What does the American university stand for?

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For Andrew Loewen

"Commodification" is perhaps not the best name for what is happening to the American university system.[1] Neither is "corporatization." Sheila Slaughter and Gary Rhoades (2004) call our emerging paradigm "academic capitalism," meaning, among other things, that the American scientific and technical disciplines have become deeply entangled in patents, startups and industry contacts; that we have new market-like forms of ranking and evaluating students and institutions (Strathern 2000); and that our management systems are evolving in more or less businesslike directions (Greenwood 2013, Nolan 2008, Newfield and Grandin 2008, Veblen 1918). While the terms "commodification" and "corporatization" tend to suggest that these processes are impersonal and originate outside the university sector, Slaughter and Rhoades' "academic capitalism" reminds us that these projects have in fact been pursued by certain academic actors themselves (themselves, of course, in alliance with outside business and political interests). And even if academic capitalism is perceived by many actors as the new dominant paradigm, it is not monolithic or total; other modes of academic production persist alongside it. The large American research universities still (generally) support traditional humanistic disciplines like classics, art history, philosophy or linguistics, which are still doing traditional, non-commodified academic research: what Gibbons and company famously called "mode 1" (1994).[2] Liberal arts education is still being dispensed by elite colleges and universities, remaining a major cultural marker of class belonging, while a majority of American students continue to attend working-class "community colleges," generally more oriented towards vocational education. And a whole sector of politically progressive young fields, like black and ethnic studies, gender and queer studies, cultural studies and science studies, have established themselves in the American academy, the institutional legacies of the 1960s (Brint et al. 2009).

There are already many nuanced analyses of the linkages between the American university sector and the capitalist political economy, including Pierre Gervais' text in this volume.[3] But I think it misses the point somewhat to spend all our efforts on clarifying the processes named by words like "commodification" or "corporatization." Although (or even because) these terms are imprecise or inaccurate, they remain powerful *metaphors* in the American university sector, helping to rationalize and make moral sense of ambiguity and contradiction. These metaphors have a clear disciplinary location: it is generally the humanities and critical social sciences that publicly oppose commodification and corporatization, not the sciences or business schools. And it is also within the

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[1] In American English you would have to speak of "higher education" or "colleges and universities" or "post-secondary education," to be maximally inclusive, but I mean for the French *système universitaire américain* to include this whole range of institutional types. The American lexical distinctions need not greatly concern us.

[2] See also Critical Inquiry's special issue on Disciplines and Disciplinarity (Chandler 2009).

[3] See for instance Slaughter and Leslie 1997, Rhoads and Torres 2006, Chomsky et al. 1997, Williams 2006, Newfield 2004.

humanities and social sciences that we find the most significant forms of political mobilization and labor organization against academic precarity.

My aim here is thus to give a partial but, I hope, reflexive look at the American university sector, focusing on the position of these internal critics in humanities and critical social sciences[4]. I will begin with a brief look at the ideological impasses that emerged from one recent anti-precarity project. I then want to suggest that this roots of this epistemological impasse have to be understood sociologically, in terms of our evolving relations of class and disciplinary reproduction. Finally, I want to consider two ways that these internal critics have come to inhabit their contradictory place in the system: one way being labor organizing, another being a complex form of what I term dialogical false consciousness. In what follows, I will at times give demographic and general information, but as a politically engaged ethnographer, I have generally privileged the analysis of concrete situations.

Precarity and ideological impasse

A reflexive examination of the state of the American university system must start by admitting that *that there is objectively no standpoint* from which this system can be rationally examined. Most general overviews of the American university are written from the perspective of its leaders or its specialists, and *all* such projects are at best teetering on the edge of ideology, prone to universalizing and thus misrecognizing their own limited, particular point of view.[5] To be sure, all such particular points of view are themselves dialogic, in the sense that there is no social group in the American university system that is not aware of other social groups and that does not, one way or another, incorporate difference into its world picture. This, however, does not necessarily lead to a happy synthesis of different perspectives; it just means that we have increasingly dialogical forms of false consciousness, whose incommensurabilities are concealed by the attempts to overcome them. To put it in philosophical jargon, there is no universal subject in the American university, no group structurally able to aspire to epistemological totality. We have instead a series of inadequate

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[4] Much of the American social sciences is relatively policy-oriented, and heavily quantitative. One seldom finds academic labor mobilization in this more policy-oriented section of the academic field, which corresponds to a generally more technocratic and expertise-oriented political practice and aspiration. At the University of Chicago, for instance, doctoral students in Anthropology are extremely pro-unionization, whereas the Economics Department's doctoral students are deeply opposed.

[5] If someone were to object that this argument is itself universalizing and exaggerated, this would only illustrate my point. More seriously, it seems to me that the epistemological situation in the American university system is *not* simply one of a space where "chacun tente d'universaliser son point de vue," as my French colleagues have suggested. Instead, I would say that there are different and incommensurable *cultures of universalization*, within which generalizing discourses about the university may acquire a certain value, and within which different idioms and registers of universalization may emerge. The relationship between these cultures of universalization is not even one of a competition on a relatively legible field, because not every group is involved in the same language game; what we have instead is a process of uneven dialogue across social positions that *in turn spawns further misrecognition*, as I demonstrate below.

pretenders to the role of general spokesperson, and these, moreover, are seldom even aware that they are unconsciously involved in epistemological conflict.

This epistemological impasse obviously has social conditions of possibility, which are too complex to review here, belonging to the order of phenomena which Ronald Barnett would characterize as "supercomplex," or "both paradoxical and incoherent at the same time" (1998:47). It would not, however, be controversial to suggest that the precaritization of academic labor has been one of the most significant structural developments in recent decades.[6] The rise of academic precarity is normally understood through historical contrast with what now appears in the United States as the relatively golden age of tenured academic work in the post-1945 period. Federal government statistics have shown the rise of part-time and non-tenured full-time faculty from 34.3% of all teaching staff in 1975 to 54.9% in 2007, a relative growth that was entirely at the expense of the tenured faculty, as graduate student teaching employees have quite steadily retained their approximately 20% share over this period.[7] It's worth emphasizing briefly that, despite the exceptionalist accounts of the tenured faculty that set them apart from larger trends in American labor relations, this longer history of post-war security followed by post-1970s casualization is deeply in keeping with the general trajectory of post-Fordist American labor towards precarity.[8]

While national statistics are too coarse to provide much sociological detail about the non-tenured, precarious teaching staff, a 2010 large-scale – though not necessarily representative – survey by the Coalition on the Academic Workforce has provided some suggestive details, ones surprisingly similar to the analogous *Enquête précarité* performed in France the very same year (PECRES 2011). Looking at the part-time non-tenured respondents to the CAW survey (n=10,331), a majority (61.9%) were women, an overwhelming majority (about 90%) identified as white, and most were middle-aged (70% were between 36 and 65 years old), debunking, yet again, the ideological hope that precarity is a transient phase afflicting only the young. A near majority of respondents (44%) were teaching in the humanities, but precarious staff were spread across a wide range of disciplines, from professional schools to social and natural sciences. Salaries were quite low, the median pay being $2700 per course, with some variation by discipline; and median total earnings, for a Ph.D. holder teaching 8 courses per year, were $22,400 per year, which is a low wage in general and particularly so in relation to average earnings for other Ph.D. holders. That said, it seems clear that in most cases the income from part-time faculty work is only one component of a more complex

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[6] For more general overviews of the state of American academic labor, see AAUP 2012, Conley 2009, Bousquet 2008, 2003, 2002, Disch and O'Brien 2007, Schuster and Finkelstein 2006, Rhoades and Rhoads 2006, Rhoades 1998, Martin 1998, and Meisenhelder 1986. See also the excellent bibliography in Pankin and Weiss 2011.

