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How the University Unmakes

(on Marc Bousquet's *How the University Works: Higher Education and the Low-Wage Nation* [New York: NYU P, 2008], Christopher Newfield's *Unmaking the Public University: The Forty-Year Assault on the Middle Class* [Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2008], Jack H. Schuster and Martin J. Finkelstein's *The American Faculty: The Restructuring of Academic Work and Careers* [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2006])

“The thing being made in a university is humanity.”

—Wendell Berry

Few among the tenured classes would describe graduate students as faculty members, yet a significant proportion of them perform many, if not most, of the necessary professional functions requisite for such recognition. But in the eyes of the law neither graduate students nor their mentors even so much as *work* at the university. According to the Supreme Court's majority opinion in *National Labor Relations Board v. Yeshiva University* 444 U.S. 672 (1980), the faculty cannot unionize because they function as managers rather than as workers. Who then do they manage? Apparently not their students, since, per the NLRB's decision in *Brown University* 1-RC-21368, 342 NLRB No. 42 (2004), students who double as research assistants or teaching assistants do not count as employees. Might this latest wrinkle invalidate the professoriate's status as managers, or, alternately, allow them to reassert their status as workers? Come what may, these decisions have further reinforced the distinction between the graduate student and the faculty member in an era when such distinctions have begun to blur.

In my own experience, nearing the end of my graduate career, I have found myself addressed and construed as “professor” by an increasing percentage of my undergraduate students, as well as in mailings from professional organizations and publishers. The American Association of University Professors extended membership rights to graduate students and part-timers in 1998, after watching its membership numbers plummet from 120,000 to 40,000 in the final decades of the twentieth century. Yet, at the same time, the AAUP distinguishes between “active members” and “graduate student members” (as though to reinforce the distinction between active scholars and graduate student scholars), even while extending these junior sub-partners “all rights and privileges accorded to active

members... including the right to hold office and to vote in national elections” (112). How might the definition of “faculty” further shift if “graduate student members” were to outflank “active members” within the AAUP, electing their own slate of representatives and advancing their own agenda? Funding problems aside, they certainly have the strength in numbers to do so, if only they were to begin a coordinated organizing campaign at the interdisciplinary and national levels.

Most works of scholarship continue to classify graduate students as standing beyond the pale of the faculty. Such is the case in Jack H. Schuster and Martin J. Finkelstein’s *The American Faculty: The Restructuring of Academic Work and Careers* (with Jesus Francisco Galaz-Fontes and Mandy Liu, 2006), which attempts a comprehensive snapshot of a diffuse, diversifying professoriate in an era of globalization, massification, and privatization. Given disparities in compensation, power, and privilege, Schuster and Finkelstein grant that references to “a faculty” tend to mislead, “except in the more egalitarian community colleges” (15). Nevertheless, broad trends emerge. For one, the faculty is older than ever before: in 1968 faculty under age 35 were three times as common as faculty over age 60, whereas by 1998 faculty over age 60 were twice as common as faculty under age 35. Moreover, as Schuster and Finkelstein observe, “One’s position in the institutional prestige hierarchy has tended to mirror quite faithfully the socioeconomic background of one’s family of origin” (65). As such, the high bar to professional entry and the long struggle associated with such an attempt have combined to create a tacit class ceiling that few manage to transcend.

Most job candidates now pass through a period of “protracted deferral” (184) characterized by a dearth of stable full-time employment and a corresponding rise in postdoctoral appointments and visiting positions. Many fields are thus rendered “collections of potential transients” (325) that prove much less diverse by demographic measures than the student populations they are poised to encounter. The nature of these encounters has also been transformed; as information technology works to “increase the *frequency* of faculty-student interaction, it may also change the nature—the *quality* of such interaction,” resulting in relationships that are “more superficial” and “less face-to-face” (348). Such quantity-quality dynamics seem to typify a range of faculty responsibilities, from teaching to publishing pressures and tenure demands.

Still, good news does emerge here: in demographic terms, the youngest strata of the faculty are more truly representative of the larger population than ever before; women face fewer barriers to child-bearing and marriage than those who preceded them; faculty

seem more interested in the stakes of undergraduate education than they were a generation ago. This transformed faculty is nonetheless a great deal more dissatisfied than they were three decades ago, thanks to what Schuster and Finkelstein describe as “a recipe for declining job satisfaction levels” (151): increased professional demands, decreasing professional influence, and declining compensation. Salaries for assistant professors have dipped toward parity with elementary and secondary school teachers, a labor pool which—thanks to its superior union organization—has not suffered erosions of salary or tenure.

