Forward:

Resistance Is Not Futile

Cary Nelson

Marc Bousquet's work on the nature of the contemporary university is the single most important recent advance in our understanding of the structure of higher education. His series of interlocking essays gives us the first persuasive account of the university that emerged in the last quarter of the twentieth century. This powerful and defamiliarizing critique has the potential to lift the veil from our eyes and expose the nature of the economic system that now regulates the lives of students and faculty alike.

As Jeff Williams reminds us—and as cannot be overly emphasized—Bousquet's project grew out of theorized activism. He formulated the logic of the job system in the heady days of mid-1990s Graduate Student Caucus organizing for change. Those were the days when an MLA President blared "Graduate students will serve on the Executive Council over my dead body." But they were also the days when graduate students and their allies did indeed begin to serve and won many victories despite the unstinting antagonism of most of the MLA's organizational leadership. Marc's theory of the job system developed as an analysis in response to the coopted blindness of faculty, the conservatism of disciplinary organizations, the failures of our own self-understandings, and the remorseless advance of reliance on contingent labor throughout the academy. Bousquet's work builds on the systematic employment injustice that many of us have worked hard to expose, but it takes our understanding of this injustice to a new level of coherence and integration.

As a result of the multiple delusions professional ideology has installed in us, some of us have believed the academic job system needs but modest adjustments at the margins, while others have been certain the system would in time repair itself, and still others of us have believed it requires drastic reform. Part of what Bousquet

is arguing is that the job system is functioning exactly as it has evolved to function—delivering cheap instructional labor precisely when it is needed, disposing of experienced instructional labor when it becomes more expensive, breeding compliance in all its participants. Should we want to understand more about how compliance is installed in our most exploited teachers, why some stand firmly against their own best interests, the essay by Chris Drew, Matt Garrison, Steven Leek, Donna Strickland, Jen Talbot, and A.D. Waldron gives us telling examples. They detail in a sensitive and persuasive way why some graduate employees feel grateful for what they have and reluctant to join organized opposition.

Meanwhile, a generation of senior faculty thoroughly interpellated into the job system's logic has come to the end of its usefulness. Not long ago the organizing committee of the prestigious English Institute met to plan the following year's program. When they looked to salt the event with promising younger scholars, these luminaries came to the agreement such people were nowhere to be found. No good work, they concluded, was being done by anyone under fifty. My own experience is that I do not have to look farther than my own department to find inspiring work by young scholars. But a certain species of academic superstar believes he or she is the profession. These are some of the people Joe Berry in his essay here describes as being exempted from the depredations of an increasingly dehumanized academic workplace. No wonder they are comfortable with their belief that nothing can be done to transform the job system. Exploitation, after all, doesn't matter, since there's no one beneath their level worthy of fair and decent treatment.

The betrayal of their younger colleagues by some of our most distinguished scholars is certainly one of the more depressing features of the current landscape, since it suggests intellectual achievement itself can be bankrupted when its rewards are grounded in inequity and indifference. But of course such attitudes are not universal among senior faculty. And in a curious way the callousness of prestige may provide some necessary instruction for those who need to be awakened from unwarranted idealization.

Certainly every major economic and structural trend in higher education suggests the future will include further declines in faculty compensation, independence, and intellectual freedom. A large number of undergraduates, as Bousquet reminds us, are themselves already but part-time students, deflected from their studies by jobs. And higher education as a whole continues to drift fitfully toward a narrow mission of job training and away from the more complex democratic mission of empowering critical citizenship. One of the more powerful features of Bousquet's work is his ability to integrate an analysis of higher education's evolving mission with its instructional and workplace practices.

The only solution, as Bousquet and the other contributors here demonstrate, is a collective project of theory and action. The mutual project of theorizing our situation is essential if we are to free ourselves from the powerless subject positions all the institutions of higher education have collaborated in articulating for us. Only a

mixture of analysis and radicalizing experience can undermine the identities that now keep exploited academic labor in its place. Neither will suffice on its own.

