

# RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

## *The American Academic Profession: Transformation in Contemporary Higher Education*, Joseph C. Hermanowicz, Editor

Reviewed by James Davis

***The American Academic Profession: Transformation in Contemporary Higher Education*, Joseph C. Hermanowicz, Editor (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011)**

A profession is defined by the degree to which its practitioners control the terms and conditions of their work and by the autonomy they enjoy from the influence of the public and politicians. The key question addressed in *The American Academic Profession* is whether and how these attributes have been maintained in higher education, particularly in the face of neoliberal policies and practices ascendant since the early 1980s. In one sense, it seems academic in the worst sense to pursue this question while neoliberalism has dealt others fates far worse than it has dealt college professors. But as the best chapters in this collection illustrate, examining the vitality of any profession – whether law, medicine, or academia – is a way of assessing the constellation of social, cultural, and economic forces that impinge upon it. The patterns discernible in higher education – such as the stratification of the faculty and the diminution of tenure, public disinvestment, and administrative bloat – reflect broader trends in corporatization, shifting costs and risks downward while directing capital and power upward.

*The American Academic Profession* may be considered a contribution to the emerging field of Critical University Studies, though its proponents have tended to be humanists while this volume leans decidedly toward social science. Its contributors favor empirical research, measured claims, and a detached rhetorical posture. Despite some impassioned and ambitious arguments, they marshal data and methodically chart case studies, and the volume thus complements the existing humanities scholarship. Its strength lies in its striking breadth of

subject matter and the expertise of its contributors. Sheila Slaughter and Gary Rhoades, who co-authored *Academic Capitalism and the New Economy* (2004) contribute separate essays here; Jack Schuster, co-author of *The American Faculty* (2006), introduces the book; and among the other leading higher education scholars represented are Steven Brint, Roger Geiger, Joseph Hermanowicz, and Teresa Sullivan, the president of the University of Virginia. Sullivan's chapter is among the finest and is noteworthy in light of her attempted ouster by Virginia's Board of Regents soon after the book's publication. (There is no direct causal connection, but her chapter advances an account of threats to shared governance that presage the threat to her job.) Taking the temperature of the academic profession in the new century, the book's thirteen chapters fall into five sections: Structural and Cognitive Change, Socialization and Deviance, Experience of the Academic Career, Autonomy and Regulation, and Contemporary and Historical Views. Readers who are weary of the invective and jeremiads that sometimes characterize commentary on higher education may find relief in this book's empiricism. They will certainly find fodder for thought and a firm basis for action.

Significantly, few contributors to this collection acknowledge the paradox at the heart of today's academic profession: while professionals are by definition distinct from "mere" workers, today it is principally through behaving *like* workers that faculty stand a chance of preserving autonomy and exerting control over the terms and conditions of their work. As two leaders of a recent faculty strike at the University of Illinois – Chicago write, "We've all begun to realize that, whatever it meant in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century that distinction is pure ideology. Professionals are workers – and professors are workers."<sup>1</sup> Many contributors to *The*

*American Academic Profession* assume the traditional opposition between professional and worker, despite their own evidence that faculty are increasingly “managed professionals,” in Rhoades’ phrase, their work overseen or influenced by others beyond their peers, from funding agencies and accrediting bodies to review boards, citizen groups, and private enterprise. Traditionally, shared governance, academic freedom, and tenure have maintained the academic profession. But since 1993, Schuster reports, the majority of first-time, full-time faculty appointments have been off the tenure track (9). And now, when just 17 percent of the faculty have tenure and only 8 percent more are eligible for it, shared governance and academic freedom have become chimerical for the vast majority.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, when Neil Gross interviewed dozens of professors of varying ranks for the chapter he contributed to this collection, he found that academic freedom “is not a topic to which most of [them] appeared to have given much thought,” and their responses tended to be “short, halting, and unelaborated” (113, 134).

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For this reason, I am perplexed by contributor Ann E. Austin’s claim that “the continuing strength of academic work as a profession partly depends on the extent to which those who take nontraditional appointments [...] understand and commit themselves to the central values and norms of the academic profession, including such values as commitment to excellence, autonomy, academic freedom, collegiality, self-regulation and peer review, and the place of research, teaching and service within the profession” (156). How can the untenured and untenurable be expected to uphold norms outside of their experience or subscribe to values that have not served them? However honorable, these values and norms will not be maintained by improved socialization of doctoral students; they have to be more than abstract ideals.

Furthermore, as Sheila Slaughter’s chapter demonstrates, “Changes in state forms pose challenges to academic freedom because the state plays a large part in framing what is possible” (262). Although the state has been “unevenly altered” by liberal, social conservative, and neoliberal movements, Slaughter contends that the overall effect of these negotiations has been to undermine academic freedom (242). Examining the U.C. Berkeley struggle over affiliation with the agribusiness giant Novartis and the case of *Usofsky v. Gilmore* (2000) involving the

University of Virginia, she argues that the state’s neoliberal approach to higher education has turned research faculty into entrepreneurs, putting “profit before discovery” and “secrecy over openness” with respect to intellectual property, and removing decisions from faculty governance bodies. Discussing the Ward Churchill case in Colorado, she says that the social conservatism accompanying the shift to free market and neoliberal policies has encouraged state interference in scholars’ academic pursuits, not just their extramural activities, as during the Cold War.