That an increasingly fragmented, harried, and isolated American faculty finds itself in decline, if not quite in full eclipse, becomes readily apparent over the course of Schuster and Finkelstein’s narrative. But one need not take their word for it. Survey data reported in the back of the book suggest declining levels of respect for the academic profession as a whole. Perhaps as a result, surveyed faculty also report declining levels of satisfaction with college and university administrators, and reveal a sharp increase in left/liberal views across disciplines. Such results, which span the period from 1969 to 1998, have likely accelerated in the last decade. The data include only full-time faculty members, but one can assume that dissatisfaction would be compounded further with the inclusion of their part-time counterparts. Schuster and Finkelstein note that the American faculty has now become “a *majority* contingent workforce” (323). Future studies in this vein would do well to factor the contingent into their calculations.

At some institutions, contingent instructors comprise the preponderance of the teaching force. One such university is NYU, whose labor dynamics are treated at length in *The University Against Itself: The NYU Strike and the Future of the Academic Workplace* (2008). This collection of essays and testimonials pivots on a dispute that has twice reshaped the organizing rights of graduate students over the past decade. Several contributors note that the logistical, professional, and political difficulties of this strike resulted both from the reversal handed down by the National Labor Relations Board and from the strike’s failure to impact core university operations. Unlike, say, coal miners or truckers, who extract value directly, graduate students extract value in a much more indirect fashion. In consequence, as Gordon Lafer notes toward the end of the volume, it is not enough for graduate and faculty unions to rest content with picket lines and work stoppages; rather, he argues, they must reach out to students, parents, and taxpayers, meeting corporate universities with corporate campaigns, learning “to understand, and intervene in, the key profit centers of higher education” (244).

A seasoned veteran of the New York City academic labor movement, Marc Bousquet serves up a stinging indictment of those universities that exploit their students from the moment they set foot on campus in *How the University Works: Higher Education and the Low-Wage Nation* (2008). Bousquet proves particularly incisive with respect to the “superexploited corps of disposable workers,” within the “parafaculty” and the “subfaculty,” who find themselves “teaching too many students in too many classes too quickly, without security, status, or an office,” and who face a growing debt load that “sorts for persons who are in a financial position to accept compensation below the living wage” (2-4).

Bousquet has elsewhere described that over-credentialed and underemployed subset of the company of educated men and women as the “waste product of graduate education.” As he reiterates here, such workers “are not merely treated like waste but, in fact, are the actual shit of the system,” for “without expelling the degree holder,” as Bousquet explains, “the system could not be what it is” and “in many locations, the pipeline would jam in the first year” (27). One can imagine certain bemused administrators, confronted with Bousquet’s argument, joking to themselves that universities can hardly be expected to “eat shit and die.” Given the protocols of postindustrial capitalism, this is perhaps what would happen if universities attempted to establish just labor relations without completely overhauling their business model. This, then, is not “a system that teaches well,” but rather “a system that teaches cheaply” (42).

How did such a system arise? Quite simply, the twentieth-century university has drifted from the pursuit of knowledge to the production of knowledge. Whereas Cardinal Newman’s *The Idea of a University* suggested that such institutions were best given over to “a Knowledge which is its own end” (111), more recent generations have taken knowledge not as an end in itself, but rather as a means to the end of profit maximization. As Jean-François Lyotard explained it in *The Postmodern Condition*, “Knowledge is and will be produced in order to be sold, it is and will be consumed in order to be valorised in a new production: in both cases, the goal is exchange.” As such, “knowledge ceases to be an end in itself, it loses its ‘use-value’” (4). Because the exchange-value of teaching cannot be capitalized except through the exploitation of labor, it is devalued in comparison to those research products that can function as commodities, even when their use-value approaches nil.

Ironically, the devaluation of teaching accelerated at the very moment when curricular controversy became an acute issue. In *Whatever Happened to the Faculty* (2006), Mary Burgan cites

work to this effect produced in the late 1980s and early 1990s by Allan Bloom, Gerald Graff, and John Guillory, among others. But in the two decades since those heady debates about canonicity and the curriculum, those with long experience are teaching less, while those least prepared to craft or perform their pedagogical identities are burdened with more teaching than ever before. For most undergraduates, Graff's "teachable moment" occurs not at points of curricular controversy between eminent scholars, but rather at those junctures where solitary adjunct instructors manage to teach their students something about such conflicts despite deficits of energy, experience, resources, and time.

