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Our Ultimate Vision: The Place of Our Contingent Faculty Struggle in the Broader Society

“Trench Scholars: The Place of Contingent Academic Labor in Social Class Conflict”

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Abstract

In order to better understand the possibilities for contingent academic labor organizing, it is imperative that we have an understanding of the role that social class has had in shaping the university. It is hoped that this brief excavation of power will help us to develop the insights necessary to act effectively.

In this paper, I argue that if we have a proper understanding of the role of elites in shaping the system of higher education in the U.S., then it becomes clear that the contingent academic labor system serves as a veil of legitimacy in a system of higher education that, though touted as a central vehicle of social mobility in a democratic society, is a means of hiding disparity and inequality, and of concealing social class conflict. At the same time, while contingent academic faculty may be the pivotal pawns needed to prop-up this illusion, we are not automatons and conformists seeking narrow self-interest. We are in the trenches at the front line of this conflict and we have the potential to act as agents of positive social change. We are sometimes labeled as the “academic proletariat,” and in concurrence with that designation, perhaps, it is through contingent academic labor and our allies that the best hope lies for the university to become a source of democratic renewal.

There are several levels to the conflict which marks the system of contingent academic labor. In this essay I will only briefly explain the first and second levels of this conflict, and then I will delve more deeply into the third level of the conflict, which consists of deeper, longer-term patterns that show a system of higher education that has been a site of struggle over power between social classes for well over a hundred years.

The first level, the most obvious one, is the way that most contingent academics experience their class position within the hierarchy of academic labor. These are the everyday indignities that remind us of our second-class status. Sometimes these are subtle cues that serve to demean us, and sometimes they are more explicit patterns and rules that exclude us from consideration as professionals. These are well-known disparagements to COCAL participants and this essay will not dwell upon them.

The second level, as I have argued elsewhere,¹ consists of the systematic and expanded use of a contingent academic labor force, which is roughly configured along hierarchical lines. The academic labor system, such as it exists today, makes use of contingent workers in such a way that part-time faculty are most in use at those colleges where the most disadvantaged students attend. That is, part-time faculty are used most in community colleges and at urban public four-year colleges that serve a disadvantaged population. Of course, the use of part-time faculty has increased at *all* institutions of higher education over the past ten or twelve years, but there are still discernable patterns. It is not a uniform breakdown, and there are important exceptions to the pattern, but Gappa and Leslie argue that “the more an institution ‘looked like’ a community college, the more likely it was to make extensive use of part-timers. For example, part-timers were commonly used to staff evening division and extended education programs.”² On the other hand, one might argue that the more elite institutions may not use as many part-time faculty, but that they do use poorly paid graduate teaching “assistants” to staff their classes, however, when combined with other differences, i.e., student-teacher ratio, other resources, and perhaps most importantly, the cultural capital that the students bring with them, this model of hierarchy and disparity that I am describing still holds up.

In addition to the demographic distinctions of contingent academic labor by type of college, there is also a breakdown by discipline and by level of courses. Although the data for this claim is more ambiguous – it is difficult to broadly ascertain reliable

¹ Vincent Tirelli, “Adjuncts and More Adjuncts: Labor Segmentation and the Transformation of Higher Education,” in *Chalk Lines: The Politics of Work in the Managed University*, ed. Randy Martin (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), 181-201.

² Judith M Gappa and David W. Leslie, *The Invisible Faculty: Improving the Status of Part-Timers in Higher Education*, (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishing, 1993), 113.

information about the disciplinary categories beyond that already established by the National Center for Educational Statistics/National Survey of Post-Secondary Faculty (NCES/NSOPF) – however, I believe that we can discern, roughly, that within the disciplines we find the most use of part-time faculty where there are the most democratic aspirations for students, i.e., remedial programs, fine arts and the humanities, as well as the large introductory classes in certain programs such as math (especially where these programs are located in those colleges where the most disadvantaged students attend). The natural sciences, engineering, and more advanced classes within programs, by comparison, make less use of part-time faculty.