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This shift of terrain not only subverts Ann A. Austin’s claim, but makes it seem hollow to suggest, as John Braxton, Eve Proper, and Alan Brayer do, that “stewardship for one’s academic discipline” can be ensured by graduate faculty cultivating the “moral compass” of the next generation (183). Their focus on professional norms as a composite of individual behaviors obscures the context in which norms are established. It is difficult to see how affirming the three “invariant norms” of graduate student mentorship (refraining from harassing students, suppressing whistle-blowers, or directing students to fabricate or alter research data) will “function as compensatory integrating mechanisms for fragmentation in the structure of the academic profession” (182).

The collection’s concern with professional norms comes from Durkheim, whose concept of *anomie* is usefully reworked here by Joseph Hermanowicz, the collection’s editor and the contributor of one of its best chapters. Based on two sets of interviews conducted ten years apart with a group of sixty academics, he pursues what sociologists call a structural-functionalist analysis of the gap between the expectations the academy fosters in faculty members and its capacity to fulfill them. When the gap grows sufficiently wide and persistent – when, for example, the number of published papers required of scientists for tenure triples without a corresponding change in the time to tenure, as it did between the 1960s and 1980s – the result is *anomie*, an individual’s sense of purposelessness or meaninglessness that actually has a structural source (224). In sum, Hermanowicz proposes that the academic profession has evolved into a frustrated quest for recognition: while faculty in elite institutions and non-elites experience it differently, and young faculty experience it differently from their senior colleagues, a sense of *anomie* is general, like the snow blanketing Joyce’s Ireland in “The Dead.” Hermanowicz reaches the dismally understated conclusion that “the consequences do not appear favorable,” but we would do well to remind ourselves and our colleagues of Durkheim’s key claim about *anomie*: that although it is “transmitted and

experienced as a pathology in individuals," it is in fact "a pathology of organizations and institutions" (233). This collection helps us identify a number of important phenomena beyond the overreliance on untenured and untenurable professors: the bifurcation of faculty into research and teaching duties, the intensification of research and scholarly demands to mimic research-intensive universities ("mission creep"), the unbundling of faculty responsibilities and entrepreneurial ethos accompanying high-tech industry's reach into academia, the arrival of "audit culture" on campus, tuition hikes and a consumer sensibility among students, the rapid expansion of administration and public-private partnerships to backfill declines in public funding. The unease many academics now feel – their inability to assume or assert the prerogatives of professionals – must be redescribed not as individual pathology but as institutional pathology, and remedies must therefore be devised that reimagine institutional structures rather than calling simply for a restoration of traditional academic values. Readers of this collection will acquire some useful tools for that task, but they will need to address the definitional problem on whose horns many of its contributors are stuck – the fact that with few exceptions academics are also workers.

Redefining professional identity amid current conditions could entail a number of strategies. The most direct would be unionization, expanding the number of faculty who can collectively bargain terms and conditions of employment. The faculty's hard-won identity as professionals impedes our identification as workers, but the conditions detailed in *The American Academic Profession* have already begun effecting a shift. Contingent faculty and graduate students are involved in large-scale unionization campaigns through SEIU, AFT, and others. The American Association of University Professors, the profession's century-old advocacy organization, is functioning increasingly as a collective bargaining agent. While individual AAUP membership and membership in advocacy chapters have declined precipitously, collective bargaining chapter membership is rising sharply; today, for nearly eighty percent of its fifty thousand members, the AAUP is their union, not just their professional association. However, not all faculty have the right to collective bargaining, either because they lack enabling state legislation or work at private institutions. The 1980 U.S. Supreme Court decision *NLRB v. Yeshiva University*, prohibiting faculty at private institutions from engaging in collective bargaining, may be vulnerable given the composition of the National Labor Relations Board.<sup>3</sup> But in the absence of collective bargaining, faculty still have a critical role in implementing strong language in college bylaws around academic freedom, job security and due process, and shared governance. To be effective in the new conditions, governance bodies may need to include contingent faculty and those on clinical and research appointments, and the tendency for governance bodies to be populated with administrative toadies will need to be combated. Teresa Sullivan writes that shared governance "is the tenet of the academic profession that may be in the most jeopardy, principally because of the proliferation of other occupations within the university and because of

tensions among the professors themselves" (329). The challenge, she observes, will be to "maintain professional solidarity" despite so many other job titles on campus (and indeed the diffusion of "campus" as such), despite the tension between faculty who look outside their institutions for professional validation and those who look within, and despite our disciplinary diversity.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Lennard Davis and Walter Benn Michaels, "Faculty on Strike," *Jacobin: a Magazine of Culture and Polemic*, February 14, 2014. Online, accessed February 17, 2014.

<sup>2</sup> Richard Moser, "Overuse and Abuse of Adjunct Faculty Members Threaten Core Academic Values," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, January 13, 2014. Online, accessed March 12, 2014.

<sup>3</sup> Scott Jaschik, "Questions from the NLRB," *Inside Higher Education*, February 11, 2014. Online, accessed April 8, 2014.



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