[7] Needless to say, these shifts in relative size have to be analyzed in a context of overall growth of faculty over time: between 1975 and 2007, overall instructional staff grew from 783,370 to 1,690,415, and even the full-time tenured faculty expanded by 27.8% over the period. But the relative share and direction of growth are the most useful indicators for assessing general trends and managerial priorities.

[8] As Andrew Ross puts it, "In retrospect, the Keynesian era of state-backed securities—whether in the capitalist democracies, the socialist bloc, or the postcolonial, developmental states—was a brief interregnum, or, more likely, an armed truce" (2009:2).

household economy, since the CAW survey found that "household income for part-time faculty respondents was fairly evenly distributed from under $25,000 to over $150,000" (CAW 2012:15). The families of part-time faculty, that is, are widely distributed across class lines, a fact which is not without implications for the unionization projects we will consider below.

Faculty Employment Status by Institutional Category, Fall 2007

All Degree-Granting Institutions

	Full-time Faculty, by Tenure Status (% of Total Faculty)											
Public	**Tenured**		**Tenure-Track**		**Not Tenure-Track**		**All Full-time**		**Part-time**		**Total**	
4-year	163,041	32.1%	73,847	14.6%	106,575	21.0%	343,463	67.7%	163,931	32.3%	507,394	
2-year	46,024	12.8%	16,559	4.6%	49,449	13.7%	112,032	31.1%	248,530	68.9%	360,562	
	209,065	24.1%	90,406	10.4%	156,024	18.0%	455,495	52.5%	412,461	47.5%	867,956	64.3%
Private Non-profit												
4-year	81,203	22.1%	44,258	12.0%	75,659	20.6%	201,120	54.6%	166,907	45.4%	368,027	
2-year	129	3.2%	77	1.9%	1,210	30.0%	1,416	35.1%	2,618	64.9%	4,034	
	81,332	21.9%	44,335	11.9%	76,869	20.7%	202,536	54.4%	169,525	45.6%	372,061	27.6%
Private For-profit												
4-year	107	0.1%	77	0.1%	10,535	11.7%	10,719	11.9%	79,372	88.1%	90,091	
2-year	77	0.4%	8	0.0%	7,933	41.8%	8,018	42.2%	10,969	57.8%	18,987	
	184	0.2%	85	0.1%	18,468	16.9%	18,737	17.2%	90,341	82.8%	109,078	8.1%
All institutions												
4-year	244,351	25.3%	118,182	12.2%	192,769	20.0%	555,302	57.5%	410,210	42.5%	965,512	
2-year	46,230	12.1%	16,644	4.3%	58,592	15.3%	121,466	31.7%	262,117	68.3%	383,583	
	290,581	21.5%	134,826	10.0%	251,361	18.6%	676,768	50.2%	672,327	49.8%	1,349,095	100.0%

Source	US Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. Full-time from Employees in Postsecondary Institutions, Fall 2007 (NCES 2009-154): Table 4, p. 7. Part-time from IPEDS Winter 2007 Compendium tables 9-10. Compiled by Compiled by American Association of University Professors, John W. Curtis, Director of Research and Public Policy.

We can find an excellent illustration of the ideological impasses of this system by looking at the lacunas of one recent critique of academic precarity. On March 26, 2013, an article called "Our Dirty

Little Secret" appeared in the online academic newspaper *Inside Higher Education*. The article was a standard denunciation of the rise of what Americans call "contingent" teaching labor, work without durable title or permanent contract that would be called "precarious" in France. The authors begin by recalling the fact that, as we have just seen above, "more than two-thirds of the faculty providing instruction in non-profit higher education are currently employed off the tenure track."[9] And they go on to propose three major critiques of this precarious state of affairs. First, that it is poorly planned, a "haphazardly derived product of casual, short-term planning and reactionary decision making amid constrained budgets." Second, that it is not just "unethical" for the *teachers* but also (instrumentally) bad for the *students*: "poor working conditions... have an adverse effect on student retention, transfer, and graduation rates." And finally, that there has been too little "outrage or at least concern within our academic community" about the situation, except from "the adjuncts" themselves, whom the authors refer to in the third person as "they."

I want to stress two points about this text. First, the authors do not themselves identify as precarity's *victims*; they present themselves instead as semi-independent analysts, adopting the stance of the expert who can objectively identify and criticize bad policy without any clear personal stakes.[10] When at times they refer to the "we" of an "academic community," this designates no one in particular; it is merely a way of soliciting the reader's moral sympathy. They attempt to occupy a discursive middle ground, critical of the status quo without displaying unseemly militant anger or excessive moralizing.

This stance goes along with an ambivalence about the precise grounds on which precarity is to be condemned. At times, the authors do attack it as overtly "unethical," remarking that "moral objections [are] inherent in a model that would leave employees without a living wage or safety net." But this simple ethical denunciation does not seem to them sufficient, either logically or rhetorically, and they spend little time trying to elaborate it. They spend more of their energy stressing that precarity is *instrumentally ineffective*, poorly *planned* and *haphazard*, and bad for the *students*. In short, the authors hesitate between a moral critique from below and an instrumental critique from above — between a condemnation of unethical treatment as such, and a more measured complaint about inefficient bad policy that harms the student clientele.

My aim is not to denounce this position as such, but to point out that it reveals a certain strategy for dealing with moral and institutional problems in the tense, obscure space of American academe. The authors' own eclecticism, combining policy analysis and commonsense morality, culminates in an attempt to recruit academic "leaders" into a reform movement which they themselves propose to

[9] See the American Association of University Professors' recent report on the economic status of the profession (AAUP 2012), particularly Figure 3 (p. 10).

[10] The three authors all came from Higher Education Studies backgrounds, melding political and research credentials. Adrianna Kezar, the director of the Delphi Project for the Changing Faculty and Student Success, was a senior education professor at the University of Southern California; Daniel Maxey was her research assistant; and David Longanecker had been the Assistant Secretary for Postsecondary Education during the Clinton administration (1993-1999).

lead. "We invite leaders from across the country to join the Delphi Project on the Changing Faculty and Student Success not only in calling for changes, but in helping to create new solutions to this problem now," they close by saying, giving a link to their website. And their rhetoric of critical but reasonable expertise, in this position, delineates a centrist, moderate response to academic precarity, one that presupposes that precarious work is here to stay, even if it should be more ethically organized.[11]

Does this bid to lead an anti-precarity coalition succeed? We get some sense of its reception from the online comments on the article. Many were generally in agreement with the article: "This is certainly a moral issue," said Luis Montesinos; "Great article!" said joelcairo, though even these supporters showed no signs of immediately joining the coalition. Others were more skeptical: tossell, for instance, suggested a predictable economistic reinterpretation of the case. "To what extent is this a problem mainly of supply and demand?" tossell asked. "If a university can find desirable candidates who will accept a temporary adjunct position at a salary of $2700 per course, why should they be willing to pay more?"

But what is interesting — and what I think shows the real limits of this kind of moderate, policy-oriented coalition politics — was less the pro-market response than the unexpected critique from the left, which was mounted by one very vocal commenter, pablosharkman. He announced:

"Welcome to the working class, adjuncts. I've been in this battle since 1983..."

