

Exploits in the undercommons

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In my early twenties I had a job playing “Papa Smurf” at Eaton’s. All I could see out of the tiny screen hidden below the nose of my gigantic and sweaty cartoon-character costume were droves of hyper children; some hugged me, some tugged on me, and some just ran away from me in fear. The worst of them would step right up to me, stare directly into my face, and declare sneeringly: “You’re not ree-al...” Little did I know that being badly paid, abused, disrespected, and rendered invisible wasn’t unique to being a Smurf. Life as a part-time instructor in the university system turned out to be scarily similar.

From the very first semester, much of my experience as a working grad student challenged me - the exploitation of students as TAs and RAs, the strange unspoken economy of faculty attention and support, the administrative pitting of students against each other for small amounts of funding - and so I began pushing against the parameters of the university, asking questions of the place: What was the nature of this authorizing institution called the university anyway? What was I training myself to ‘do’ or ‘be’? To whom was I responsible or obligated? I finished my Masters quickly enough, but kids, a marriage meltdown, and, most significantly, the ridiculous demands and deprivations of part-time teaching held up the completion of my doctorate for 11 years.

I laboured in the wilderness of part-time teaching and limited term contracts at a variety of universities for all of those 11 years. I started out teaching big undergrad courses at Simon Fraser when I was 29. I got my first tenure-stream gig at Northeastern University in Boston when I was 40. In between I taught at the University of Toronto and at Trent. In those 11 years I witnessed first hand the shift of the university from an institution intended to serve the public good while trying to cope with a serious deficit in federal and provincial funding, (federal funding for post-secondary education dropped from .5% of

GDP in 1983 to .19% of GDP in 2004¹) to an institution marked by strategic private sector partnerships, in the throes of ‘academic capitalism.’

As this volume’s editors Janice Newson and Claire Poster, notable American sociologists of the academy Sheila Slaughter and Gary Rhoades, and countless others have convincingly argued, the university is now firmly and cozily situated at the intersection of state and market, an enthusiastic participant in the blurring of boundaries between public and private sectors. Universities facilitate the commodification of knowledge and learning, laundering public subsidies into private gains for corporations, who are portrayed as sponsoring research under the guise of the “public good.” Students are seen as customers being “served,” even as they are leveraged for fiscal resources. The regulatory ideals of the modern university have become synonymous with the ideals of the free market – resource generation, maximized labor efficiency, and profit.

Along with these huge structural changes, during those 11 years I witnessed a significant shift in the makeup of the labour force in the university, specifically incredible growth in the number of contingent academic workers. In the 1950s and 1960s non-tenured academic labor primarily functioned to maintain the job stability of tenured faculty in the face of labor market fluctuations. Contract and contingent academic hiring increased in the 1970s and into the 1980s as a response to fiscal shortfalls and decreasing government funding. By the 1990s, however, contingent and part-time hiring came to be seen as a necessary and ongoing facet of academic staffing in general, a tool to cut costs and increase efficiencies. And so, while tenure-track hiring continued, the hiring of contingent faculty kept pace with it, eventually outpacing it.² But, no matter how the general assumptions and discourses about adjunct teaching changed, the material conditions on the ground for the majority of adjuncts did not. The pay remained terrible, the support and resources still negligible, the workload impossible, and the respect and recognition nonexistent.

In addition, academic labour in Canadian universities has become increasingly segmented. Graduate programs across the country routinely graduate more Ph.D students

than the tenure-stream market can bear. The increased job competition that results from this, however, does not occur between tenure and non-tenure streams, but within them; so as the number of part-time academic workers increases, so too does the competition for these badly paid and under-valued jobs. As a result, “segmentation becomes a strategy of reducing wages and labour standards in the *entire* academic labour market.”³

At the University of Western Ontario, where I now teach, over 50% of undergraduate teaching is performed by part-time, or limited term contract faculty. Recent research indicates that numbers of contingent faculty at other Canadian universities are just as high or higher.⁴ In the U.S. today, tenure stream faculty jobs account for only 25% of the instructional workforce in higher education. At the same time, the proportion of faculty salaries in relation to universities’ total expenditures have declined significantly, from 31% in the late 1970’s to only 19% in 2004.⁵

