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The Tripartite Division of Labor in US Higher Education

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Developments in U.S. higher education suggest the crystallization of a tripartite division of labor consisting of administrators, tenured and tenure-track faculty, and part-time faculty. Given that much has been written on the second category, this essay will focus upon the first and third categories. I discuss the implications that the growing number of personnel in both of these categories has for higher education. Finally, I urge faculty and students to assume a pro-active stance in challenging various current trends in U.S. higher education.

THE ADMINISTRATION AS A PRIVILEGED STRATUM

Sociologist Norman Birnbaum (1988:150) argues that whole sectors of the academy have been colonized by “bureaucratic elites.” The emergence of the administration as a “privileged stratum” in higher education, however, is not an entirely new phenomenon. In 1960 Henry Steele Commager observed that “while European universities are run by their faculties, American universities are run by administrative bureaucracies, many of whose members have not the remotest notion of what a university is about” (quoted in Simons 1967:88).

Whereas in the past, high-echelon administrators generally were faculty members who had spent years in the classroom and engaged in scholarship, an increasing percentage of the members of this privileged stratum are “career administrators” who have spent little or virtually no time working in the trenches of the academy. They sometimes enter the ranks of the administration with doctorates in educational administration. It almost seems as if these programs as well as conferences and workshops for administrators prepare them to inject into the academic world slogans that purportedly will motivate the faculty, staff, and student body onto ever greater heights of whatever.

During the 1980s and 1990s I have seen slogans such as “International Awareness,” “Computer Awareness,” “Bigger and Better,” and “Reforming the Major” come and go on my campus.

While each layer of the administration enjoys certain privileges and perks that are not enjoyed by rank-and-file faculty, the higher the status of the administrator, the greater the privileges. Like elites throughout history, university administrators have developed an ideology that justifies these privileges, and at least some faculty members, particularly the “administrative wannabes,” have also internalized this ideology. They view that the university’s higher education status (something for which in turn generates costs).

In addition, university presidents are provided with generous retirement benefits, and in the thousand or so faculty members who may be difficult to attract and large operating budgets they may hire to purchase offices and phones.

ADJUNCTS AS AN EXPLOITED CATEGORY

University professors in the country are those who either retire or hold positions that provide only part-time tenure track income (they may have PhDs), and if so, this pattern is part of the “professionalization” of academics. Such it is possible when they can purse strings,
this ideology. Simons (1967:93) argues that the university administration, especially its higher echelons, assumes superior status (something highly destructive of morale) and encourages empire-building, which in turn greatly increases administrative costs.

In addition to their hefty salaries, university presidents or chancellors are provided with spacious living quarters and generous retirement packages. Some even return to the classroom as “distinguished professors,” despite the fact that often nothing or little in their academic accomplishments warrants such a designation. Many high-level administrators are also provided with cars, travel budgets running in the thousands of dollars (in contrast to faculty members who find it increasingly difficult to attend professional meetings), and large operating budgets with which they may hire administrative assistants and purchase office equipment and cellular phones.

ADJUNCTS AS A SUPER-EXPLOITED OCCUPATIONAL CATEGORY

University administrations across the country are replacing senior faculty who either retire or take other academic positions with assistant professors, non-tenure track instructors (many of whom have PhDs), and part-time instructors. This pattern is part and parcel of the “deprofessionalization” or “proletarianization” of academics. Such inequitable practices are possible when administrators control the purse strings, not only over the salaries of faculty but also over their own salaries.

While regular faculty, in many instances with justification, often complain that they are underpaid, part-time or adjunct faculty constitute a super-exploited category within the political economy of U.S. higher education. Furthermore, despite cut-backs in the budgets of state universities in recent years, administrators and even full-time faculty, although to a lesser extent, have been able to ensure their privileges by increasingly relying upon adjuncts. The 1993 National Study of Postsecondary Faculty reports that about one-third of higher educational faculty and instructional staff are part-timers. These faculty members are generally paid by the course and often teach at several institutions in their efforts to eke out a living. They are generally denied fringe benefits. Administrators seem to be oblivious to the quality of instruction that a part-time faculty member can deliver when he or she spends much of his or her time commuting from one job to another and sending letters of application in the hope of perhaps eventually landing a “real job” somewhere. Unfortunately, the super-exploitation of part-time faculty all too often has not been challenged by tenured and even unionized faculty. Because of their unstable status, part-time faculty are generally not in a position to defend themselves, although graduate students at some universities, such as the University of Wisconsin, have unionized and obtained improved wages and working conditions, tuition waivers, and health insurance.