He remarked on the fact that the various "reformist" projects have done little to reverse the trend: "Back then [in 1983], about 40 percent PT [*temps partiel*]. Now, 2013, with all this analysis paralysis, these Delphi projects, these auxiliaries tied to MLA[12] and AAUP[13] and such? Well, 70 percent and rising, PT and contingent."

And he comments explicitly on the article's problems of voicing: "What's missing here, again, are legitimate voices of struggle, voices of anger, voices from the trenches. There is a sad middling language in these academic stories… So, this article, with the quote here, is repetition, and, we've been there, done it before…"

For this commenter, then, the article was an offensive failure and a "middling" form of "repetition," proposing a project that only effaced struggle, anger, and the voice from below. And this, I think, serves as a sufficient illustration of the impossibility of any general project of representation in the American academic sector. *Welcome to the working class*, says a representative of

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[11] Note that the Delphi Project website is indeed a rich vein of case studies that point towards treating adjuncts more fairly, with better pay, better benefits, and an expanded role in institutional governance. Again, my point is not to denounce that project, which is clearly a step in the right direction; it is rather to assess their discursive stance and the ideological and practical limits that go with it. In the end, they endorse a moral voluntarism that recruits "leaders" from the top down, which is quite different from the bottom-up labor organizing model of adjunct unionization campaigns.

[12] Modern Language Association.

[13] American Association of University Professors.

the contingent teaching core; *Welcome leaders to our ethical policy project,* says a concerned reformer. Perhaps both of these positions share certain critical ideas about precarity; but beyond that, they share nothing: neither class position, nor a political strategy, nor anger, nor a sense of possibility, nor a personal engagement. The adjunct says, *in spite of you policy people, things have been getting worse for so long,* while the policy people say, *it is time for us leaders to join together and finally make a difference.* Since this whole conversation is happening online, they never even have to have a face to face encounter. In sum, far from witnessing a coherent political subject come into view, we see morality becoming banality, criticism becoming repetition, political moderation fraying at the seams, and class lines solidifying within our ranks. Fortunately, this minor moment is not the end of the story.

Class and disciplinary reproduction

Our understanding of the demographic basis of these ideological contradictions improves as we consider the social heterogeneity of the sector. In 2011, the American university sector counted 21.0 million enrolled students, spread across some 4706 degree-granting institutions of higher education.[14] As Figure 1 illustrates, enrollments have continued to grow over the past decade, with a marked rise around 2008-10 due to the financial crisis. The private for-profit sector has seen by far the most rapid growth: in 2011 it had about two million enrolled students, up from only about 625,000 in 2002. This comes to about 220% growth in a decade, compared to only 18% growth for public institutions and 21% for private non-profits.[15] More recently, though, the for-profit boom has dwindled; enrollments plateaued in 2011, and the most prominent for-profit establishment, the University of Phoenix, has closed half its branch campuses.[16]

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[14] Digest of Education Statistics 2012, Ch. 3. http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d12/ch_3.asp, accessed January 1, 2014.

[15] According to U.S. Census Bureau figures, the estimated resident population of the country grew from 288,129,987 to 312,017,903 during the same time period (September 2002-September 2011), which amounts to 8.3% growth. We can thus see that university sector enrollments have expanded considerably faster than the general population over the past decade.

[16] See Paul Fain, "Phoenix Reloads." Inside Higher Ed, October 26, 2012. http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2012/10/26/university-phoenix-down-not-out, accessed April 10, 2013.
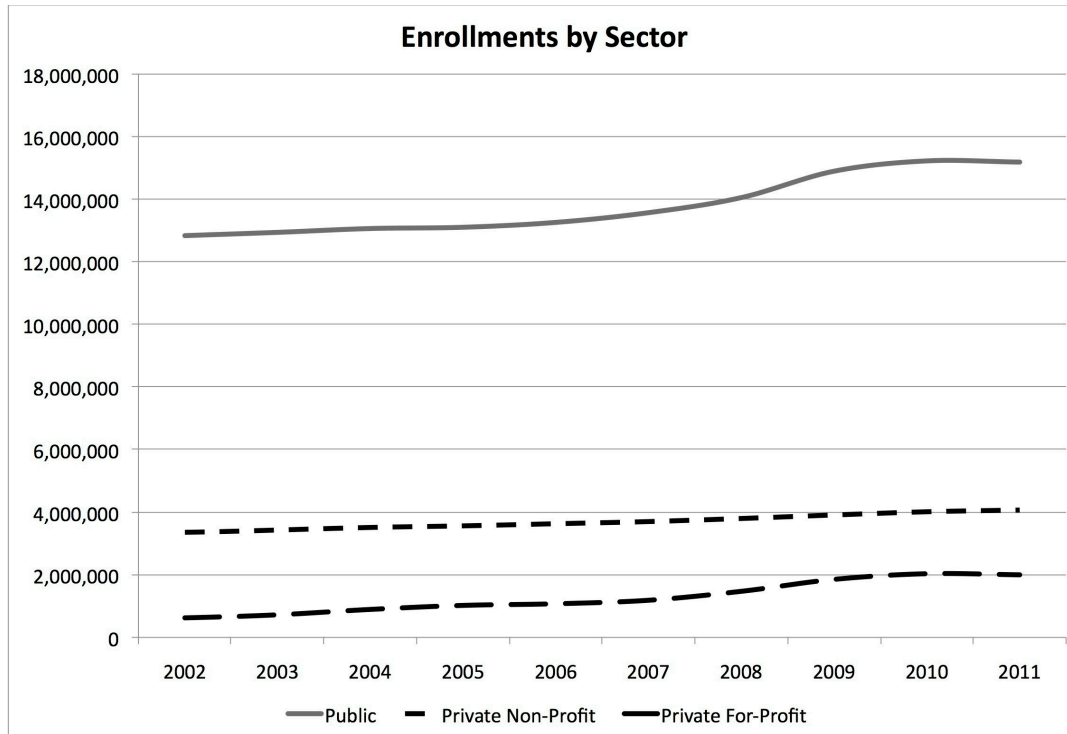
Figure 1: Enrollments by Institutional Sector[17]

As embodiments of nakedly corporate values, with typically aggressive marketing campaigns, these institutions have been widely criticized by traditional academics. But the scholarly distaste for for-profit higher education also has a veiled class subtext. If we consider students' family income distribution by institutional type (Table 1), it becomes apparent that the social composition of the two-year for-profit institutions is dramatically more working class than in any other sector. The median U.S. household income was $50,132 in 2008; the median household income for the families of 2-year for-profit students was only $33,535. Given this level of objective economic disparity, it is not surprising that scholars like Tressie McMillan Cottom who have studied the milieu observe a strong sense of *knowing one's place*, as if social class were, as usual, ingrained in students' class habitus. She comments that for-profit students have "a sense... that they made the best choice available to them," while students at elite colleges view for-profit establishments as "not [schools] for people like them" (2013; cf. Brint and Karabel 1989).

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[17] Data from IPEDS Enrollment Survey (2002-2011).