What allows the system to teach so cheaply and haphazardly is the perennial promise of the job-to-come. Whereas many acknowledge that the "job market" is a pathological and even toxic system, Bousquet questions the rhetoric that underwrites the system itself, suggesting that "the idea of a job market functions rhetorically, not descriptively" (21). At mid-century, there was actually such a thing as a "Job Mart" or "Faculty Exchange," in which search committees convened in one hall, vetting dossiers and summoning compelling job candidates assembled in a neighboring hall. In those days, the degree was a stamp of approval, but as Bousquet explains, in the current environment, "degree holding increasingly represents a *disqualification*" (23). It's easy to blame such dynamics on the problem of overproduction, but Bousquet dispenses with that myth. "In fact," he notes, "there is a huge shortage of degree holders;" "if degree holders were doing the teaching, there would be far too few of them" (41).

Bousquet recommends that "we" work "to adjust or regulate the 'market' to meet our needs." Though it's not entirely clear who comprises Bousquet's "we" in this instance, his proposals prove clear enough: "as true apprentice teacher-scholars and not cheap labor... graduate employees should (a) teach no more than one course a year and (b) receive a living wage, currently in many major education centers ranging from \$18,000 to \$24,000." Under such terms, "the assistant professor will become the cheapest labor available...and 'demand' for assistant professors will cease to be a problem" (208). This would solve the problem of graduate labor and the job crisis in a single swoop. I can't imagine a single graduate student who would object.

Smart as Bousquet is on questions of graduate labor, he makes an equally important contribution in an exposé of undergraduate labor, which tends to make up the largest and most diffuse labor bloc on any given campus. Enduring "a period of employment as cheap labor" (136), these "docile and disposable" (148) student-

workers might be better understood as worker-students. Bousquet documents the example of Metropolitan College, an arrangement funneling three thousand students at Jefferson Community College and the University of Louisville into an abbreviated graveyard shift at the airport UPS hub, yoking minimum wage pay to debt relief in the form of so-called “education benefits” that are revocable upon resignation. Such opportunities present a triple threat to what are essentially indentured servants: “sleep-deprivation and family-unfriendly scheduling; ultralow compensation, resulting in secondary and tertiary part-time employment; and a high injury rate” (129). Though Bousquet found it difficult to locate information on graduation rates in the Metropolitan College program, he estimated a persistence rate of 12% to any type of degree, compared to the University of Louisville’s graduation rate of 33%.

If the Louisville example goes to extremes, the working undergraduate suggests a default condition: only two in ten don’t work at all, whereas fully half work an average of twenty-five hours per week, and the other third works full time or more, often at multiple jobs. There are reasons for students to shoulder such heavy labor burdens, and they aren’t good ones. By Bousquet’s calculations, in the mid-1960s one could pay one’s own way through a public university by working 22 hours per week per year at the minimum wage; in a private university this would have been closer to a full time proposition, at 36 hours per week. But today such a prospect demands overtime: 55 hours per week to cover expenses at a public university, and 136 hours per week to cover expenses at a private university, the latter prospect leaving roughly three hours per day for attending classes, doing homework, commuting, eating, and sleeping. No wonder there’s an Adderall epidemic!

Bousquet’s book reveals the dystopia that the contemporary university has become for many of its constituents. His comparisons between the managed university and the HMO are particularly apposite to the underinsured student population. In both cases, the ostensible customer is met with degradations and denials of service, and in both cases this ruse occurs under the banner of improved access and quality. Such ruses have reached particularly advanced stages within the public university sector. Their dynamics are described with great force in Christopher Newfield’s *Unmaking the Public University: The Forty-Year Assault on the Middle Class* (2008), which correlates the stark declines in state funding for public universities with a dynamic something like covert class warfare: a reactionary gambit by the elite professional-managerial class to retain power in the face of a better-educated, more diversified, and upwardly-mobile middle class.