Students who come from disadvantaged backgrounds can often be found in the lower-tier colleges of the university system, for a variety of reasons, and this has implications for social equality. At the community colleges, for example, the education is not just about training and remediation, but it is also about introducing the students to an academic education as well. Many of the students at this level often need to be socialized to the habits of academic work, i.e., the things that one does to be successful as a student in college. In such institutions, the full-time faculty cannot give the proper time to students as they are loaded down with departmental responsibilities that are typically not required of part-time faculty. Staffing this segment of the university system overwhelmingly with part-time faculty who do not usually get the resources needed to spend the necessary time with the students is nothing short of a blow to the democratic promise of higher education in the United States.³

This breakdown by discipline is significant because it is reflective not just of a “market” for academic labor, but of a set of values and priorities that are more dictated by

³ I only refer to the United States, though I suspect that similar dynamics exist elsewhere.

a business-oriented outlook among trustees and university managers than by sound educational policy and good pedagogy – a legacy of the ideological nature of the school of “scientific management,” handed down to the university by Frederick Winslow Taylor via the Carnegie and Rockefeller foundations. These values and priorities are part of an outlook that has shaped higher education since, at least, the Progressive Era, circa 1900.

Perhaps the most insidious aspect of the extensive and systematic use of contingent faculty is that it also limits the power of faculty governance and it makes faculty unionization all the more difficult to achieve. Not surprisingly, we also have seen a decline in full-time tenure track jobs over the past decade or so.⁴ These trends, taken together, give advantage to those trustees and managers who would administer the corporate university, thereby diminishing the potential for a democratically run institution.

How can we change this? Sometimes one has to go backward before one can go forward. The longer view of power and society gives us some insights that can help us to better navigate the path before us. The role of colleges and universities in U.S. society has been closely tied to the development of capitalism and to the perceived needs of elites. Thus, the third level of the conflict, I will argue, can be found if we examine the broader historical development of power in society, and how that power has manifested itself in the university throughout the various epochs of history in the United States. From the school of the sociology of education I borrow the concepts of production and reproduction, and I use them as a means of explaining the role of higher education in various epochs of U.S. history. A higher education system that has a “productive”

⁴ AFT Higher Education, Lawrence N. Gold, Director, “The Growth of Full-time Nontenure-Track Faculty,” Item Number 36-0700.

function is one that contributes through its academic programs to the economic and social development of a society. A higher education system that has a “reproductive” function is one that serves as an ideological cover for hierarchical social roles and, through the processes of the educational system, helps to reinforce the stratification that exists in society. These two concepts are not mutually exclusive and often coexist.

The earliest colleges, during the colonial era, were not the most important repositories of elite power. They did, however, serve to reproduce the existing set of hierarchical relations by giving an education to those who would become the elites, though not all of them. The period from Jefferson to the Civil War saw a wide range of colleges popping up all over the place in a variety of forms. Debates over curriculum, control, and funding were common during this era, as they are still. The university played a minor reproductive role in society, still, but the seeds of production were growing as the Industrial Revolution took hold. After the Civil War, critical mass was reached and the university system was born. It was not until the Progressive Era, though, that the university system began to take on a shape that we would recognize today.

With industrialization, the development of the sciences became much more important to economic elites. The massive funding, private and public, helped to shape the new form of the institution. Private funding by the captains of industry, and public funding through the Morrill Acts of 1862 and 1890, which helped the Agricultural and Mechanical colleges, caused intense growth. The role of the faculty in this period was one of subordination. The system of higher education during this period did not just serve to reproduce elite roles and structures, but it also became a part of the productive engines that drove the young industrial economy.

Two foundations, in particular, were established to bring together a national system of higher education – the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and the General Education Board (i.e., Rockefeller’s outfit). Using methods adopted directly from Taylor’s “scientific management,” the two foundations worked together to bend and shape the system of higher education to serve the needs of elite interests. The problem with this method was that what was *science* and what were corporate interests often became intermingled and confused. Resistance did emerge from some faculty, and the advancement of academic freedom, though nascent through the early years of the Twentieth Century, did become an important victory that was necessitated by faculty’s need to freely seek knowledge and by the elite’s need *for* that knowledge and all that it entailed. The university, which always had a role in reproduction, by now unquestionably had a productive role, as well.

As we leap over the decades, we find that after World War II, elite corporate interests became increasingly global, and militarism became an increasingly dominant part of American ideology, however the American public was not fond of international involvement and adventures. They would need to be convinced. American public support for a strident and aggressive foreign policy was made possible by the relatively affluent post-war society. There was a kind of unwritten social contract such that as long as citizens were taken care of domestically, then policies that supported elite interests internationally would not be scrutinized.

