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**The Sociopathology of Everyday Business:
A Review of *The University Against Itself: The NYU Strike and the
Future of the Academic Workplace* by Monika Krause, Mary Nolan,
Michael Palm, and Andrew Ross (Temple University Press, 2009)**

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Concerns about the governance and administration of higher education in the United States have increasingly drawn the attention of trade journals such as *The Chronicle of Higher Ed* and national media outlets such as *The New York Times*. Those writing about this topic are usually concerned about the exploitation of graduate student labor, increasingly top-down management styles imposed upon faculty by college and university administration, and the development of “star” faculty systems which make high pay and resources available to a few faculty members while the majority of teaching is conducted by grossly underpaid contingent faculty. Blame for these and other changes and have often been laid at the feet of the corporatization of US higher education, a process by which US corporate-style business models are imposed upon non-profit educational institutions. The corporatization of US colleges and universities has sometimes resulted in dramatic acts of resistance, one of the most recent being the 2005 graduate student workers’ strike at New York University.

Monika Krause, Mary Nolan, Michael Palm, and Andrew Ross’s aptly titled *The University Against Itself: The NYU Strike and the Future of the Academic Workplace* clearly, concisely, and chillingly documents the failed 2005-6 New York University graduate student worker strike, the events leading up to it, and the corporate-style university structures which made the strike necessary. Contributions to this edited anthology come from five tenured professors at NYU, ten NYU graduate students, three tenured professors and one graduate student from the CUNY system, two tenured professors from other New York City universities, seven professors from outside the New York City area, and one union representative. These students, professors, and the union representative contribute diverse viewpoints and areas of expertise to the discussion of the strike as well as being, in many cases, eyewitnesses of the events they describe.

The University Against Itself is divided into three sections. The essays in Part 1, “Corporate University?”, describe the rise and effects of the corporate university model

imposed upon NYU, situating the NYU strike within the broader context of higher education in New York City, New York state, and the United States. Essays in this section are usually a combination of literature review and history. Part 2, “GSOC Strike,” is devoted to describing the activities of the Graduate Student Organizing Committee (GSOC) during the 05-06 strike and the history of organized labor at NYU. Since the strike ultimately failed, requiring graduate students to return to work without a union contract, Part 3, “Lessons for the Future,” explains the weaknesses of student labor organizing at NYU and suggests ways in which similar efforts may be more effective in the future.

Since Part 1 contextualizes both the strike and NYU within New York City and New York state higher education, the essays in this section have perhaps the widest possible application to higher education across the United States. They describe several fundamental dysfunctions within US higher education in the starkest possible terms. One essay, for example, explains how CUNY once provided free college tuition for New York City residents until NYU aggressively lobbied for city government funding cuts that would require CUNY to charge its students tuition. Economic downturns and rising costs would have made tuition inevitable for the CUNY system, but Ashley Dawson and Penny Lewis’s “New York: Academic Labor Town?” clearly documents that the CUNY system began charging tuition when it did because of New York City politics, not economic need, and that when this happened, NYU was the primary beneficiary.

More than one essay in Part 1 describes NYU’s gentrification of Greenwich Village, its disregard for the concerns of that community, NYU President John Sexton’s pathological habit of lying to the residents of Greenwich Village, and NYU’s destruction of historic landmarks, such as the home in which Edgar Allen Poe lived and composed “The Raven.” It describes a corporate mentality guiding NYU administration in which top administrators make salaries approaching one million dollars (not including perks) and their assistants make over \$100,000 per year, while 70% of NYU courses are taught by poorly paid contingent faculty with no job security who are working in one of the most expensive cities in the United States. Parents of NYU students need to understand that they are paying Ivy League tuition for graduate students and other adjunct instructors to teach their children. It explains how John Sexton justifies this state of affairs by calling teaching a “sacred duty,” appropriating religious language of service and self-sacrifice to support the mistreatment and exploitation of the only campus group actually providing the very service for which the university exists.

Furthermore, Part 1 reveals how faculty at NYU witnessed a continual erosion of their rights during the strike period. After the strike began, for example, “several faculty members discovered that deans and directors of undergraduate studies had been inserted onto their Blackboard sites... thus enabling administrators to monitor all transactions and communicate with students” (52). The provost then restructured grading so that students “who felt their learning had been disrupted [could] take courses pass/fail *after* they had received a grade from their instructor” (52). Finally, NYU took punitive action against strikers, prohibiting those who participated in the strike from teaching the following semester. More than twenty faculty members were fired as a result of the strike. All of

these measures, it should be noted, were unilaterally adopted by NYU administration without consulting faculty and were in disregard of existing procedures, precedents, and university regulations.

The dominance of a corporate mentality among NYU administrators should not come as a surprise. Christopher Newfield and Greg Grandin in “Building a Column of Smoke” list NYU trustees by their general industry and identify 29 of 40 NYU trustees as coming from business sectors including finance (17), insurance (2), real estate (7), manufacturing (1), and retail (2). The remaining are in media and art (9) and education (2). “Media and art” trustees, including representatives of the *New York Observer*, the *New Republic*, and the Wasserman Media Group, created a public relations nightmare for media-conscious labor organizers. Reporting on the strike from these media outlets teaches a disturbing lesson in the direct relationship between corporate interests and what is presented as “news” in newspapers and on the radio and television.