Family Income and Race by Institutional Type, 2008

Institutional Type	Student's family income by percentile					Student body racial composition		
	10th %	25th %	50th %	75th %	90th %	White	Black	Hispanic
For-Profit: 2-year degree	$8,316	$20,656	$33,535	$64,927	$87,056	52%	23%	12%
Public: 2-year degree (small rural)	$13,195	$25,787	$50,258	$70,353	$100,972	70%	18%	3%
Public: 2-year degree (urban multi-campus)	$11,347	$27,650	$51,680	$85,005	$121,425	41%	19%	21%
Public: 2-year degree (suburban single-campus)	$17,401	$34,870	$57,915	$89,823	$120,648	61%	12%	12%
Research universities	$23,603	$43,602	$78,813	$119,102	$163,867	57%	14%	6%
Engineering colleges	$19,498	$37,118	$75,705	$110,542	$148,277	67%	6%	1%
Research universities (high research activity)	$24,976	$48,720	$82,400	$120,894	$166,528	62%	11%	6%
Liberal Arts Colleges	$27,409	$52,689	$86,336	$131,751	$180,000	68%	10%	4%
Research universities (very high research activity)	$28,153	$53,777	$91,855	$131,211	$179,855	58%	5%	6%

Table 1: 2008 Race and family income distribution for dependent students, by selected institutional type[18]

The figures bear this out. If we look more closely at Table 1, we can see how social class works out more broadly in the American university system. The table gives a basic sense of how students' ethnic and racial identities, and their family incomes[19], are spread out over a range of institutional types.[20] We can see that, in general, the families of dependent students at lower-status, two-year establishments are clustered around the national median household income. The families of students at high-status research universities, on the other hand, all have median family incomes more than 50% above the national average, reaching over 80% above the national average at the most elite research universities.[21] One notices that the racial composition of the student bodies changes as one ascends the institutional status hierarchy as well: the proportion of black and Hispanic students falls, and white students tend to predominate.

This does not mean, naturally, that any university sector is completely socially homogenous. But it seems nevertheless that the white American bourgeoisie remains the dominant clientele in the most prestigious university sectors, the elite research universities and the liberal arts colleges. These institutions are in turn the ones where the American humanities retains its deepest base of institutional and ideological support: in 2011, 53.1% of humanities degrees were awarded in research universities, which are a minority of all university enrollments (only producing 32.5% of all degree recipients[22]) even as they have dramatically wealthier student bodies. It thus seems fair to conclude

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[18] Note that the reported incomes refer to family income for "dependent" students (those who are legally dependent on their families for tax and financial aid purposes), but to student income for "independent" students. Income data source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2007-08 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS:08). Racial composition source: IPEDS Fall 2008 figures. Note that "White," "Black" and "Hispanic" are obviously inadequate and reifying categories for the U.S. racial situation; I use them here only as suggestive indicators of class divides. Also note that, for space reasons, I have only presented selected ethno-racial categories, leaving out foreign students, Asian and Pacific Islanders, American Indians, and unknown columns (thus, the figures do not sum to 100%).

[19] National data in America does not usually have a measure that entirely corresponds to the French classificatory system of PCS, so I have used family income as a very rough proxy.

[20] Note that this list is not exhaustive. The list of types comes from the 2005 Carnegie Basic institutional classification system. I have selected certain categories that give a sense of the system as a whole.

[21] To put these figures in some perspective, for the top fifth of the American population, the mean household income was $171,057, for the bottom fifth it was $11,656, and for the middle fifth, it was $50,132.

[22] According to IPEDS 2011 figures.

that there *continues* to be some connection between the traditional humanistic disciplines and the reproduction of the American upper classes. The cultured disciplines remain something of a class privilege;[23] as in France, the massification of the American university system has not necessarily produced social equality (see also Armstrong and Hamilton 2013, Walpole 2003).
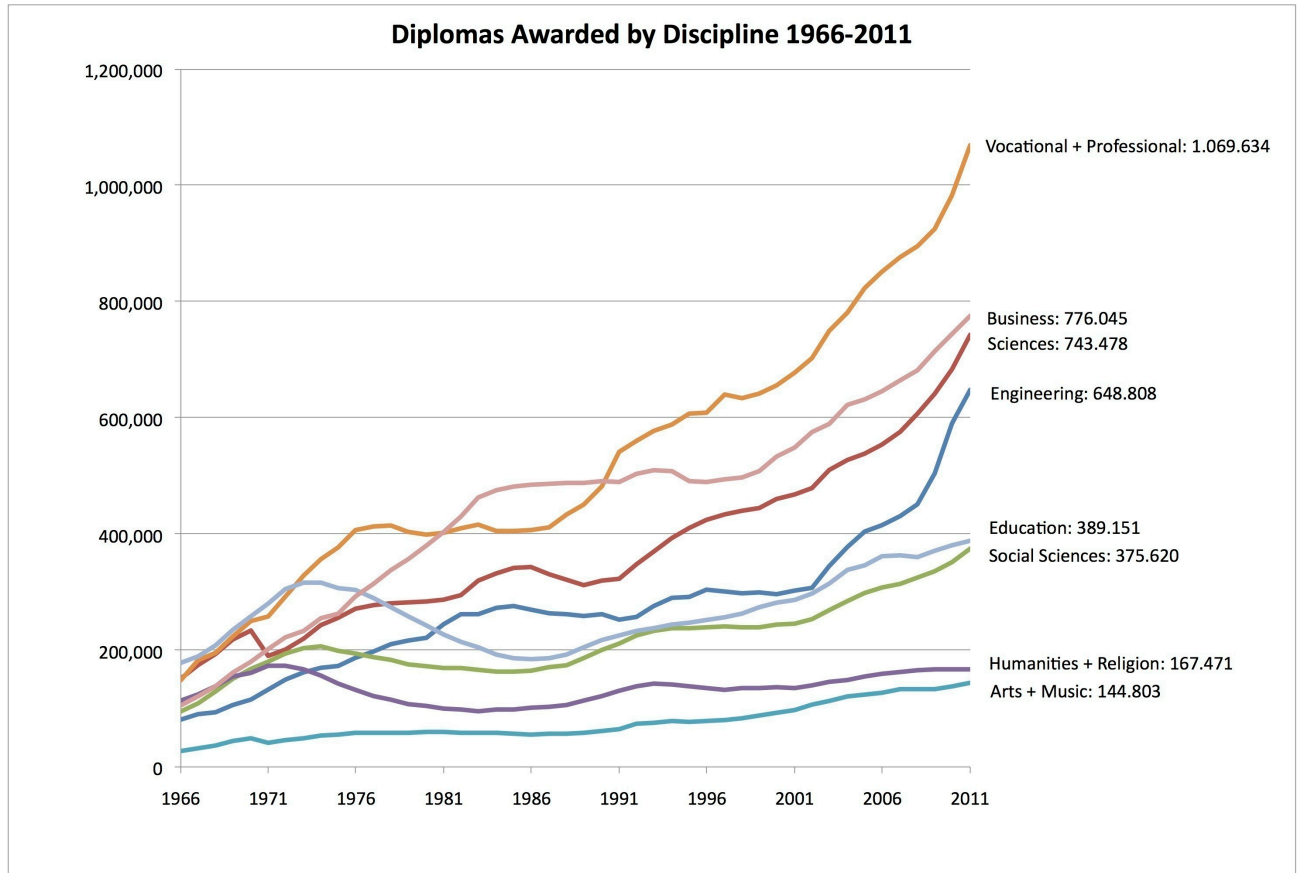

Figure 2: Diplomas granted by discipline, 1966-2011[24]

The evolving conflicts of the academic disciplines mediate and are, in turn, mediated by these larger class-based uses of the educational system. If we turn to look more closely at the evolving demographics of disciplinary production (Figure 2), the overall situation is clear: the large majority of American university diplomas are now granted in business, science, engineering, and professional-vocational fields (Brint et al 2005). Business is by far the largest single field, now graduating more than three quarters of a million students per year, and is only surpassed by the sum of all vocational and professional fields (in which I have lumped together fields like communications, social service, law, architecture, etc). The social sciences passed the humanities in 1970 and have acquired a distinctly intermediate position, similar in size to education, with 375-390.000 graduates per year. As for the humanities, no doubt the most "classical" of disciplines, their *relative* share of graduates has

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[23] See the special issue of the *Minnesota Review* on "Smart Kids" (vol. 61-62), particularly the essays by Williams (2004) and Kendig (2004).

