esp. p. 47. The report does not address TA labor. See, however, "AAUP Statement on Graduate Students" (2000), which recommends standards on work time, benefits, collective bargaining, governance, and so on. This document was widely disseminated, appearing, for example, in *MLA Newsletter* 33 (Summer 2001): 4–5. See esp. "AAUP Policy Statement on Contingent Appointments and the Academic Profession" (2003), www.aaup.org. See also Nelson, "Lessons from the Job Wars: What Is to Be Done?" *Academe* 81 (Nov.–Dec. 1995): 18–25.

15. See Nelson, "What Hath English Wrought," §12: "PhDs are produced in large numbers meanwhile, not because of a massive demand for new faculty but because of an institutional demand for cheap graduate student labor and because of faculty desire to maintain the perks and pleasures of graduate education. It's basically a pyramid scheme." For radical Marxist critiques of Nelson's labor theory as reformist (not revolutionary) true to its trade unionist roots, see Mas'ud Zavarzadeh, "The Dead Center: *The Chronicle of Higher Education* and the 'Radical' in the Academy," *Alternative Orange* 5 (Summer–Fall 1997), <http://www.geocities.com/redtheory/AO/AOVol5-2.html> (this is a special issue entitled "Privatization of Public Education: Capitalism and Its Knowledge and Industries"), and Brian Ganter, "Haven't You Realized That Workers Have It Pretty Good Today?" *Red Critique* 1 (Spring 2001): 29–33.

16. On the situation of labor, see André Gorz's prophetic *Farewell to the Working Class: An Essay on Post-Industrial Socialism*, trans. Michael Sonenscher (1980; Boston, 1982): "A society based on mass unemployment is coming into being before our eyes. It consists of a growing mass of the permanently unemployed on one hand, an aristocracy of tenured workers on the other, and, between them, a proletariat of temporary workers carrying out the least skilled and most unpleasant types of work" (p. 3). See also Jeremy Rifkin's more recent *The End of Work: The Decline of the Global Labor Force and the Dawn of the Post-Market Era* (New York, 1995), esp. part 4. See, however, Jacques Derrida, "The University without Condition," *Without Alibi*, trans. and ed. Peggy Kamuf (Stanford, Calif., 2002): "Rifkin does not speak of unemployed teachers or aspiring professors, in particular in the Humanities. He pays no attention to the growing marginalization of so many part-time employees, all underpaid and marginalized in the university, in the name of what is called flexibility or competitiveness" (p. 226). See also Ulrick Beck, *The Brave New World of*

One of my first glimpses of things to come occurred during the early 1970s in the year I was completing doctoral studies. A notice appeared in the spring issue of *PMLA*, advertising a postdoctoral intern-fellowship program at a large research university in the South as a “unique new plan,” which, indeed, it was. Being unsuccessful on the job market that year, I was a captive audience. The plan offered new Ph.D.s a salary half the normal beginning tenure-track one, a nine-hour teaching load, in-service training and supervision, plus assistance in the job search. I wrote an angry, ironic letter that appeared in the *MLA Newsletter*, pointing out that most new Ph.D.s had already received training, supervision, and job assistance; the only thing new here was the exceedingly low wages; and the program was, in fact, “feeding off the desperation of the unemployed intellectual proletariat.” Further, I wondered out loud whether the state university in question had “hired [new] assistant professors this year. Hiring ten fellows instead of ten assistant professors could save a lot of money.”¹⁷ A reply from the vice president for academic affairs accompanied my letter in print, noting that 648 applicants had applied; that they were “no exaggeration—desperate”; and that “(1) we did not create this desperation; (2) we did not force anybody to apply.”¹⁸ I cite this exchange not to pat myself on the back as a visionary—quite the opposite. Thirty years ago it was evident even to a neophyte that the academic labor force was being altered via casualization.¹⁹

My letter made it clear that I was responding based on interviews with a dozen doctoral students (I was on the executive committee of the local graduate student organization). What we perceived at the onset of this transformation of the academic labor force was a “crisis,” not a “condition.”²⁰ It took another twenty years or more to figure this out, which in

Work, trans. Patrick Camiller (Cambridge, 2000): “Calls are made everywhere for greater ‘flexibility’—or, in other words, that employers should be able to fire employees with less difficulty. Flexibility also means a redistribution of risks away from the state and the economy towards the individual. The jobs on offer become short-term and easily terminable (i.e. ‘renewable’)” (p. 3).