This state of affairs is perpetuated by an ideology of disciplinary and scholarly quality, or ‘excellence’; those most gifted will land the tenure-track jobs, while those who do not are just ‘not good enough.’ In other words, while statistics show that the number of tenure-stream jobs is shrinking and part-time contract jobs are increasing on the ground, many in the professoriate continue to suggest that a young academic’s failure to get hired is strictly their own fault. Ironically, in my own experience, part-time faculty routinely get excellent teaching evaluations, often contribute much to the life of a department or faculty, and carry on a research agenda for which they are not recognized or paid.

I remember walking the picket line with Trent’s full-time faculty union (TUFA) when they struck in the fall of 1996. It was not a comfortable time, since CUPE, Trent’s part-time teaching union of which I was a member, had been locked out. We had decided to support the strike, even though TUFA, historically, had done absolutely nothing for us. (In this instance, the executive of TUFA had promised to support us in our work to increase the number of classes a part-timer could teach in exchange for our support of the strike. Predictably, after winning, they reneged on this promise.) As my fellow parttimer, David Bateman, and I trudged back and forth on the picket line in the rain we spent our

time picking out potential husbands from Trent's male faculty. One of the central issues of the strike was spousal hiring and job sharing; at this point it seemed just as likely that one of us would end up marrying into a job than acquiring one legitimately.

Sadly, not much has changed since 1996. Today there remains a deafening silence on the part of the tenured and tenure streamed faculty about the segmentation of academic labor and the fate of contingent academic workers; it seems the professoriate would rather fight for the right to have their individual spouses hired, than fight for fair and principled treatment of their junior colleagues. This might be partly due to what Marc Bousquet has described as the "social engineering of faculty culture" by new styles of administration based in private corporate management techniques such as Total Quality Management. This type of management theory focuses on "the underlying cultural norms that frame daily life"⁶ at a university. Administrators become "change agents" seeking, through emphatic leadership, to retool the entire culture of the institution to their interests and to find ways to bind their employees to its new profit-producing values.

In the face of these cultural changes, increased managerialism, and bureaucratism, the tenured professoriate aligns itself with the interests of the administration, happily engaging in the commercialization of research. They compete with each other for merit pay, allow the publication of their teaching evaluations in the name of greater accountability (it wasn't until the installation of the new right to privacy laws in Ontario that Western saw fit to remove student evaluations of professors from a completely public website), send their students' papers off to a private corporation to be 'checked' for plagiarism (turnitin.com), and install themselves in managerial positions in relation to the contingent academic laborers "below" them. The complete discursive and practical re-jigging of the university into a managerial corporate culture seems to suit the professoriate, many of whom already see themselves in neo-liberal terms, as isolated, individualistic, autonomous agents of knowledge. As Bousquet writes: "it has become increasingly difficult to speak of anything resembling "faculty culture" apart from the competitive, marketized, "high-performance" habitus designed for them by management."⁷ Often, as with Trent example, faculty unions, threatened by the influx of

adjunct hiring, work to strengthen tenure protections and behave in a completely self-interested manner. Arguably, faculty unions have “bargained the multi-tier system of academic labor into existence.”⁸

When I arrived at my first tenure-stream job at Northeastern University in Boston, I was shocked to learn that rates of undergrad teaching by contingent faculty were as high as 75% in my department and across the university. Also, I soon discovered that the administration at Northeastern was proposing a system whereby a tenured professor could be fired if they achieved low merit evaluations for two years in a row. So intense was the goal of achieving fiscal viability that any and all inconvenient vestiges of a traditional university system, like tenure, were easily tossed aside. After attending a “State of the University” address by the president where I was asked to applaud the fact that the university had managed to raise tuition significantly *and* keep enrollment stable, I quickly realized I was not in Kansas anymore. I had found ground zero of corporate u.