[24] Source: IPEDS Completions Survey.

dropped greatly since the 1960s, although, as the figures show, they have nevertheless managed to maintain their *absolute* production of graduates since the 1990s, and have even grown somewhat over the past decade. This stability of absolute numbers is coupled to their high cultural and academic capital (Graeber 2007), which leaves them in a particularly contradictory position as the majority of academic jobs in the humanities become precarious. They are excluded from the lion's share of enrollment growth, are disproportionately represented at elite establishments, and are decoupled from more marketized sections of the education market, but their continuing cultural and academic legitimacy means that they are far from the most subordinated fraction of the professional-managerial class (Meisenhelder 1986, Ehrenreich and Ehrenreich 1977).

Objectified bitterness and splitting

When academics come to have much cultural capital but little economic capital, their contradictory social situations frequently yield subjective contradictions as well. The state of split consciousness in the humanities is perhaps best illustrated by a semi-comedic animated video that recently became a sensation, called "So you want to get a PhD in the Humanities." It was released on YouTube on October 25, 2010,[25] and would go on to get some 742,066 views, which is quite a success for an academic milieu that only has 1.48 million teaching staff across all fields.[26] In my own circles, the video is fairly well known, and it seems to have spread rapidly across online social networks; similar videos rapidly emerged for other academic fields.[27] Its author was Leslie Allison, a 26-year-old doctoral student in English at Temple University in Philadelphia. Interviewed by the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Allison explained that the video was based on a similar video about going to law school, and that she had only spent "$5 and about 90 minutes" to produce it. She added: "The cartoon aspect of the video lends some humor to it and allows people to receive the message that you're putting across more positively… Even though it's a very cynical message."[28]

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[25] http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=obTNwPJvOI8, viewed April 11, 2013.

[26] U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), Winter 2009-10, Human Resources component, Fall Staff section.

[27] Examples: "So you want to get a PhD in Economics?" (Dec. 14, 2010), "So you want to be an Electrical Engineer" (Jan. 4, 2011), "So you want a PhD in Clinical Psychology?" (Jan. 23, 2011).

[28] "So you think an English professor's life is a cartoon," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, January 16, 2011. http://chronicle.com/article/So-You-Think-an-English/125954/, accessed January 1, 2014.

Fig. 1: The confrontation of self with self, from "So you want to get a PhD in the humanities?"

In cartoon fashion, with computer-generated, half-robotic voices, the video shows what happens when a young woman student comes to her professor's office. She is there to ask for a letter of recommendation to graduate school in English literature, and the professor tries to talk her out of it, citing a host of practical and experiential reasons why it is "not a good idea" to go to graduate school. But the professor discovers at each turn that the student is incapable of hearing her objections. Rather than reconsidering her decision, the student takes every opportunity to voice her ardent desire for a clichéd "life of the mind."

> Professor: So you said you want to meet with me today.
> Student: Yes. I am going to grad school in English.
> Professor: No. I don't think that's a good idea.
> Student: Yes. I am going to be a *college professor*.

> Professor: Do you see where I am teaching? We're in the middle of Nowhere, Nebraska. Do you want to move to the middle of nowhere to teach?
> Student: I got an A on my Hamlet paper. I have brilliant thoughts about the theme of death in literature.
> Professor: In all of literature? What field do you intend to specialize in?
> Student: All of it. I'm going to be a college professor. I'm going to write smart things about death in literature.
> Professor: Do you know how many admissions committees are going to laugh at your application?

When the student's affirmative "Yes" meets an immediate "No" from above, she responds by gazing steadily back at the professor and flatly contradicting her in turn, standing by her image of an academic future, reiterating her desire. She does not dispute the facts, since she has no resources for doing so; nor does she dispute the professor's moral authority, since the very premise of this encounter is that she admires and covets her professor's elevated role. Neither party wants to change her views. They are immediately at a standoff.

An academic viewer of the video is, I suspect, likely to spontaneously see the student as embodying youthful naivety. After all, her beliefs about academia are plainly absurd. Her claim to have "brilliant thoughts about the theme of death in literature," for instance, only reveals her woeful ignorance of the importance of academic specialization and expertise in graduate study. The professor, by contrast, displays her knowledge of academic life, of how to make admissions committees "laugh at your application." She comes across as the voice of blunt institutional realism. The pleasure here for young American academics, I suspect, has much to do with seeing naivety put in its place, with laughing at the student's flawed reasoning. Academic viewers get the chance to identify with the seeming voice of knowledge, confirmed in their awareness of all the reasons why academic life is complex and terrible.

It would, however, be deeply inadequate to interpret the video as an encounter between the naive, typical young student and the older, wiser professor. I would argue that in fact the scholarly point of view is not embodied by the *character*, the *representation* of the professor, but rather is embedded in the structure of the situation, which is itself an icon, coming to serve as a structural diagram of a split subjectivity. Instead of describing a confrontation between two subjects, this video stages the powerful dynamics of overidentification and misrecognition that can take place *within* an academic subject.[29] Consider the penultimate soliloquy of the video:

> Professor: You will have a career where people will constantly demand that you justify to them why you exist, and you will begin to question the nature of your own existence. You

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[29] I hasten to note that this analysis does not intend to make any generalizing psychological claims about today's American academic humanists. I read the video as a cultural symptom of a contradictory institutional situation — a model *for* (as well as *of*) one possible academic subjectivity among others. The rest of the essay evokes some other possible positions (the technocratic expert and the labor organizer) in admittedly less detail.

will discover that your life has been a complete waste, and that will be confirmed to you when a student like you walks into your office asking you for a recommendation.

It becomes clear, as the video progresses, that these two figures are less two separate characters than two distinct moments in a single academic lifecourse. They represent two moments in a shared social destiny that functions through mimesis and overidentification of the young with the old.[30] Here, this structural identity between young and old is made clear poetically by the increasingly ambiguous use of *you*, which comes to designate both the professor and the student. "*You* will discover that your life has been a complete waste, and that will be confirmed *to you* when a student *like you* walks into *your* office asking *you* for a recommendation": *you* in this context refers at once to the student in the future, to the professor in the present, and perhaps to the viewer as well, whose split subjectivity might only be concealed by momentary overidentification with the character of the professor.

This structural identity between student and professor entails not only mutual recognition but mutual misrecognition. The phantasmatic character of overidentication is obvious in the case of the student, who comes into the office wanting to become the person she imagines her teacher already is, a person who (in the student's words) is "going to write smart things," who "will inspire students to think critically about literature," who has "potential as a literary scholar." But what becomes clear in the speech above is that the professor recognizes herself in the student as well, indeed recognizes herself only too clearly, as she despairingly tries to warn the student of the probable existential costs of a hopeless scholarly career, a "complete waste" of a life. If, as Marc Bousquet has argued, the hopeless casualization of academic work has become "a horrible blot or stain" on the system of academic reproduction (2002:90), then here we see how this stain can swell up into a existential problem not only for its obvious victims, the underemployed or excluded workers themselves, but also for intermediate faculty, like the gray-haired professor in the video. The intermediate agents and managers of this system can find themselves "experiencing inside a kind of misery," and only "have agency in retreat" (Newfield 1998:177).