To Newfield, the chiasmus of access and affordability within the contemporary public university smacks of racism. At the precise moment when civil rights began to take hold, the university opened to a more representative swath of the population, state funding began to erode, and tuition was increased and/or introduced at a wide range of institutions whose costs had been far more modest when their admissions committees were far less equitable. But if the culture wars were racist in effect, they were also a consequence of economic considerations. In order to retain inherited privileges of class and race, it became necessary for those Newfield terms the “traditional elites” to discredit the very institution that enabled a much more diffuse and generalized cross-section to attain economic prosperity. Per various legal decisions that followed, the university population came to be marked less by integration than by what Newfield calls “pseudo-integration” (107-22), in turn benefiting those Thomas Jefferson styled the “pseudo-aristocracy.” Interrogating the slippery relationship between affirmative action for underrepresented populations and the rise of development and legacy admissions for traditional elites—a process discussed at greater length in recent books by Daniel Golden and Mitchell L. Stevens—Newfield asks a pointed question: “why should anyone balk at giving one applicant 20 points for being black when another receives a special, customized review process for being rich?” (180).

While admissions processes have been much scrutinized, the university’s distribution of that revenue across its various units presents another compelling, though less often discussed tale. In analyzing the divide between the humanities and the sciences, Newfield isolates the crucial metric of indirect cost recovery, leading to some telling and unexpected results. Despite the conventional wisdom whereby the sciences subsidize the humanities, Newfield notes that most grants scientists garner tend to cover only a portion of the tab, with the university left to cover the difference from its own coffers. Because grants in partial aid of research have escalated in an era of ever-fiercer competition for profit maximization via technology transfer, support for such speculation has come not from the science departments themselves, but rather at increasing cost to: (a) their under-compensated graduate students, who toil in labs for fractions of what they would command in a truly open market, and (b) humanities and social sciences departments, whose substantial tuition dollars, garnered from considerable instructional loads, tend to be redirected to those units judged to have higher profit ceiling potentials, even though those same units often function as loss leaders. “In fact,” Newfield explains, “science and engineering cost money, and humanities and social science teaching subsidize it” (217).

Newfield concludes that while private funding sources can be expected to support private universities, these same sources cannot be depended upon to sustain widespread public university education. With state funding reduced to a minor portion of several flagship university budgets, a vicious cycle sets in, wherein the perception of private support leads to reductions of public support. Perhaps the starkest illustration of these changed priorities is the fact that even as state funding for higher education has been decimated in recent generations, state funding for prisons has doubled.

Ultimately, *Unmaking the University* serves as a sort of elegy for an ascendant middle class; it relates “the story of what made this broad middle class and its signature institution, the public university, a danger to conservative rule, and of how the culture wars put this middle class back in its place, culturally, politically, and economically” (267). The remedy for such rollbacks depends upon the restoration of state funding, keyed to the service of collective and individual intellectual development, well-supported teaching and research activity, and maximum access for historically underserved groups. These emphases, for Newfield, will return to the public university one of its most distinguishing characteristics: “top quality at a low cost to the individual student and his or her family,” affording students the “freedom to choose a field of study without awareness of its future income potential” (270).

Here is the Achilles heel of an otherwise fine study, for such awareness was probably never absent among those emerging from blue-collar backgrounds. If the confluence of low-cost, maximum access, top-quality education might seem from certain vantage points like an achievable and even necessary entitlement, its unprecedented occurrence in the United States may well have been peculiar to a particular epoch within an empire grown accustomed to its spoils. In Europe low-cost, top-quality education has always been restricted in scope, and only recently, with the extension of broader access, have costs begun to rise just as surely as quality has begun to decline. To the extent that American exceptionalism has been laid bare of late, university structures in the United States may begin to converge with the emerging global order evoked in *Toward a Global PhD?* (2008), edited by Maresi Nerad and Mimi Heggelund.

Newfield’s more nationally-inflected frame was enabled by the Morrill Land-Grant College Acts of 1862 and 1890, which established most of the institutions discussed in *Unmaking the University*. These crucial pieces of federal largesse occurred through the bestowal of vast tracts of land—a combined area approaching the size of South Carolina—expropriated from a range of indigenous populations laid waste, disinherited, dispossessed, and dispersed.

The tremendous power and wealth that the United States accrued through the twentieth century was built up largely on the strength of an ongoing imperial expansion which has few parallels in world history; that expansion has now progressed to a breaking point, and the resulting shift of fortunes in America's most central institutions may well be a consequence of that trajectory. In retrospect, it was easy to proclaim and even to establish the values and virtues of low-cost, maximum access, top-quality education when these were affordable goals. Now that the end of cheap university education has arrived (roughly contemporaneous with the ends of cheap food, cheap oil, and cheap hegemony), another set of arrangements may be necessary. Can such arrangements accommodate all aspirants fairly? Our inheritors will be sure to balk if the answer proves to be no.

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