17. Leitch, “The PhD and Jobs,” *MLA Newsletter* 4 (Sept. 1972): 7.

18. Kenneth L. Knickerbocker, letter to the editor, *MLA Newsletter* 4 (Sept. 1972): 8.

19. It was less clear during the 1970s than now that academic administrators would produce “a system that—while financially successful—has undercut much of what used to stand at the heart of academic life” (Lafer, “Graduate Student Unions Fight the Corporate University,” p. 65). Benjamin Johnson also points his finger at academic administrators: “So the employment crisis—most of it, perhaps all of it—is not the product of the iron hand of supply and demand, but rather the result of universities’ decisions to slough off work that should be done by regular faculty onto adjuncts, postdocs, and graduate students” (Johnson, “The Drain-O of Higher Education: Casual Labor and University Teaching,” in *Steal This University*, p. 67).

20. See, for example, the panicked report from the 1970 MLA Commission to Study the Job Market authored by David Orr, “The Job Market in English and Foreign Languages,” *PMLA* 85 (Nov. 1970): 1185–98.

hindsight seems unbelievable. The intervening years were filled with expectations of better times to come; promises of imminent widespread retirements and replacements;²¹ sporadic cutbacks in graduate admissions by a few isolated departments; hopes of returning to late 1950s–early 1960s conditions of job abundance; and a short-lived upturn in the 1980s job market. But by the mid-1990s amidst a seemingly full-blown U.S. economic boom, yet a continuing depression in academe, it was finally clear that the labor crisis in higher education was not going away. A new wave of academic unionization drives began, including even at some research universities where faculty and doctoral students tend to see themselves as individual free agents and entrepreneurs, traditionally identifying with the aristocracy, professional guilds, and administration rather than the national teaching corps or working class.

During the seventies as a tenure-track assistant professor with a spouse and two young children, I qualified for federal food stamps, which I promptly received much to the astonishment of my colleagues and dismay of my administration. After all, I was being paid the going academic wage. This was one of several anarchistic job actions carried out in the decade after receiving my Ph.D. When I moved to a large Midwestern state research university in the mid-1980s, I was stunned by how minuscule faculty and student union sentiments were. But the fact is these were counterrevolutionary times: the AAUP lost half its membership, shrinking from roughly 75,000 to 45,000 members; President Reagan busted the 13,000-member flight controllers' union and got away with it; accelerated deindustrialization everywhere dramatically eroded formerly well-paid workers' security; and a short-lived spike upwards in the academic job market took considerable pressure off. Demoralization and disarray worsened throughout the nineties as rampant, explicit casualization of labor, swelling enrollments, legislative defunding of public institutions, and triumphant free-market corporate management theory and discourse (the jargon of excellence) assaulted higher education. By then there were no food stamps to be had, the welfare state having been in the meantime dismantled piece by piece, with welfare parents gleefully tossed onto the labor market during the second Clinton term.²²

21. See William G. Bowen and Julie Ann Sosa, *Prospects for Faculty in the Arts and Sciences: A Study of Factors Affecting Demand and Supply, 1987–2012* (Princeton, N.J., 1989), a widely influential optimistic prediction, which Bousquet criticizes in detail; see Bousquet, "The Rhetoric of 'Job Market' and the Reality of the Academic Labor System."

22. "Under Clinton's presidency, the decline in the number of people receiving food stamps—9.8 million—was 17 percent greater than the decline in the number of people officially defined as impoverished, and was accompanied by a dramatic increase in the pressure on private soup kitchens and food pantries" (Robert Pollin, *Contours of Descent: U.S. Economic Fractures and the Landscape of Global Austerity* [New York, 2003], p. 30).