But if the video dramatizes the subjective wounds visited on these intermediate faculty, it simultaneously illustrates how they become repressed and disavowed. Consider: the student is not the incarnation of a non-academic come to mount an attack on the professoriate, she is something much more uncanny — a projection of the cruel optimism and attachment buried within an academic self.[31] And her uncanny identity with the professor is precisely the source of the professor's discomfort. Indeed, one might speculate that part of the attraction of the video, for an academic viewer, is that it allows academics to externalize and objectify their own painful attachment to their degraded profession, and then to experience the vicarious pleasures of disavowal via the professor's increasingly bitter attacks on the student. Faced with her student's refusal to listen, the

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[30] Or at least with their fantasy of the old.

[31] I do not claim that this form of split subjectivity characterizes all or even most contemporary U.S. academics, but I would suggest that it is a familiar enough pattern that many would recognize it in themselves or in some of their colleagues. For a more general theory of cruel optimism, see Berlant (2006).

professor eventually resorts to incredulous insults: "I cannot respect you," "You cannot seriously be this stupid!" When we recall that the professor deeply identifies with her student, we realize that these statements are actually disavowed *self*-criticism. They amount to exclaiming, "How can I be this stupid?" and "I cannot respect myself!"

In the last scene of this video, things come to a sort of ideological climax:

> Professor: ...You will discover that your life has been a complete waste, and that will be confirmed to you when a student like you walks into your office asking you for a recommendation.
> Student: So will you write me a recommendation?
> Professor: Yes. Give me the forms. I will have it for you by Monday.
> Student: Thank you. I find you very inspiring.
> Professor: Please get the frack out of my office. (She blinks.)

For the character of the professor, this is *the* ideological moment of the whole encounter, the moment where she can no longer fend off ideological interpellation, where she believes she sees through all the false premises and promises of an academic life, but fulfills her role in academic reproduction anyway. In this moment, her own repressed attachment to the structural optimism that organizes academic careers becomes apparent through the very form of her machinic, compulsive relation to her own praxis, as she reverts to type (on which more in a moment). Asked if she will write a recommendation, she finally becomes pragmatic, efficient. "I will have it for you by Monday," she says. The student then thanks her and calls her "inspiring": this looks like a ritual false compliment, but in the last analysis is just an accurate statement of the reality of the student's fantasy, since structurally, she *does* find her professor very inspiring.[32] And the coda that follows, where the professor cannot prevent herself from venting her bitterness at the student – "Please get the frack out of my office" – is the moment that confirms the futility of academic self-consciousness. Her curse is an impotent gesture of rebellion that relieves frustration, but changes nothing.

The professor, in sum, inhabits something like the cynical stance that Peter Sloterdijk calls *enlightened* false consciousness, a state of "[knowing] oneself to be without illusions and yet dragged down by the 'power of things' " (1984:193). The student on the other hand is in just the opposite position: she inhabits ideology *wishfully*, and she voices a sort of dream logic, where her longing (to become an academic) becomes feasible merely by being pictured.[33] Hers is a logic which is impervious both to rational counter-argument and to emotional appeals, a logic which depends on overidentifying with her idealized image of the professor while ignoring any unwelcome features of this Other. The form of this wishful subjectivity is a logic of sheer repetition, which only knows how to affirm its fantasy, over and over, mechanically.

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[32] Again, Berlant's analysis of the fantasy structures of feminist pedagogy (1997) is a model analysis of these intersubjective dynamics.

[33] This is of course also in keeping with larger American "dreams" or fantasies about opportunity without impediment and ambition without social structure.

There is a dialectic here between fantasy and institution; each is the condition of the other. The student's intolerable *affirmativeness* is coupled to an insistent instrumentalism. She wants to be a college professor; and by the end of the scene, she has been promised the letter of recommendation she needs. On one level, this is a standard institutional negotiation about a standard, instrumentally necessary request. But as we have seen, the professor tries – and fails – to resist this instrumental request on the grounds of her own reasoned analysis of the situation. On a second level, then, the video illustrates the impotence of intellectual argument and critical knowledge in the face of fantasy; all the intellectual arguments fail, one after the next, to make the fantasy even budge.

Yet there is a telling irony about these fantasies: far from being deeply original, deeply individual inventions, they themselves are sheer institutional products. Just what is the common denominator of the student's stated passions for "thinking critically about literature," for "working hard," for collaborative learning," for "inspiring students," for having "potential as a scholar," for wanting a "life of the mind"?[34] Nothing if not that they are all bits of American liberal arts marketing rhetoric; they are identical to the standard platitudes that humanistic scholars generally produce when asked to give a public rationalization of liberal education. And so in fact we are confronted here with a doubly uncanny image. Not only is the repressed ambivalence of the humanities professor revealed here by the presence of the naive student who wants to become her, but also the deep, sustaining fantasies about the goodness and value of humanistic scholarship turn out to be structurally inauthentic, the internal echoes of our own academic marketing discourse. In short, the student is uncanny because she is someone who appears to *truly believe* the platitudes about critical thinking, etc., that we put in our mission statements,[35] someone who demonstrates that our fantasies about the fundamental worth of scholarship are fantasies that *come from outside*.[36]

The bearers of these scholarly fantasies of value and knowledge, for their part, are as typical as what they espouse. The voices and faces in the video are auto-generated by the (now-defunct) computer software Xtranormal, and as the preformatted quality emphasizes, neither the professor nor the student has much individuality. They are spokespeople for social types, the everywomen of today's humanistic disciplines. Indeed, their mutual (mis)identification is grounded sociologically in their gender and racial identities: both are women, both are white. In this, they represent the modal social identity in the American humanities, where women far outnumber men and whites are the most common racial group.[37] The subjective contradictions and ambiguities represented in this video

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[34] For a different sort of ideological analysis of the "life of the mind," see Jeffrey Williams (1996).

[35] Contrast this with Bonnie Urciuoli's linguistic and ethnographic analyses of how these mission statements are cynical tools for management and marketing strategies (2003, 2005, 2008).

[36] I would take issue here with Christopher Newfield's reading of the "the passions that can supersede predictable white-collar ambivalence" (1999:911). I suggest instead that these "passions" have become uncanny, even unlivable for their bearers in the humanistic disciplines.

[37] In 2011, women constituted 61.0% of new doctors in English and literature, 57.5% of new doctors in foreign languages, and 33.0% of new doctors in other humanistic fields. In the same year, whites constituted 69.1% of new doctors in English, 46.1% of new doctors in foreign languages, and 64.3% of new doctors in other humanistic fields. (It is worth noting that the fraction of white doctors in foreign languages is lower because of these fields' large

can thus be seen to emerge from a historical dynamic marked, as the Modern Language Association has recently put it, by the combined effect of "trends affecting all higher education, but especially the humanities: the casualization of academic labor, the feminization of the humanities, and the defunding of the liberal arts" (MLA 2009:2). Feminization in particular has been a structurally ambiguous process: while women have become demographically dominant in the humanities, no longer being subject to the extreme misogyny of the 1970s by some accounts (Philips 2010), they are still subject to structural sexism in promotion, salaries and workload. The MLA's recent study found that "men disproportionately held positions of higher rank than women and moved through the ranks more rapidly than women" (2009:1). It is no accident, then, that while the video casts white women as the typical — though not yet unmarked — type in today's American humanities, it singles out high-status men as particular symptoms of disciplinary inequity and structural sexism.

