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Review of *How the University Works: Higher Education and the Low-Wage Nation* by Marc Bousquet (New York University Press, 2008)

Marisa Huerta

In the midst of a particularly dismal period in tenure-stream academic hiring, Marc Bousquet's exposé of the corporatization of higher education in *How the University Works: Higher Education and the Low-Wage Nation* could not be more timely.[1] A leader in the diagnosis of and activism to improve the working conditions experienced by academic labor, Bousquet presents a forceful critique of the postmodern university. Specifically, he argues that at all levels the university is run not as a non-profit institution serving the public good but as "managed education" designed to maximize profit, not unlike the system of "managed health care."[2] His eye-opening study focuses on exploitative practices at all levels of higher-education employment and the "academic-capitalist values and behaviors, and acquiescence to an increasingly managerial role with respect to the contingent" that university administrations have successfully pitched to tenure-stream faculty.

Chapter One introduces one of Bousquet's most important insights, that many of the issues bemoaned regularly by professional organizations like the Modern Language Association (MLA) and the American Historical Association (AHA)—such as job "shortages" or "crises"; the over-reliance on adjunct faculty, the majority of whom are women; the budget "crunch" at many universities—are not accidents or temporary problems that can be waited out or easily remedied by good will on the part of faculty members. These problems are indications that the university-as-corporation model is working successfully. In fact, it is working so well that many faculty members have internalized the "ideology of excellence" (10) that encourages market competition among tenure-stream faculty members (for merit pay, etc.). This leads to a "corporatization of the self" (13) Bousquet argues, and creates a culture wherein "educational leadership" and "change" come from administrators, in top-down fashion. In this social construction of the university, members of management imagine themselves as "the intellectual vanguard" (12) working to inspire recalcitrant (tenure-stream) faculty members to get in line with organizational culture. A crucial point in this chapter, one that Bousquet returns to again and again, is that there is no over-production of Ph.D.s; there is a scarcity of tenure-track jobs. He also establishes that the only way there can appear to be a "job market" is if one excludes the actual practices of university hiring. Rather, if Ph.D.-

holders were doing all the university teaching, there would be a “huge shortage” of degree holders (41).

Chapter Two focuses on the already-lost-battle and distracting pseudo-struggle between faculty and administrators over the “informationalization” of the managed university (through distance education and like technology) with its sustaining fantasy of workerless profit for the corporation. This chapter contains a fascinating discussion of William Massy’s “Virtual U,” which is “a computer-simulation of university management in game form,” that only allows one role for players: that of the university president.[3] Bousquet points out that this “profoundly ideological” positioning requires successful players to fire non-tenurable with a single keystroke, teaching that to be successful is to eliminate employees without ever interacting or seeing the faculty person (73). Chapter Three analyzes the hegemony of “managerial values” among faculty, including organized faculty. Bousquet argues that “the institutions of faculty and staff unionism are the survivors of a series of great judicial, executive, and legislative traumas after 1980,” including the Supreme Court’s Yeshiva ruling in 1980 that full-time members of the university’s faculty are managerial and thus are not entitled to legal protections for collective bargaining under the National Labor Relations Act (109). He further suggests that if faculty are to achieve even part of the solidarity that management enjoys, they need to connect their struggles with larger social movements and create wider coalitions of workers on campus.

Another important component of Bousquet’s critique of the corporate university is his argument in Chapter Four that even undergraduates with taxpayer-subsidized jobs in the private sector (like the “earn and learn” part-time program between UPS and Metropolitan College) are already academic workers, not students preparing for a future job. These programs are good for UPS, which gets a sweet deal from the state and the student workers, Bousquet contends. They don’t impact the wages and benefits negotiated by the Teamsters for unionized non-contingent employees. However, these work/study opportunities are not good for the students themselves. Bousquet points out that, “Like graduate employees, undergraduates frequently find out that their period of ‘study’ is, in fact, a period of employment as cheap labor” (136). Even other kinds of student labor reflect the “similar low-wage benefitless positions in the service economy at large: food service, day care, janitorial work, building security, interior painting and carpentry, parking enforcement, laundry service, administrative assistance, warehouse restocking, and so on” (149). Moreover, at many institutions, the student-employment office functions as a sort of temp agency that places part-time labor in positions—without benefits or unemployment insurance, and often at low wages of $6 to $7 an hour—advertised by outside employers. The undergraduate student labor market is huge: Since only 20% of students in the U.S. do not work at all, according to Bousquet, “about 10 or 12 million undergraduates are in the workforce at any given moment” (150). Although the college years have extended, the media portray this period of “delayed adulthood” as a carefree time. Bousquet rightly argues that this period of so-called extended youth (which seems to be code for a kind of super-exploited labor) is not always voluntary (137). Moreover, the university is key to this system because of what it promises in the implicit social contract that student workers depend upon, which is: Accept contingent work now so that you can escape into a better employment later (148). Without this promise offered by the university, student workers would be more likely to demand better working conditions immediately and higher education would not be able to depend upon cheap youth labor. Labor studies that focus in a good-intentioned manner on alliances between students and labor entirely miss the fact that students *are* already labor.