The university had its heyday as it became increasingly integrated into the productive apparatus of society. By then, it was part and parcel of the military-industrial-academic complex. Among university presidents and academic faculty, many had

followed the trail of money as defense dollars poured into the top tier science institutions. For the rest of us, the university system was expanded. This was the period when community colleges began to grow dramatically, and the G.I. Bill helped millions of veterans to attend college. It opened the doors of higher education to the working class, and, by doing so, it channeled the class-based energies, which in the 1930s had resulted in massive strikes and disruption of industry, into a more placid and integrative environment. At the same time, authorities hunted down communists and broke the unions that had even a hint of red. The society, and the labor unions, were transformed into the image of capital.

Science and, thus, university scientists were an essential component of the post-war defense buildup. During the 1960s, jobs were plentiful and privileges grew. For many university faculty, it was a golden era. The public sector, in general, and the university, both public and private, were expanded. Public sector unionism grew at a record pace.

Along with this growth of the public sector, the 1960s also saw an increase in urban insurgencies. The response of the federal government resulted in the increase of city expenditures. These revenues increased the social service network and, thus, increased the number of city workers. These gains were consistent with the interests of elites.⁵ Lichten points out, with regard to New York, the following:

The most powerful elements of the private sector encouraged the increase in city expenditures, because it served their class needs. New York City's economic base was changed, as manufacturing declined and services became more predominant. Increased city services stilled a potentially troublesome population, while keeping the city's workers cooperative through the dual policy of increased wage and benefit packages along with

⁵ Eric Lichten, *Class, Power & Austerity: The New York City Fiscal Crisis* (Massachusetts: Bergin and Garvey Publishers, Inc., 1986), 91.

decreased productivity. Labor peace was essential to this transformation, and a smooth one was more likely while the city spent its funds and borrowed more, rather than while it was cutting back. To put it simply: the expansion of city expenses and debts assisted corporate needs in ways that a retracting budget could not.⁶

By the 1970s, stagflation at home and a restructuring of the world economy had created a crisis of capital. As the economic crisis became more severe, “the corporate and financial sectors could no longer permit workers to exercise influence over government, nor could they permit government to respond to citizen’s demands for increased services.”⁷ By 1975, the “social contract” was abrogated by the elites. It was no longer necessary to placate the urban working classes as much as had been done in the 1960s. The 1975 fiscal crisis in New York City served as the beginning of the end for the New Deal. The austerity measures imposed by elites on New York during this period became the model for austerity throughout the nation during the Reagan years.

Since the mid-1970s, the number of part-time faculty has grown, and the contingent academic labor system, as we know it, has taken shape. It allowed for the education of the increased numbers entering college, but it also served a reproductive function within that seemingly democratic expansion. As more of the poor and working class entered the university in its newly established lower-rungs, states and municipalities have increasingly pushed the cost of public colleges onto the students through periodic tuition hikes, larger class sizes, and, of course, the increased use of part-time faculty. To some degree, depending on the factors outlined above (i.e., the “second level” of the conflict), private colleges, more or less, followed a similar path. This all comes with an increasingly administered corporate university, as faculty control has been under

⁶ Ibid., 92.

⁷ Ibid, 93.

continuous assault. There is nothing natural about this in terms of economic processes. It is man-made policy. It provides a democratic face to policies that are increasingly anti-democratic, anti-poor people, and pro-imperialistic. The era of class peace is over, but the working class has not yet received the message. The hierarchical system of higher education presents an illusion of democracy and opportunity, and the contingent faculty are used as a part of the apparatus that places a veil of legitimacy over hierarchy and inequality. However, we do not simply carry out the functions dictated by the structure of power. We are active conscious human agents. Our task must be to pull back the curtain and expose this class structure and the elites who are pulling the levers that thwart the public good. Our unions are our front line, but they must be transformed into more militant, democratic organizations that recognize the need for addressing broader political issues, both locally and globally.

Understanding the role of the university in terms of historical social class divisions, just briefly sketched out in this essay, is a necessary dimension to developing a class conscious response by contingent academic labor. We may seem like we are weak and powerless at times, but, in fact, we are central to maintaining the ideology of illusion that props up a corrupt system, and that puts us at the front lines and in the trenches in the struggle for power between social classes. Understanding this dynamic gives us a better view of what kind of alliances we can and should make, what direction our strategy should take, and what kind of university we might envision that is a democratic alternative to the corporate paradigm of higher education that is currently trying to assert itself.

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