> Student: It is important that I go to Yale. They have Harold Bloom.
> Professor: Harold Bloom is a misogynistic narcissist. He is not even in their English Department. They gave him his own Department of Humanities because no one could frackin' stand him.

"Misogynistic narcissism" becomes the correlate, precisely, of status – Bloom being a famous, controversial Yale professor who had been publicly accused of a long history of sexual harassment (Wolf 2004). And we see how a pedagogy of curbed ambition gets coupled to a pedagogy of structural sexism: the student is being taught not only that she should know her place and limit her professional expectations, but also that high-status men like Bloom are above the pale even if they are vile, secure in their rights to abuse others while retaining their status. A moment later, the professor will expand this point into marriage advice to the student, warning her that "on the rare occasion it does happen [that an academic couple can find jobs together], women are usually offered the lower-paying position."

Like all lessons in academic realism, these are implicitly lessons in critical resignation and symbolic violence.[38] And the structural ambiguities of feminization coupled to growing precarity and downward mobility are particularly marked in English literature, which serves in the video to typify "the humanities" in general. English is clearly the demographically dominant field in the American humanities, producing 1515 new doctors in 2011, against 646 in foreign languages, 566 in religion and theology, and 576 in other humanistic fields.[39] It is nevertheless a field divided internally between low-status (but widespread) composition teaching (Shaker 2008), and high-status, specialized and subdivided scholarly research on literature and theory (Graff 1987). The low-status sector of the field is subject to particularly high rates of precarious employment, and its precarious workers are especially poorly paid, making around $2500 (against a median of around $2700: CAW

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contingent of foreign students, 31.1% in 2011. Of course, there is a certain category confusion inherent in the national figures, which classify "temporary residents" or foreign students as a racial category.)

[38] What I mean by this is that the teacher is indeed revealing a form of criticality towards the status quo, but one which does not propose to intervene in it in any practical or political sense.

[39] Figures from NSF Survey of Earned Doctorates, 2011, retrieved via WebCASPAR.

2012:38). This evolving internal differentiation has reshaped political and professional positions within the discipline, documented for instance by a 2009 survey of literary critics' "credos" in the *Minnesota Review*. While some scholars directly advocated labor organizing and new forms of "pack consciousness" (Steffan 2009, Bousquet 2009), others objected to politics in the name of professionalism (Graff 2009). While some cast themselves as inheritors of the theoretically effervescent 1970s and 1980s, still trying to "incite students to theorize" (Fuss 2009:187), others remarked on a "slowing down in theory production" (Looser 2009:225), and defended a turn towards normal science in post-sixties fields like women's literary history.

Interestingly, even though the video's creator, Allison, was a specialist in feminist theory, the more politicized stances in English are absent from the video, and what we see instead is a depressive version of the professionalist stance. As far as one can judge from the scene it depicts, the professor's job may be bad, but she keeps doing it all the same. The worst risk for her is not getting fired, in the end, but having to confront her own alienation from her work and from her ideals. Not surprisingly, this alienation seems to become palpable for her at the moment of encountering an Other who wants to become her. Her response then exaggerates external menace and hostility, as if to camouflage and rationalize her internal ambivalence about her job. If her professional ambivalence is externalized in one direction onto the student, it is also externalized in another direction onto the institution, as if the situation, not the subject, was what was bad and compromised.

In the end, like all successful ideological projects, the video works to make the real into the tolerable, to mediate objective social and subjective contradictions by translating them into enjoyable fictions with easy objects for academics' displaced ambivalence. In order to do this, as I have tried to show, it inadvertently dramatizes how professorial ambivalence can be repressed, and how naive (but structural) optimism about the life of the mind can be disavowed. At the same time, it re-enacts the dynamics of projection, identification, disavowal, and disgust that constitute some of the most plausible subjective strategies for today's precarious academic humanists. The political moral of this story is quietist: it suggests that there is nothing in the end to do but live through the worst of the absurdities we are offered, continuing to do our jobs after incredulity has set in. It is in this sense a perfect illustration of the fact that today's "crisis of the humanities" is less a matter of outright disappearance than of progressive alienation, downclassing and internal stratification. And yet quietism has not been the only response.

The ambiguities of mobilization

The state of the American academic labor movement can be conveniently gauged from a recent conference, called "Countering Contingency," that met in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania in early April 2013. The conference was sponsored by the United Steelworkers (USW), a large industrial union that has traditionally been strong in western Pennsylvania. The increasing precaritization of

academic staff has, in fact, provided something of an organizing opportunity for the beleaguered U.S. labor movement, and the Steelworkers were in good company in allocating new resources to unionizing contingent faculty, as similar campaigns have lately been supported by the American Federation of Teachers, the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), and the United Auto Workers. Traditionally these campaigns have been fought one campus at a time, but at the Pittsburgh conference, a new, more ambitious regional strategy came into view. The long-term goal of the USW's campaign in Pittsburgh, as of the organizing campaigns currently backed by SEIU in Washington, D.C. and Boston, was to organize all part-time faculty across a metropolitan area, thereby raising standards for academic working conditions and increasing pressure on individual campus administrations.

The argument for the campaign began, unsurprisingly, with the state of current affairs, which was dire in both economic and gender terms. "An adjunct's salary isn't much higher than a janitor's," said the union president, Leo Gerard, as he introduced the Pittsburgh conference. "It should be brought up to where you can live with dignity."[40] The subsequent speaker went on to emphasize how precarity goes hand in hand with the structural sexism we saw above. "The contingent track is a mommy track; the [traditional] academic career path was originally developed for men with wives," she said, describing herself as a "contingent mother philosopher." She went on to point out that, all too often, contingent faculty are *blamed* for their lot, as if it were their fault that they could not get better jobs, rather than a result of an irrational, unfair labor system.

Over the next three days, conversations ranged from organizing strategies and academic labor history to more personal testimonies about adjunct life. "To elitists, careerists or supremacists, adjuncts aren't people. They are an inert material, like dirt!" exclaimed one late-middle-aged, long-term adjunct in English. "We shouldn't compete with each other in a system set up to exploit all workers; we should band together demand improvements... We can't all make it into the 1%," remarked a younger organizer from the Duquesne campaign. "There can be liberation in contingency," said two advocates of academic freedom for adjuncts. Others were more skeptical, even despairing. Even "a modicum of bastardized academic freedom comes at a price." "Do we really want these jobs?" "These jobs are gonna be *gone* by the time we can do something about it."

While there was certainly an aspiration to solidarity, there was also a keen, realistic sense of the possible conflicts with the tenured faculty, who typically serve as middle management for the contingent staff. "There will be no true solidarity" between tenured and contingent faculty "until all conflicts of interest are resolved," argued one adjunct. A sense of epistemological impasse also made itself felt: "There's something about being contingent faculty that's opaque to tenured faculty, mostly opaque to grad students, almost entirely opaque to students." In response to these sorts of dilemmas, the union organizers in the room tended to advocate strategies that aimed broadly, extending beyond the level of the individual campus. "This cannot be won one institution at a time," argued David Rodich, from the Service Employees International Union. "We experience domination

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[40] All these quotations come from my notes, taken at the conference. They may not be verbatim.

individually, but we have to respond collectively," said Joe Berry, a national figure in contingent faculty organizing for more than thirty years. "The bosses almost always underestimate us," he added, "because they believe in their own meritocracy."