Part 2 offers a frank and self-critical examination of the strike itself which, since GSOC had allied itself with the UAW, found itself run by a coalition of quite differently thinking constituents. Representatives from traditional organized labor sought to pursue clearly and narrowly defined goals, to stay on message, to effectively manipulate public perception of NYU, and to create logistical and economic hardships for NYU through a protracted strike. Their constituents, however, balked at the top-down leadership style of traditional organized labor, sought to address concerns about race, gender, and the status of international students that were treated as peripheral, unimportant, or off-message by organized labor leaders, and found themselves at odds with their own values as the strike increasingly inconvenienced a student population GSOC faculty members sought to serve. GSOC found itself torn between organized labor pragmatism and graduate student idealism, between a group whose existence is consciously dependent upon a corporate system and a group who views all interaction with this system as shaking hands with the devil.

Part 3 is almost a hands-on manual for student labor organizing, providing many useful suggestions for those who would seek to replicate GSOC’s activities elsewhere. Essays in this section provide insight into how to generate and keep undergraduate support for graduate student activism and how best to use the media to generate support for student activism (when it is not directly owned by the constituents against whom one is striking). Additionally, Part 3 offers suggestions about how to better integrate organized labor with a graduate student population. One of the most useful and direct essays in this section is Cary Nelson’s “Graduate-Employee Unionization and the Future of Academic Labor.” He suggests that teacher strikes by themselves are not enough to coerce administration to deal with labor and that demonstrations will never be effective unless they are carried out on a large scale and are immediately disruptive to the everyday business of the university. Large, loud, disruptive, and sustained demonstrations carried out jointly by graduate and undergraduate students in administration buildings are the most effective.

Even more effective is behind-the-scenes pressure from politicians, or at least potentially more effective. While New York Senators Hillary Clinton and Chuck Schumer both

publicly supported the strike, neither seemed to apply serious political pressure in the form of “delaying building permits and contracts, complicating inspections, refusing multiple forms of cooperation, orchestrating public embarrassments for administrators, and so on” (252). Another effective strategy would have been gaining the cooperation of other unions, so that vital services such as campus deliveries are stopped or delayed, a cooperation that GSOC/UAW was unable to generate. Gordon Lafer’s “Sorely Needed: A Corporate Campaign for the Corporate University” is another important contribution that describes alternate methods for applying pressure upon university administration that seem promising and potentially very effective. He suggests that activists attack major sources of university revenue, such as real estate, medical services, corporate-sponsored research and earnings from intellectual property, federal grants and contracts, and endowment earnings through legal action, community activism, and political lobbying. He believes that the American Federation of Teachers is in the best position to step forward and begin looking at how to coordinate these efforts, and he argues persuasively that should these types of campaigns be carried out, university administration would be more willing to deal with its workers. Administrations care primarily about money, after all, and only when it is more cost effective for administrators to pay a living wage to its workers than to shamelessly underpay them will unjust practices begin to change.

What is missing from this volume is the other side. No administrative voices are heard; no corresponding arguments from evidence are forthcoming from administrators. That too is an unfortunate part of the problem, as university administration is responsible for the business of running a university in ways faculty is not, and have competencies in this area that faculty do not. The example of Antioch College comes to mind. The university administration described in this collection of essays felt no need to justify itself, however, and in the instances when it did, said nothing that could be trusted. Of course a collection of essays by faculty and graduate students about administration will be a litany of complaints, but these complaints seem more than reasonably justified given the manipulative and highly exploitative nature of NYU’s administration. Also missing from this volume is an essay devoted to the specifics of bargaining: what exactly did graduate students have before unionization, what did they gain after unionization and their initial contract, what did they want in their new contract? While this information could be culled from a variety of essays, I would have liked to see more direct focus upon this topic. Another useful inclusion may have been suggestions for a Graduate Student Bill of Rights, a list of best practices, or suggestions for federal guidelines regarding the treatment of graduate students and contingent faculty.

I want to make clear, however, that although this anthology is focused upon New York City higher education, particularly NYU, the problems and attitudes that it describes are national in scope. I know of one small liberal arts college that insulted, intimidated, and otherwise coerced most of their long-term, highly paid faculty into retirement so that they could replace them with younger faculty members making one third or less of their salary. I know of another private university that sought to address the overuse of contingent faculty by forming a committee to develop “innovative” hiring practices. Their solution? Create a “staff” position that pays an MA \$20,000 per year to teach four freshman courses per semester. Readers beware: when a businessperson uses the word

“innovative,” he or she invariably means, “I’ve found new ways to exploit people that have not yet been made illegal, but should be.” By listing grossly underpaid teaching positions as “staff,” the university can dishonestly inflate its average teacher salary in national reporting to entities such as NSSE. Both this example and *The University Against Itself* repeatedly reinforce the need for full financial transparency among private colleges and universities. Any school with students who receive federal financial aid accepts public funds and should be subject to full disclosure.

The bigger problem is that a corporate model will always mean selling the least expensive product at the highest possible price so that those at the top can make the highest possible salaries. In higher education, this translates into the ideal of all courses presenting their content through pre-packaged online instructional modules that do not require teachers beyond their initial development, so that one teacher is paid one low salary one time to teach 10,000 students. The day that this happens, learning may continue in some form, but teaching will have died, and human beings will be educated to be no different from the machines that have taught them. Barring the attainment of that “ideal,” wages and benefits will always be driven down, ultimately at the expense of students. It is time for higher education in the United States to return to non-profit ideals and practices that match its non-profit status. Education is too valuable a social resource to be squandered and compromised by those looking to make a fast buck so care nothing for teachers and other employees. Ultimately, a lack of concern for teachers also demonstrates a lack of concern for students, for we cannot expect demoralized, underpaid, and overworked employees to be inspiring and effective teachers.

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