From the 1970s onwards, more and more has been written, particularly within cultural studies circles, on postindustrial, post-Fordist, postmodern political economy.²³ An inventory of key words and buzz phrases would turn up a wide array of telling, now all-too-familiar terms: downsizing, deregulation, privatization, flexibilization, debt, free trade, transnational corporation, good business environment, two-earner family, individual retirement account, shareholder revolution, quarterly profits, bottom line, commodification, International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Trade Organization, globalization, plus plenty of others. Yet comparatively little has been written on the new political economy of higher education by senior cultural studies figures, with a few notable exceptions. There is, nevertheless, a burgeoning subfield of cultural studies scholarship—academic labor studies—being created by young activists and midcareer sympathizers, all of whom deplore corporate images of professors as content providers, students as customers, and higher education institutions as profit centers and engines. What I, like others, see here is a main fault line running through not only U.S. politics but current globalization politics worldwide, namely, the dispute about the place and scope of market practice and theory. When it appears, the dispute typically pits outraged progressives and worried centrists against arrogant free-market fundamentalists. Not surprisingly, the struggle against decreasing regular faculty and increasing casual labor reiterates key elements of the battles against, for instance, IMF conditionality agreements (vanguard, free-market “agreements”); in both cases funding generally occurs in an explicit, neo-Darwinian environment of ruthlessly reduced spending, low wages, worsening work environments, narrowed tax bases, high wages for management, systematic cuts in social insurance, increased administrative decision making, and growing insecurity.²⁴ Trium-

23. See, to cite only a few well-known examples, *New Times: The Changing Face of Politics in the 1990s*, ed. Stuart Hall and Martin Jacques (London, 1990); David Harvey, “The Political-Economic Transformation of Late Twentieth-Century Capitalism,” *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Cambridge, Mass., 1990), pp. 19–97; Immanuel Wallerstein, *Geopolitics and Geoculture: Essays on the Changing World-System* (New York, 1991); Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism; or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, N.C., 1991); Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis, 1996); Bourdieu, *Acts of Resistance: Against the Tyranny of the Market*, trans. Nice (New York, 1998); and Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, Mass., 2000). My own work in this area includes “Transformations in Political Economy during Postmodern Times,” *Postmodernism—Local Effects, Global Flows* (Albany, N.Y., 1996), pp. 145–57 and “The New Economic Criticisms,” *Theory Matters* (New York, 2003), pp. 107–22.

According to Lisa Featherstone and Doug Henwood: “As a field, economics has become increasingly hostile to unorthodox opinion in recent years, and virtually no-left-of-center economist has been hired by a major department in more than two decades” (Lisa Featherstone and Doug Henwood, “Clothes Encounter: Activists and Economists Clash over Sweatshops,” *Lingua Franca* 11 [Mar. 2001]: 31). Regarding sweatshops, the campus campaign on behalf of fair wages for garment workers needs to be extended to casual and service workers.

24. For critiques of the unelected IMF, see among many others the economists Robin Hahnel, *Panic Rules! Everything You Need to Know about the Global Economy* (Cambridge, Mass., 1999),

phant market logic seeps into every corner of life; free-market discourse is the dominant genre of our time, trumping politics, religion, ethics, education, health, and entertainment. Much autonomy in these spheres has been ceded to market criteria. In health care, for example, recent decades have witnessed drastic cutbacks in (as well as temping of) hospital nursing and technical staff; increased caseloads and speedups; the American Medical Association advocating unionization of doctors; numerous public hospitals sold off; munificent pay for top hospital and health insurance administrators; 45 million people in the U.S. without health insurance; privatization of Medicare drug benefits; the triumph of administrative rationality across the system; and worsening health care. The situation of academic labor is of a piece with labor elsewhere in the new economy, a point illuminated by cultural studies work on the topic.