The conference had emerged from a recent, largely successful unionization campaign that the Steelworkers supported in Pittsburgh. The campaign had aimed to organize part-time adjuncts at Duquesne University in Pittsburgh, and it had followed the standard American unionization process. This consists in recruiting a majority of a given workforce to sign cards supporting the union; then holding a vote to certify the union as the workers' legitimate representative; then, finally, negotiating a labor contract with the employer, who is legally obligated to bargain with the union. The Duquesne campaign had won its certification election in June 2012, but the university administration had immediately appealed the legitimacy of this election in court,[41] claiming that the university's status as a religious (Catholic) institution would exempt it from federal labor regulation. This claim seemed weak, and even the administration admitted (in an accidentally leaked email) that they expected to lose their appeal, but apparently still thought it worthwhile to delay union negotiations as long as possible.

In the meantime, the local organizers had decided to organize a conference as a way to mobilize, educate, and reach out to other contingent staff in the region and across the country. The vast majority of conference participants came from the humanities or social sciences, and the largest single disciplinary group was clearly English literature, which is the discipline that has been most militant in academic labor organizing since the 1990s. The conference thus offers us a good gauge of the limits and possibilities of today's academic labor movement.[42] There was a real sense of optimism and collectivity, coupled to a recognition of the major material and symbolic gains that a union-negotiated employment contract could obtain. At the same time, a labor identity in the university milieu requires a real shift in subjective identity, since the accepted American image of the humanistic scholar depicts someone set apart from the physical toil associated with industrial unionism (Williams 2004). It is, moreover, hardly an easy moment for labor identities in the United States, whose conservative political climate has painted teachers' unions, in particular, in a grim light, and culminated in vicious legislative attacks on state workers' unions across the Midwest, most famously in Wisconsin under Republican governor Scott Walker.

The question of the material *risks* of unionization, in particular the risks of contract non-renewal, was often asked during the conference, and seldom received an entirely conclusive answer. A number of the participants in the conference, however, had arrived at a clear personal position:

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[41] "Duquesne adjunct faculty to join United Steelworkers," in the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, Sept. 21, 2012.

[42] Joe Berry at one point commented that the level and sophistication of contingent mobilization in Pittsburgh today far outstrips what it would have been ten or fifteen years ago anywhere in the country. A broader analysis would have to look at the relations between contingent faculty organizing, graduate student organizing, faculty organizing (in those public university systems that permit it), and non-academic staff unionization (which is much less ideologically controversial, but nevertheless subject to opposition from university administrations, largely for cost reasons).

adjunct exploitation was bad enough that organizing was worth it, whatever the possible costs. "Compared to the tenured, we have little to lose," or so it was said. Not everyone was entirely persuaded of that view, and there were fairly perceptible differences in habitus between faculty organizers and the more resigned, often older faculty. In comparison to the assertive and militant discourses of the faculty organizers, and the even stronger and more militant stance of the professional union staff, one could not fail to perceive the weight of physical and symbolic domination among the long-time contingent workforce, many of whom had worked in precarious jobs for a decade or more. There was anger at being passed over repeatedly for permanent jobs in their departments; there was bitterness at the pervasive lack of institutional recognition and visibility; there was pessimism about the future. "Instead of teachers, we'll have course custodians," ran one mournful vision of the future. "I know the value of my work even when my university does not."

Repressive desublimation

This fleeting, particular moment in Pittsburgh strikes me as raising insoluble, even existential questions for politically self-conscious inhabitants of the American university system. Just what in the end does this university system stand for? *What* in the last analysis is the value of academic work in the present? What, if anything, makes the American university livable? Given my view that there cannot be a rational, totalizing view of this enormous and contradictory system, I will not venture any formulaic summary. Indeed, the failed dialogues and subjective contradictions that we have reviewed above lead me to suspect that any effort to analyze this system in terms of a schematizing Bourdieuian space of positions would fall short. An image of a space of positions, in which institutional locations map loosely onto localized and self-interested forms of consciousness (the famed "adjustment of objective and subjective structures"), offers us an inadequate account of the forms of malevolent intersubjectivity, internalized contradictions, splittings and displacements which, as we have had occasion to see above, can readily beset academic forms of self-consciousness. A theory of "positions" tends to underestimate how much academic consciousness can become double consciousness, a scene of illusory awareness of one's institutional others, a subjectivity that can become split apart through the very processes of dialogue and interaction that might normatively be expected to produce collectivity or at least reasoned disagreement.

Some precedent for my conclusions emerged almost twenty years back, when, drawing on Jean-François Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition*, Bill Readings famously argued for a University not of consensus but of "dissensus":

> In a global economy, the University can no longer be called upon to provide a model of community, an intellectual Levittown. And the appeal to the University as a model of community no longer serves as the *answer* to the question of the social function of the University. Rather, the University will have to become one place, among others, where the attempt is made to think the social bond without recourse to a unifying idea...

> The University's ruins offer us an institution in which the incomplete and interminable nature of the pedagogic relation can remind us that "thinking together" is a dissensual process; it belongs to dialogism rather than dialogue. [Readings 1996:191-192]

Readings, reasonably enough, wanted to advocate a theory of discourse and social relations that no longer presupposed transparency of communication, clarity of metanarrative, or coherence of social bonds, and I agree with him completely that "none of us can [or, at least, *should*] now seriously assume ourselves to be the centered subject of a narrative of University education" (10, my addition). But Readings, writing in the 1990s, also greatly underestimated the political significance of what he termed "proletarianization," and also the depths of epistemological impasse, misrecognition and false consciousness that this fractured world would plunge us into. Leslie Allison's video shows us that epistemological impasse is not just something that can happen *between* academic subjects, but also *within* them. The more political scenes of union mobilization we have examined, by contrast, are less about this internal splitting and more about the *practical* illustration that, the more politically concerned academics try to sort out where they stand, the more they find that their differences are politically insurmountable.

In other words, the very desire for a political unity that might overcome precarity can itself reveal insurmountable and tragic differences, which are at once epistemological, emotional and historical. The Pittsburgh conference did not yield any new *form* of mobilization, and although it may have given a burst of energy and enthusiasm to its participants, we have also seen that it was a place where contingent faculty came face to face with "something that's opaque" about themselves, with the bitter opportunities of "almost always being underestimated," with the sense that everything "comes at a price," that "we have little to lose." Indeed, the price of the supposedly open, postmodern world of American academe — which Readings diagnosed and which we arguably now inhabit — is the brutal division of existence into regions separated by ideological abysses, by bureaucratic controls, armed guards and expulsions, by filaments and palisades of class distinction.[43] A fractured object, it is equally apt to fracture the human subjects it produces. It pushes one's moral capacities for ambivalence, and one's intellectual tolerance for paradox and contradiction, to the breaking point; and then instrumentalizes this ambivalence as a coping mechanism, making it an apparatus for repressive misrecognition. It would be satisfying to conclude that the academic labor movement will dissolve and transcend these contradictions, but it will not; as currently constituted, it can only offer a chance at somewhat gentler ambivalences, lived out under somewhat better material conditions. This, to my mind, means that it is not yet sufficiently ambitious.

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[43] I borrow the form of this sentence from Alain Badiou's "The Communist Hypothesis" (2008:38).

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