

THE JOB WARS

John Wilson

“Let us have a conversation about a profession that eats its young,” writes Cary Nelson in *Manifesto of a Tenured Radical*, his critique of academia’s failure to address the economic crisis it faces. After a decade of the “culture wars,” a new battle terminology is entering the vocabulary of debates about higher education: the “job wars.”

Nelson’s book shows the kind of changes in the struggles academia faces. The first part of his memoir focuses on the culture wars which dominated so much of the debate for the past decade. Nelson was one of the early victims in the culture wars more than a decade ago, when a National Endowment for the Humanities employee informed him that chair William Bennett “had called a staff meeting to warn people that grants like two that had been just awarded to me—to direct a 1983 teaching institute and conference on Marxist cultural theory—would never get past him again.” Later on, a conservative student newspaper funded by right-wing foundations would attack him as one of the “loony left” professors on campus trying to “ban Shakespeare” from campus.

The second part of *Manifesto of a Tenured Radical* is called “lessons from the job wars,” battles which Nelson correctly sees as being far more consequential. The culture wars have been won in the classroom and by the anthology-makers, although lost (and lost badly) in the public arena. But, in the end, the fate of multiculturalism, cultural studies, and all the rest will depend much more on who wins the job wars than who wins the culture wars.

Still, the two fights are not disconnected. As Nelson observes, “A delegitimated university is easier to defund.” The Right’s attack

MANIFESTO OF A TENURED RADICAL

Cary Nelson

New York University Press

256 pages; paper, \$17.95

WILL TEACH FOR FOOD

Edited by Cary Nelson

University of Minnesota Press

308 pages; paper, \$19.95

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on higher education has made it much easier to cut back money for colleges and universities deemed “politically correct.” Having lost the intellectual argument, the Right now hopes to eviscerate the funding for its enemies. After all, if the curriculum can be dictated by wealthy trustees and administrators fearful of conservative attacks, if the opportunities for research can be eliminated in the humanities by destroying the NEH and tenured jobs, if dangerous tenured faculty can be replaced by vulnerable part-time instructors, there is a chance to return the world back to the good old days.

According to Nelson, “the job crisis and the oversupply of PhDs color everything we do.” But one of the flaws of both Nelson’s memoirs and the anthology he has edited, *Will Teach for Food*, is the failure to link the job crisis to the growing corporatization of academia. Instead of challenging the economic status quo in colleges and universities and its exploitation of graduate students and teaching temps while eliminating tenure-track lines, Nelson’s harshest attacks are reserved

for a system which he believes “overproduces” PhDs.

The truth is that the current supply of PhDs would be no crisis were it not for the enormous public defunding of higher education and the efforts of administrators to raise class sizes and misuse cheap labor to replace tenured faculty. Nelson, by buying into the illusion of the PhD glut, misses the larger economic issues affecting academe.

Nelson estimates that no more than 25% of those PhDs in English will end up as tenured faculty members, leading him to wonder, “If there are no jobs, why are we training PhDs?” Former AAUP president Linda Ray Pratt, like Nelson, argues for cutting the supply of labor: “In the long term, the profession must balance the supply of PhD degrees with the opportunities for employment, which means limiting graduate school enrollments.”

However, the job crisis in academia is not solely a result of oversupply. There has also been a structural change in college employment, with graduate students and temps replacing tenure-track professors as the primary source of teachers. Decreasing the supply of PhDs will only marginally affect the exploitation of college teachers; after all, administrators can always just hire people without PhDs to do the grunt work of higher education, or increase class sizes, or force graduate students to do more teaching.

The problem of exploited labor in colleges and universities is not the fault of professors training too many graduate students. The problem lies in the structural flaws of higher education’s immoral decision to run universities on the cheap—and the incompetence of America’s professoriate at resisting these trends. This is what Daniel Czitrom’s essay calls “one of the dirty little secrets of the modern American university: it cannot function without the exploitation of cheap graduate student labor.”

Even the *Will Teach for Food* anthology—presumably a place for graduate students and adjunct faculty to express their views—features eleven full professors and only five part-time faculty or graduate students. As always, tenured

professors follow their instinct of telling their lessers what to do rather than trying to listen and join with their students and “colleagues” in a unified front. This isn’t to deny the good intentions of those few professors who support the efforts of graduate students and adjuncts to resist their lowly status. But even they seem to have given up on the idea of a union which would combine graduate students, adjunct faculty, and tenure-track professors into a single unit powerful enough to resist the forces attacking college teachers today.

The extent of the job crisis became apparent in December 1995, when 250 Teaching Assistants at Yale went on a grade strike, refusing to turn in grades until Yale agreed to acknowledge the existence of the Graduate Employees and Students Organizations (GESO). As Kathy Newman observes in her essay, “the grade strike touched a raw and defensive nerve in the Yale professoriate.” The French Department sent out a memo threatening graduate students that they would never teach again if they participated in the strike. The dean of the graduate school declared that negative letters of recommendation for students were a legitimate way to retaliate against TAs.