Gordon Lafer rehearses the chilling fact that "the entire organizational leadership of elite higher education mobilized" against the NYU graduate employee unionization drive and then recounts the case for a national movement resisting those reactionary forces. Eileen Schell gathers together evidence of spirited and inventive collective action by some of our most exploited employees. Chris Drew and his coauthors take us on a journey of political awakening and consciousness raising among a group of graduate employees who cannot hope to organize for collective action without first interrogating their own lives and class positioning. Joe Berry suggests things may have become bad enough for tenured and contingent teachers to begin building alliances. Kelli Custer cleverly tracks the analogies between bottom-line driven HMOs and universities. Taken together, Bousquet's work and the other essays demonstrate the critical, dynamic interaction between theoretical analysis and activism that is the academy's only hope.

Yet, what, we may ask, can we hope for, what models of higher education have a chance to survive the effects of commodification, quantification, and corporatization? One contributor faults Bousquet for displaying remnants of the humanist fantasy that the university can remain a separate protected space, arguing instead that inside and outside inevitably penetrate one another. Indeed throughout its history the university has never had complete autonomy. What it has had, to use the Althusserian term, are continually renegotiated and variable forms of relative autonomy. Take a simple analogy: when you enter an enclosed courtyard in Oxford or New Haven the noise of the street is only partially muffled. Yet the effect is enough to provide a reflective space for focused critical reflection, for concentrated intellectual work. Contrary to what the late Edward Said argued, who feared that higher education would lose its independence if it were to be politicized, that space is already a product of political struggle. The struggle, however, is not to sustain an impenetrable ideal garden but rather a space intermittently less subject to transgression and distraction. The university is now being subjected to sustained political, cultural, and economic assault. To deny that is to cede the future to corporatization and a form of higher education with little purchase on cultural critique.

I can now write in train stations and in airplanes, but it is a skill I could not have learned without less distracted time beforehand. That's one of the reasons I join Bousquet in decrying the increasing pressure on undergraduates to work while in school. As an undergraduate at Antioch College I worked six months out of every year on jobs away from campus in other cities. As Antioch's program required, I alternated quarters in academia and quarters in the world of ordinary work. I think the balance was correct in every regard. But I did not work while on campus. Instead I learned something about intellectual devotion, even obsession, receiving

full academic credit one semester for studying the poet Ranier Maria Rilke and doing nothing else. I was also active in the antiwar movement while on campus. If the university is to contribute critical intellectuals to the public sphere it needs to give students the time and space to develop such skills. Increasingly, that is not the case. Students spend fragmented semesters that give little experience in serious intellectual work, then fragment them still further with employment. And they learn from contingent teachers who race from campus to campus in lives equally distracted. Few of those teachers, moreover, have the job security that has traditionally underwritten academic freedom and the right to take controversial positions, let alone decent health care and other essential benefits of fair employment.

Academic freedom too is a changing terrain of struggle, not a fixed value. Stanley Fish, noting that the absolute does not exist, would presumably tell us academic freedom itself does not exist, the same position he has taken with regard to free speech. But the devil is in the details. And the details are worth fighting over, as any savvy contingent faculty member who sees his or her tenured colleagues exercising greater academic freedom might well understand. Agents of the corporate university too often find any administratively inconvenient level of academic freedom undesirable, whether it is an affirmation of employees' rights to collective bargaining, a critique of campus contracts with industries, a disagreement over budget priorities, or a debate about the institution's mission. As the national security state gains power, some university administrators are likely to find controversial public political speech an impediment to corporate goals as well. We need to resist these developments, not merely by preserving existing rights but also by asserting rights we have ignored or neglected before. Thus it is now more important than it has ever been to make the university an equitable employer, not only for the impact on our own communities but also for the example we can set for other industries. Now that it is much more difficult to be a green world set apart, as commodification enters our world on every pathway, it is especially necessary to take up the challenge.

Higher education as we have known it for nearly half a century is in the process of unravelling. The massive recent shift to contingent labor is the lynchpin of this change, and it is altering everything else about the academy, from the character and status of the professoriate to the nature of the education we can provide. The campus struggle over these issues is critical to the nation and to the nation's role in the world. It affects not only the students we serve worldwide but also our capacity to have an impact on national policy and produce graduates interested in and capable of intervening in public life. And we cannot win that battle merely by fighting a rear guard holding action. We will need to reimagine higher education for the many possible uneasy futures we face. We will need to theorize our institutions and reflect on our practices more tenaciously than we have done before and to take up activism on many fronts. We will need to expand the notion of an academic community and define new subject positions for faculty and students within it. These essays will help that work get under way.


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Part I:

Contingent Labor and the Corporate University