Theory in our time is a banner under which a whole set of progressive social movements have gathered, ranging from feminism to queer theory, Third World and postcolonial liberation to equal justice for ethnic minorities, psychoanalysis to Marxism in their classical and contemporary forms. For academics in many literary, linguistic, foreign language, and other humanistic and social science disciplines, theory is a ticket as well as a banner. Job announcements regularly feature it as a preferred strength. It is more or less an essential element in framing research, including conference papers, articles, dissertations, grant proposals, and job applications. It forms a large part of the technical language and unconscious of the professoriate. It shapes not only research and professional discourse but classroom teaching, it being expected that theoretical concepts and issues, if not primary texts, will appear in course syllabi. There is much theory work to be done, with, for example, a large and growing library of guides, primers, and readers aimed at every level of student and all types of courses. Theory shows up not just in courses, credentials, and research projects but teaching portfolios and experiences.

Theory is both banner and ticket, which is how things work in our late capitalist postmodern society, the higher education industry not excluded, having been increasingly flushed from its liberal gated walls and tossed onto the neoconservative force fields of competitive niche markets. Under such conditions, it has become less and less possible or conscionable to keep political economy—for instance, exploited labor, downsizing, privatization, and (de)unionization—out of guild publications, conference proceedings, the theory curriculum, and scholarly journals. Everywhere free-market economics reconfigures erstwhile autonomous spheres toward the goal of max-

chap. 6, and Nobel Prize winner Joseph E. Stiglitz, *Globalization and Its Discontents* (New York, 2002).

imum productivity and fast profits in disregard of decent living conditions, to say nothing of social justice. This is one conflict we must teach. Call it political economy, postmodern culture, late capitalism, corporatization, globalization, work theory, or what you will.²⁵

Many academics in the U.S. are laboring fifty- and sixty-hour weeks (unpaid summers included), especially beginning tenure-track professionals and casual workers, for whom the credentials ante has been mercilessly upped in the face of the vast reserve army of Ph.D.s. This overemployment wreaks havoc on personal and family life.²⁶ Meanwhile, the large and growing number of underemployed and unemployed Ph.D.s exceeds estimate. Stress and anxiety affect not just academic laborers but the workforce at large, employed and not. The old goal of a thirty-hour workweek now seems quixotic. But wouldn't it be great if we could shift twenty hours or so per week from the overemployed to the un- and underemployed? No doubt, it is utopian to think so.

When I arrived at my present university, we had thirty full-time English department faculty with a campus enrollment of 21,000 students. As I write this six years later, there are twenty-five faculty and 25,000 students. The number of TAs has jumped from forty to sixty-five while contingent teachers have held steady at around twenty. This year (2003–4) we added a new category of casual worker to our departmental bylaws, “visiting assistant

25. In the face of such changes, there have been increasing calls for public intellectuals and cultural studies scholars to intervene in policy decision making. See, for example, Michael Bérubé, *The Employment of English: Theory, Jobs, and the Future of Literary Studies* (New York, 1998): “This then has been my fixation since the elections of 1994: configuring the relations among American cultural studies, the latest policy initiatives of the New Right, and the discourse of the public intellectual. I want to argue that cultural studies, if it is going to be anything more than just one more intellectual paradigm for the reading of literary and cultural texts, must direct its attention to the local and national machinery of public policy” (p. 224). See also Masao Miyoshi, “Ivory Tower in Escrow,” *Boundary 2* 27 (Spring 2000): 7–50, for a critique of the silence of theory and the humanities regarding the degraded conditions of academic labor and the corporatization of the university. In “What It Is and What It Isn't: Cultural Studies Meets Graduate-Student Labor,” *Yale Journal of Law and Humanities* 13, no. 1 (2001): 69–94, Toby Miller refutes criticisms of cultural studies for its being irrelevant and nonpolitical, citing its role in graduate student unionizing at New York University (his home institution) during the landmark, four-year campaign from 1998 to 2002. On this campaign, see Lisa Jessup, “The Campaign for Union Rights at NYU,” in *Steal This University*, pp. 145–70. For a discussion of successful campus labor activist groups and movements, such as Coalition on Contingent Academic Labor, California Part-time Faculty Association, Coalition on the Academic Workforce, and Campus Equity Week, see Eileen E. Schell, “Every Week Should Be Campus Equity Week: Toward a Labor Theory of Agency in Higher Education,” *Works and Days* 21, nos. 1–2 (2003): 313–37.