The sheer irrationality of the attacks on the graduate students by faculty who should have been good “liberals” supporting a labor union opened the eyes of academics around the country to the seriousness of the problem. Michael Bérubé emphasizes that “Yale faculty had no direct stake in the prospect of unionization” and “Yale faculty had nothing to lose in recognizing GESO.”

However, the harm perceived by the Yale faculty was not economic; it was psychological. Supporting GESO would mean admitting their own failure to protect their graduate students, and the implicit blame (because they are nominally in control of Yale) of exploiting them for their own benefit. The tactic of a grade strike further embarrassed the Yale faculty, who were supposedly in charge of a class but could not turn in any grades because the TAs did all of the grading. By exposing all of these betrayals of the educational mission,

the grade strike “forced” Yale to find a scapegoat: the graduate students themselves, who were accused of betraying the academic mission by pretending to be mere employees.

Yale’s attack on its graduate students provoked alarm among progressive faculty around the country. If Yale could not be trusted to be on the right side, if Yale faculty could join with administrators to crush a graduate student union, what hope could there be for any collective action to protect academic freedom, tenure, and the rights of the academic worker?

All around the country, professors are being put under severe economic pressure. The number of tenure-track positions is being steadily cut back, to be replaced by graduate students and temps: low-priced instructors with no job security who can provide lowered costs in an era of declining government aid.

Administrators defend faculty temps as being necessary for “flexibility,” but the real reason for hiring them is simple: faculty temps are cheaper. Administrators may rightly worry about being stuck with a large number of permanent employees in fields with declining popularity like Russian Studies; but this can hardly explain the tremendous reliance on temps in areas like English, where there is no chance of having a surplus of tenured faculty. Money, as always, is the explanation. As Rutgers part-timer Karen Thompson writes, “Our existence as a reserve labor force in higher education gradually erodes the ranks of full-time faculty—we’re a cheap labor alternative.”

The result has been the development of a two-track system of privilege and exploitation within the faculty, much like Yale’s recent plans to pay new janitors and cafeteria staff 40% less than the current ones. Two instructors may teach the same number of students equally well—but one is given job security, health benefits, and a substantial salary, while the other is paid half as much (or less) with no benefits.

The segregation of professors into two tracks, the adjunct faculty and the “real”

faculty, often happens soon after earning the PhD. The privileged faculty are the lucky few to find a tenure-track position where they have the time and resources to conduct the research necessary for success in academia today; the unlucky become “gypsy scholars” and “highway flyers,” combining several part-time jobs (or full-time jobs) for low wages. They have the stigma on their record of being a part-timer, and little opportunity to do the research needed for professional advancement. The system of separate tracks also helps maintain academic sexism. At research universities in 1992, there were 54% more men than women as tenure-track assistant professors. But there were 62% more female non-tenure-track instructors than male ones.

But how do we change the academic status quo? The lack of radical ideas, ironically enough, is the most disappointing aspect of Nelson’s memoir and the *Will Teach for Food* anthology. Instead of taking radical inspiration from the Yale graduate students, the few faculty who are sympathetic to their problems manage only tepid solutions.

Nelson’s proposals are not nearly as strong as his identification of the problem. He proposes a union for the graduate students and the adjunct faculty, but fails to say that tenured faculty should join together with their students toward a common goal.

Some of Michael Bérubé’s most biting commentary is reserved for former MLA president Sander Gilman, whom he mocks for suggesting the hiring of postdoctoral fellows instead of graduate assistants as cheap labor. Bérubé argues that if such an idea was actually followed, “the profession of college teaching as we know it is basically finished.” The colleges that now hire new PhDs as tenure-track faculty, Bérubé says, would simply use postdoctoral fellows and save a lot of money. However, Bérubé’s colleague Nelson (another harsh critic of Gilman) himself argues for postdoctoral fellowships, which he calls “risky but preferable to some of the alternatives in place.” Obviously, agreement on the problem isn’t leading us to a consensus on the solution.

Nelson is rather pessimistic about the future of higher education: “Having recovered from an unbroken history of sexism and become barely aware of our long night of racism, we are rapidly descending into a gulag labor program.” On the intellectual side, Nelson tells of a “triumph of democracy” in the field of English: diversity and multiculturalism has made an impact, changing what is taught in survey courses and what is published in anthologies.

The real solution requires faculty to seize power back from the administrators and trustees who now control colleges and universities and who decide—via the money they control—how these institutions will operate. Every single elite university in America can easily afford to double the salaries of graduate student teachers without imperiling their financial health. The fact that they do not is a testament to the failure of graduate students to organize, and the failure of faculty to support their efforts to get fair treatment.

The belief that the job crisis can be solved by internal reform within the disciplines (by reducing PhDs, closing “marginal” departments, and accepting postdoctoral fellows in place of graduate students) misunderstands the political nature of the problem afflicting academia. Compromises that simply accept the status quo are doomed to failure; professors can cut the number of PhDs, and close “marginal” departments, and administrators will happily reduce their ranks further. The only way to resolve the job crisis is to confront the priorities of universities and governments head on, to argue for the value of the humanities, to argue for the importance of higher education.

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