Ironically, from the moment I arrived, my fellow tenure-track colleagues began to bombard me with tenure anxiety. I had to keep track of everything I did, from meeting with students, to manning a table at a parent event, to taking minutes at a meeting. Every aspect of my job was monetized; I was actually *paid* to go to convocation. Tenure was the Holy Grail; only the highly productive, completely stressed out, insanely focused and anxiety-ridden few would achieve it. It didn’t seem to matter what you had to say, or *if* you had anything to say, papers had to be published and books pumped out. And, meanwhile, down the hall, the part-timers toiled away in the oversubscribed service courses, underpaid, and without a voice in any governance structures. Their position within the overall administration of the university was taken for granted, invisible. What was worse was that my otherwise progressive tenured colleagues failed to see any problem. I felt as though I was back in grad school, but on the other side of the process; having landed a coveted job, I was being asked to preoccupy myself with worry and anxiety about the details of professionalization and career advancement and to ignore the plight of those workers who made my own relatively privileged position possible.

The rigid professionalization of the professoriate within the corporate u depends on a profound institutionalized negligence of what Fred Moten and Stefano Harney have called the “undercommons” – those contingent faculty comprised of students, dropouts, itinerants, and radical thinkers, who refuse the authorizing structures of the place or have been refused by them, upon whom tenured labor depends. Part-time labor is necessary but unwelcome, and its presence produces a reaction on the part of the professoriate that is a kind of disavowal: a registration and repudiation of its threatening difference and a serious ethical failure to do anything about it. The professionalized professoriate represses what it knows about the conditions of its own existence, and helps to create a severely marginalized underclass. In the eyes of many of the professoriate, part-time contingent labor is treated as though it simply isn’t ‘ree-al’.

The various layers of moral, cultural and political failure on the part of the professoriate described above cannot, in the end, be separated from each other; there is no real way to tell which came first, or how and in what way they are implicated in each other’s development. To be sure, there are many members of the tenured professoriate who are committed to meaningful collegiality and deplore the current conditions of managerialism in the university, but feel powerless to change it. The degree of response and engagement of faculty unions in the plight of contingent labour is highly variable as well. Given the irrefutable facts on the ground and the growing threats to the tenure system, however, you’d think that faculty unions and the professoriate in general would be working in earnest, shoulder to shoulder with part-timers, to address the segmentation and tiering of academic labor. So, while I recognize that many faculty and their unions are taking incremental steps toward improving the plight of their contingent faculty allies, there remains a very long way to go. Just recently I sat in Senate at Western and watched the majority of its membership vote against a motion to guarantee wage parity for our contingent faculty in the university’s strategic plan.

The questions I began asking in grad school about obligation and responsibility in relation to the university are more necessary now than ever. Surely a move from the field of casual and flexible academic labour onto the tenure track does not erase or excuse the

poor working conditions and disrespect that many still endure. Employers can capitalize on the divisions amongst tenured and contingent academic workers; it's our job to counter their divisive tactics and to offer a vision of the university beyond its current corporate managerial confines. As Moten and Harney claim, the undercommons can be seen to embody the productive, unruly excess of the corporate u: the desire to know, to create organic communities, the passion for research and teaching, the impulses of free conjecture and curiosity. In the end, the university should be ours to define, claim and name; academic workers of all kinds must express their solidarity with each other, their students, and staff, and act now in the name of a 'universitas' of thinkers that, in the end, no instrumental logic can contain.

Endnotes

¹ Smallman, p. 108.

² Bauder, p. 229. While Bauder points out that this trend was first noted in a Stats Can study, access to comparable data remains a challenge. The very fact that usable stats on this issue do not exist speaks to the difficulties of defining the problem of contingent labour as a whole and to the recent proliferation of different kinds of academic work in the corporate u.

³ Bauder, p. 231

⁴ Smallman, p. 110

⁵ Bauder, p. 229

⁶ Bousquet, p. 99

⁷ Bousquet, p.100

⁸ Bousquet, p. 101

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