26. During the course of the 1990s, points out Ross, “the concept of a finite workday had been obliterated by 24/7 access to networks of information. Even worse, time poverty was becoming a mark of stature. Whereas persons of leisure had once enjoyed the highest social status, now it was prestigious to be too busy” (Ross, *No-Collar: The Humane Workplace and Its Hidden Costs* [New York, 2003], p. 44).

professor,” with terms of employment not to exceed two years. Three are presently on staff. In other words, considerable financial support has been (and continues to be) shifted outside the department. During my previous decade at a Big Ten university, more or less the same scenario obtained. There were fifty full-time English faculty and 33,000 students on my arrival and forty faculty and 35,000 students on my departure. The TA number held roughly constant at one hundred and fifty while part-timers went from twenty to forty. Needless to say, class sizes increased at both universities, as did numbers of majors and faculty service loads. Some distinguished positions were added, though overall full professor lines decreased. Each campus hired full-time professional advisors for majors, a mixed blessing, freeing up faculty time yet reducing faculty contact with students while adding to the ranks of administration. At both institutions more assistant deans, fund-raisers, PR staff, IT specialists, athletic directors, professional security personnel, and well-paid administrators were hired, marginalizing the role of and budget for faculty and instruction. In addition, lots of new buildings, parking lots, stadium enhancements, fountains, spas, landscaping, and cleared parcels of land popped up. Both schools successfully campaigned for \$500 million, all the while raising tuitions far beyond inflation rates while facing reduced annual state support. Nowadays only 30 percent or sometimes much less of yearly budgets comes from state legislatures, and the number keeps dropping, speeding up privatization. Based on my experience, this is what in broad strokes the state-supported research university looks like in the U.S. I realize that compared to many liberal arts and community colleges things are not so bad for faculty at research universities. There are many circles in purgatory.

How do things stand for senior professors, distinguished faculty, endowed chairs, the privileged teaching class? This question is rarely posed, but deserves asking. Consider Stanley Aronowitz’s sketch of the disorganization of the professoriate focused glancingly on the full professor:

Academic labor, like most labor, is rapidly being decomposed and re-composed. The full professor, like the spotted owl, is becoming an endangered species in private as well as public universities. When professors retire or die, their lines frequently follow them. Instead, many universities, even in the Ivy League, convert a portion of the full line to adjunct-driven teaching, whether occupied by part-timers or by graduate teaching assistants. At the top, the last good job in America is reserved for a relatively small elite.²⁷

27. See Stanley Aronowitz, “The Last Good Job in America,” in *Chalk Lines: The Politics of Work in the Managed University*, ed. Randy Martin (Durham, N.C., 1998), p. 216.

The picture here is of a stratified academic workforce where increasing numbers of part-timers and TAs reside at the bottom of the heap with fewer assistant, associate, and full professors further up the scale—a scale topped off by distinguished and endowed chairs. This resembles a caste system occupied at its top by Brahmins and its bottom by untouchables. While the profession used to resemble a broad middle class having some short-term apprentices and adjuncts, it now consists of a large and growing proletariat, a shrinking middle class, and a tiny yet stratified elite.

Interestingly, some of the most recognized critics of the reengineered U.S. higher education system and its downsizing of the academic workforce hold (or have held) distinguished positions and endowed chairs, as, for example, Michael Bérubé, John Guillory, Cary Nelson, Andrew Ross, and Stanley Aronowitz himself. As possessors of the last good job in America, they have developed their work theories by attending characteristically to the grim situation of casual labor, especially new Ph.D.s seeking jobs, the graduate students they work with day in, day out. Structurally speaking, the distinguished professor is an enviable person, a model, a position to aspire to, yet—given current altered circumstances—also something of a cover, fig leaf, delusory figure, justifying at once meritocracy, a prestige economy, hard work, productivity, and false promises. The distinguished professor nowadays presides, knowingly or not, at the top of Nelson's pyramid scheme. The point is not that some people are well employed but that too many are under- and unemployed. This past decade it has been the plight mainly of casualized labor to raise consciousness and organize protests. In these circumstances distinguished professors have often been a hindrance, as in the Yale strike (with exceptions); sometimes a help as with the work theorists at hand; but largely above the fray, a position, one would think, increasingly less tenable.