Chapter Five takes on the "reform rhetoric" that pervades the field of rhetoric and composition, a discipline in which, Bousquet argues, even the tenure-stream faculty take on "a disciplinary identity [that] has emerged in close relation to the permatemping of the labor force for first-year writing" (158). He argues that debates in the field over staffing and curricula of writing programs are dominated by "managerial discourse." Chapter Six returns to the subject of "the rhetoric of the job market," which was also discussed in the introduction (Chapter One). Bousquet again critiques the assumptions of the Bowen report in 1989, which argued that faculty jobs were about to reappear after what had been a period of low "supply." He also tracks the emergence of what he calls "job-market theory" and then dismantles the faulty supply-and-demand logic behind it. The theory is "a rhetoric of the labor system and not a description of it"; moreover, this rhetoric encourages such armchair "supply-side fantasies" as limiting the number of students admitted to graduate programs as a way to solve the "crisis" (188). This kind of wishful thinking is reflective of what Bousquet calls "the depoliticization and privatization of the professoriate," which aims to solve problems through "better management" rather than in labor struggles in solidarity with exploited workers (189).

It is hard to argue with Bousquet's conclusion that "[u]nder the current system of academic work, the university clearly does not prefer the best or most experienced teachers; it prefers the cheapest teachers" (204). Yet despite what should be an obvious fact by now, "job-market theory" predominates in the principal publications of the humanities disciplines. One recent striking example was a suggestion in a piece from *Inside Higher Ed* that surplus Ph.D.s be shipped abroad where they could be "put to work" in useful white-collar employment that allows them to productively use their "expertise."[4]

It is harder to agree with Bousquet's rallying conclusion that "the union movements of graduate employees and adjunct academic labor" represent the best hope against the "market-regulation approach to the 'job crisis'" (209). I say this reluctantly, as one of the principal organizers of the failed graduate-employee unionization drive at Brown University. (Bousquet includes the dissenting opinion to this decision in Appendix B.) Without going into too many details about our unionization drive here, I'll simply say that Bousquet's contention that graduate-employee unions represent the best chance for a true culture of opposition does not take into account the extent to which many graduate employees have already internalized the "ideology of excellence" and the logic of "job-market theory" that Bousquet takes on in this work. He mentions in the last paragraph of his book that there may be a "small number" of graduate students who are anti-unionization. The number may well be larger than his own experience would suggest, which is an issue that deserves greater attention.

However, I wholeheartedly agree with Bousquet's assertion that change must come from organized struggle by contingent faculty, graduate employees, and student workers themselves, not from university administrations or well-meaning professional organizations. On the whole, *How the University Works* provides a readable, incisive, and invaluable overview of the corporate university and the exploitation of academic workers.

NOTES

[1] For more on the subject of dwindling numbers of tenure-track jobs, see: Lewin, Tamar. "At Colleges, Humanities Job Outlook Gets Bleaker." *New York Times* 18 December 2009, New York: A22. Print; Golden, Serena. "Bleak News on the Front Lines." *Inside Higher Ed* 4 January 2010: n. page. Web. 28 Jan 2010. <http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2010/01/04/jobs>; Jaschik, Scott. "No Entry." *Inside Higher Ed* 4 January 2010: n. page. Web. 28 Jan 2010. <http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2010/01/04/nojobs>. For a first-person take on the situation, written by a visiting assistant professor at Clemson, see the following blog entry: Croxall, Brian, "The Absent Presence: Today's Faculty." December 28, 2009. Web. 28 Jan 2010. <http://www.briancroxall.net>.

[2] Bousquet, Marc. "Introduction: Your Problem is My Problem." *How the University Works*. Pages 1-2. All other citations of this work will be made parenthetically in the body of the text.

[3] Sawyer, Ben. "Serious Games: Improving Public Policy Through Game-Based Learning and Simulation. Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Center, 2001. Page 28. Also cited in Bousquet, *How the University Works*, page 72.

[4] Trachtenberg, Stephen Joel. "Putting the Ph.D.'s to Work." *Inside Higher Ed* 21 January 2010: n. page. Web. 28 Jan 2010.
<http://www.insidehighered.com/views/2010/01/21/trachtenberg>.