Sharff and Lessinger (1994) argue...
that administrators, department chairs, and even non-tenured faculty themselves sometimes portray part-time employment as a personal choice rather than an imposed structural reality. Some, if not many, part-time faculty unrealistically view their positions as a toehold that will lead to full-time employment. Drawing upon their own experiences as part-time faculty members, Sharff and Lessinger (1994:14) assert: "recognition of our status as exploited workers may be our first necessity."

THE NEED FOR A PRO-ACTIVE ACADEMIC COMMUNITY

Boggs (1993:117) asserts that in their preoccupation with their careers, academics exhibit strong tendencies toward privatization, withdrawal, and depoliticization. In a somewhat similar vein, Jacoby (1987:118) maintains that professionalization has prompted academics to refrain from acting as public intellectuals. I am reminded of Laura Nader's comment to me in Spring 1994 that while Berkeley has many "radical theoreticians," it has few "radical activists."

Faculty need to become more proactive in challenging the tripartite structure of the academy as well as alarming developments in U.S. higher education — developments that threaten to transform the university even more than it already is into an appendage of a corporate economy. Faculty, staff, and graduate students need to consider unionization as one strategy for empowering them. Another strategy is to transform faculty and student governance units from advisory bodies to structures of empowerment that shape university policies in meaningful ways.

Faculty also need to inform the general public that we do more than teach six, nine, or twelve hours a week. Conversely, faculty need to critically evaluate the social relevance of their research and its relationship to both teaching and social reform. They need to take concerted efforts to counter the assault on tenure. During the 1950s, many college and university faculty were terminated for not conforming to a McCarthyite image of social reality. As McChesney astutely observes,

[Public libraries and public education ...are being primed for privatization and an effective renunciation of the democratic principles upon which they were developed. . . .]The right prattles on about leftist thought police and politically correct speech codes, when in fact the dominant trend for U.S. universities is to turn increasingly to professional education and orient research toward the market. In short, the right wishes to eliminate the autonomy of the university and see it thoroughly integrated into the capitalist economy (McChesney 1995:16).

Needless to say, faculty often raise controversial ideas in the classroom, and it is essential that they have the freedom to speak openly so that students develop the ability to think critically and contribute to making democracy more than the empty shell it often has become in our society.
There was a time in the history of many Southern states when we anthropologists could not use the word “evolution” in the classroom. Let us not forget that as recently as the early 1980s, Arkansas and Louisiana passed “creation science” bills which were fortunately struck down at the federal level.

Faculty need to develop closer ties with staff personnel at their universities and move beyond the elitism that they often feel toward the latter. Students need to mobilize in addressing present trends in higher education if they expect their degrees to be more than qualifying certificates for jobs that may not even exist upon graduation or ones in which they function as cogs in a system more oriented to profit-making than meeting social needs. It seems appropriate to quote some interesting observations that Scott makes about strategies for moving beyond the current crisis in higher education.

Without critical thinking, and the conflicts and contests it articulates, will there be democracy at all? . . . [H]igher education is to democracy as theory is to politics. This analogy restates the obvious only if we think we know what all the terms mean. In any case, it may also open the way for imaginations that take us beyond the current crisis; it may also, of course, provoke new ones (Scott 1995:303).

As part of the larger effort to comprehend the culture of higher education, anthropology professors need to consider conducting ethnographic research in their own back yard and/or to urge their students to do the same. A notable effort along these lines is Melvin D. Williams' ethnography of the anthropology department at Piltdown University (a rather obvious pseudonym for the University of Pittsburgh). He warns that the university is “becoming a part of the business world, the state economic plan and national mobilization for various projects” (Williams 1993:200). As such, the university as a topic of ethnographic research and a locus for praxis provides us with a unique opportunity to “study up.”

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