

Higher Education, Lower Pay for American Faculty and Students

Marc Bousquet, *Higher Education and the Low-Wage Nation*. New York: New York University Press, 2008.

reviewed by Russell Harrison

This is an extraordinarily important book, buttressed with a tremendous amount of convincing detail. There are many different sub-themes but the subtitle is accurate. This is an analysis of how the university *really* works. Bousquet presents a wealth of data—at times overwhelming—and to do the book justice would require an article-length essay. Nevertheless, I think that by focusing on two chapters of the book, one can grasp the overall thrust and method of the book as a whole.

The second chapter of the book is entitled, “The Informal Economy of the ‘Information University.’” Bousquet addresses the fear that distance education evokes, but asserts that that train left the station some decades ago, though the station, embodied as it is in such activities as athletics, parking, food service, book stores etc. is –like real train stations (compare New York’s Grand Central Station) and Washington’s Union Station – still massively embodied; it’s just doing different things, i.e., selling different things/services. As Bousquet writes:

“We’ve already done a pretty good job of translating education into information delivery over the past thirty years. This substitution has been accomplished by the transformation of the academic workplace, not by stringing optic cable.” (56)

Bousquet’s thesis is that increasingly we are arriving at an “informationalized” academic workplace, i.e., a “just-in-time” delivery of information (as opposed to education). Crucial to the success of such a procedure is the overwhelming reliance on contingent labor. In this respect there are more teachers than ever on campus. They are the flex timers who can appear at a keystroke:

“As with other forms of consumerist enjoyment, flex-timers generally pay for the chance to work—buying subscriptions to keep up, writing tuition checks, donating time to internships and unpaid training, flying themselves to professional development opportunities—in all respects shouldering the expense of maintaining themselves in constant readiness for their right to work to be activated by the management keystroke.” (63)

As is clear, the academic flex-timers are part of the trend to two-tier employment that has developed since the 1980s (and showing no signs of abating). And the reaction of the workforce across widely different jobs has been similar. There is surprisingly little difference between the UPS workers acceptance of two-tiered employment at decent pay and decent benefits for the few and massive contingent labor for the many and the practices of academe. Even the relatively few tenured/tenure-track professors, seen as obstacles by management are quietly being taken care of by buy-outs and attrition. Much of the opining on the problems of adjunct labor has focused on drastic wage differentials between adjuncts and full-timers, for good reason. The lack of pension and health benefits is also something that should never be overlooked. This said, Bousquet notes the additional advantage accruing to management through contingent staff:

These folks can be dismissed quickly and cleanly. Despite representing the majority of the faculty, they require a minimal fraction of management time and attention. The extensive use of them permits [management] to advance most dimensions of the institutional mission with greater speed.

The obvious response to management's game plan is unionization. And Bousquet points out that this has been in one sense successful: "Since 1970, the academy has become one of the most unionized sectors of the North American workforce, and yet it's been a unionization inattentive to management's stunningly successful installation of a casualized second tier of labor" (79). This is an important fact, because "casualization and not technologization is . . . the key measure of informatics instruction. (81).

The next chapter I want to look at, "Students Are Already Workers," is perhaps the most shocking in the book. Taking UPS as a prime example, Bousquet examines in detail the student workers at UPS Louisville hub. The so-called "Earn and Learn" Program offers its students educational benefits in return for working the least desirable shifts. After working such a night shift, the student-worker then attends class—at 3:00 a.m.! As one teacher reported, the students,

"would come off sweaty, and hot, directly off the line into the class. It was very immediate and sort of awkward. They'd had no moment of downtime. They hadn't had their cigarette. They had no time to pull themselves together as student-person rather than package-thrower. (126).

These "third-shift" workers are undergraduates at something called Metropolitan College. "Supported by public funds . . . this institution is little more than a labor contractor"; it offers no degrees and does no educating. The relationship between UPS and Metropolitan College exists primarily to provide UPS with workers who will work the most undesirable shifts. (Indeed, they hire almost only those who will work such shifts.) The Earn and Learn" program is available only for such students. What education there is, is provided by teachers from local colleges, such as Jefferson Community College. This arrangement was instituted between 1997–2003. It was so successful (in UPS's terms – few students manage to earn degrees) that "students are currently the majority of all part-timers, and the overwhelming majority on the least desirable shifts" (127). "[All] of the benefits enjoyed by Metro College students are contingent on showing up at the facility every weeknight of the school year and performing physically strenuous labor for as long as they are needed" (127-28).

Bousquet's book is impressive for the research that has gone into it. He looks at weblogs maintained by workers at UPS, for example, and such a procedure balances and enriches the theoretical and historical work he has done. But one of his most impressive achievements is to tie in what is going on in this restructuring of the university with the reshaping of economic life generally. While I don't have space to go into the many sleazy maneuvers UPS uses (one example: a "bait-and-switch" policy whereby students who thought they could use their tuition certificates at the University of Louisville, are shunted off to community colleges), I will say that at times I felt I was in the bleak atmosphere of a B. Traven novel, *The Death Ship* or *The March to the Monteria* from the *Jungle Novels*, this last about the complete and total immiseration of Mexican peasants in the early years of the 20th Century. Clearly there are differences, though, as Bousquet shows, UPS is a physically demanding job. But that such conditions exist among a first-world proletariat is striking.

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