What is to be done? Here I provide a condensed version of a broad array of recommendations culled from the extensive current literature on the academic employment situation. Naturally, inconsistencies appear:

Cap casual labor at 15 percent for each institution. Pay \$6–\$8,000 per course to adjuncts. Unite all disciplinary organizations in advocating for contingent labor. Stop the conversion of full-time, tenure-track jobs to casual labor. (Re)convert contingent to full-time, tenure-track jobs.²⁸ Rede-

28. Scrap tenure. The widespread reliance on casual labor erodes tenure. Moreover, many beginning academics now regard tenure as a class barrier not worth defending. Thus the long-term well-being and future of academic tenure appear in doubt. "Ultimately, the comfort offered by job security in the form of tenure was a recipe for complacency on the part of those who might have resisted the casualization measures, much earlier and more vigorously. Submission to the selfless, disinterested devotions of the scholar's calling almost inevitably led to the sacrifice of younger 'apprentices' on the altar of an anachronistic faith" (Ross, *Low Pay, High Profile: The Global Push for Fair Labor* [New York, 2004], pp. 222–23).

fine *faculty* to include casual workers. Inform potential graduate students about the job situation. Shorten the time to the Ph.D. degree. Increase fellowships for Ph.D. students. Freeze admissions to Ph.D. programs for, say, five years. Eliminate and cut back Ph.D. programs. Reduce TA workloads (no more than one course per semester or year). Renounce the apprenticeship in favor of the employee model of TA work. Establish collective bargaining units for faculty, including contingent workers. Insure decent wages, benefits, job security, free speech rights, and a role in governance for casualized as well as regular faculty. Encourage employment outside academe for new Ph.D.s. Facilitate retirements. Return to mandatory retirement.²⁹ Replace all retirements with full-time, tenure-track positions. Hire academically oriented administrators (avoid compliant, bottom-line pragmatists). Disseminate censure lists of high casual-labor programs and schools. Publish part-time versus full-time faculty ratios as well as student-teacher ratios for all institutions, making the information available on a regular basis to faculty, staff, students, parents, alumni, trustees, legislators, and the public. Privatize severely underfunded state colleges and universities. Create debt forgiveness programs for students. Promote the thirty-hour workweek. Stop emulating corporations. Oppose the U.S. addiction to low wages and exploitation of workers. If I had to choose just three from these several dozen recommendations, they would be: pay \$6–8,000 per course to adjuncts; reduce TA work to one course per year; unionize workers.

What is visibly at stake here is the future of a profession. I came to realize this in an unexpected way when in 1997, the year I received an endowed chair, my oldest child entered an MA program and asked my advice about pursuing a Ph.D. and an academic career. She worked as a TA for two years, closely observing the situation of her peers and professors and ultimately deciding against becoming a professor. Wise choice, I thought. This decision was a relief to me, but a disappointment, too. Given the situation of U.S. higher education today, pursuing a Ph.D. and an academic career are, in many fields, high-risk behaviors. I would not have wished to say so a decade ago, still hoping that swelling enrollments and coming retirements might add up to good job prospects. Expectations die hard, but they do die.

29. Few academics seem aware of the disorganization and “privatization” during recent years of the leading higher education retirement fund, the 2.5-million-participant TIAA-CREF (Teachers Insurance and Annuity Association—College Retirement and Equities Fund), whose new CEO received in excess of 4 million dollars in wages for 2003, a year noteworthy for five hundred layoffs (8 percent of the company’s workforce).