Rethinking MARXISM Volume 11, Number 2 (Summer 1999)

Review

Will Teach for Food: Academic Labor in Crisis.
Edited by Cary Nelson. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997.

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If recent publications are any indication—*The University in Ruins, Education under Siege, Education under Fire*—the "culture wars" of the 1980s have become the "class wars" of the 1990s, engaging primarily questions of structure and economics. Given the current conditions within higher education, such analysis could not be more opportune. For while Gerald Graff, Allan Bloom, Stanley Fish, and Dinesh D'Souza argued about whether to teach *King Lear* or *King Kong* (in Graff's catchy phrase), university and college administrators were occupied with their own task: restructuring the thirty-two hundred institutions of higher education along a corporate model. Downsizing, outsourcing, and casualizing labor may seem only obliquely related to the various debates about course content and disciplinary boundaries, but they do at least clarify the priorities of the academic left: if future generations of academics are going to have the "luxury" of such debates (which is to say, the "luxury" of academic freedom and academic employment), they must attend to the economic and institutional changes immediately at hand. Unless academic critics become activists for the rights of labor (academic and otherwise), the multicultural classroom of today will soon be dominated by the monocultural corporate dictates of efficiency, flexibility, and cost-effectiveness.

Though the most recent addition to this growing body of self-examination, *Will Teach for Food: Academic Labor in Crisis,* is analytically uneven as a volume, the contributors to Cary Nelson's collection deserve credit for taking the conditions of academic labor seriously enough to match their theoretical examinations with repeated calls to action. Indeed, a number of these essays reveal major leftist figures in the

academy at their most politically engaged. In "The Labor behind the Cult of Work," Andrew Ross turns his erudition toward deconstructing the ideological structures that prevent academics from understanding their work as alienable labor and thus comprehending the rationale for unionization. In "The Proletariat Goes to College," Robin Kelley recounts the hidden history of student-labor alliances in the 1960s as a way of inciting similar solidarity in the 1990s. And in "Academic Unionism and the Future of Higher Education," Stanley Aronowitz carefully documents the history of academic unionism against the backdrop of the organizational shifts that brought us the postwar "corporate university." Though by no means alone in its affinities, Aronowitz's essay deserves special note for its historical scope and its call for unions "to become agents of a new educational imagination" (213). While most of the contributors see academic unionism as a sufficient (if not utopian) goal, Aronowitz alone warns of the reactive impulse endemic to bread-and-butter unions, and challenges readers to use unions instead to push academic institutions in more progressive directions. Add to these impressive essays Linda Ray Pratt's incisive critique of part-time academic labor and Daniel Czitrom's history of radical teaching assistants' unions at the University of Wisconsin, and there is reason enough to value this volume's political intervention.

Unfortunately, the strengths of these essays highlight the analytical weaknesses of other contributions and, perhaps more important, the uneven structure of the collection. Part of the problem lies in *Will Teach for Food'*s hybrid nature: broad structural and historical examinations are combined with a cluster of essays narrowly concerned with the 1996 teaching-assistant strike at Yale (reprinted, without revision, from *Social Text* 49). While the claims of the volume are more encompassing and the category of academic labor is, at least at times, widely conceived, many of the Yale essays seem oddly, even problematically, particularistic. Of course, Cary Nelson's decision to use Yale as a case study has some merit. Within the academic community the plight of Yale's graduate students is a cause célèbre, and Yale's financial health nicely counters the claim that academic reorganization is driven by budget shortfalls alone. Yet, how representative are these struggles at Yale? And what do they ultimately reveal about the larger conditions of academic labor? If we are to believe the claims of the Yale graduate students represented in this volume, then Yale's situation is unique indeed for, without an economic analysis of Yale's long-term actions and removed from a larger social context, the actions of Yale's administration and faculty seem fickle, largely motivated by what Kathy Newman calls "a culture of meanness" (90). Yes, even at Yale, union busting is mean, but doesn't such nastiness arise from less psychological motivations?

Without a broad economic context, a number of the Yale essays fall into the trap of substituting irony for analytical critique. Toward such ends we are asked, again and again, to partake in a ritual of personal disillusionment. "When an elite institution dedicated to scholarship and education uses strong-arm tactics to suppress its own graduate students," summarizes Barbara Ehrenreich, "when it starts asking its employees to subsist on poverty-level or subpoverty-level wages, when it brings in

a notorious union-busting law firm and security firm to make sure that employees will accede to its terms—well, this is more than a little disillusioning. It's like finding out that an elegant old gentleman you've always admired at a distance has a secret life as a mugger and a thug" (ix). This makes for fun reading, and it certainly gets the blood boiling. But is it really all that useful to personify and pathologize Yale's actions, especially given its long history of teaching, sponsoring, and participating in the organized brutality of American capitalism? Indeed, if even Barbara Ehrenreich believed Yale's public-relations pap, perhaps we need to focus our attentions on the machinery of illusion, which has evidently kept graduate students, faculty, and other intellectuals from recognizing their precarious position in what Ehrenreich earlier called "the professional-managerial class" (Ehrenreich and Ehrenreich 1977) and their likely relocation into the growing white-collar proletariat.

For isn't this, finally, the larger cause for such disillusionment? After a generation of economic expansion fueled by military research money, universities and colleges are contracting and academics are losing what little opportunity they once had to join this elegant old gentleman at his social club. This is not to say, however, that the poetics of disillusionment are without value. These essays give painful and timely testimony to the psychological effects of proletarianization. Perhaps in the future we will read them as early examples of a growing class consciousness that precipitated a more activist, more radical, and more engaged academic community. That depends entirely on our actions in this moment.

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College for Sale: A Critique of the Commodification of Higher Education. By Wesley Shumar. London: The Falmer Press, 1997.

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The university as ivory tower is dead. It has been replaced by the university as corporation. Nonacademic administrators have taken control from the faculty. Tenured faculty are increasingly replaced in the classroom by a low-paid labor force of part-time adjunct faculty and graduate teaching assistants. Full-time faculty spend less time teach-

ing and more in research. Corporations and state legislatures have increasing influence on what research is undertaken and what is taught in the classroom. Academic departments and programs compete against one another for faculty positions, budgetary resources, and even their very survival. Students are labeled "customers" and colleges and universities compete for them. Higher education has become a commodity.

These and other ongoing changes marking the "corporatization" of the academy and the commodification of higher education are celebrated by the business press and by many lawmakers. As a recent article in *Business Week* stated approvingly, "Higher education is changing profoundly, retreating from the ideals of liberal arts and the leading-edge research it always has cherished. Instead, it is behaving more like the $250 billion business it has become" (Hammonds et al. 1997). In the *Chronicle of Higher Education,* Richard J. Mahoney (1997), former chief executive officer of Monsanto, wrote, "Although a university is not a corporation, I firmly believe that academic institutions can derive enormous benefit by applying lessons from the experience of Monsanto and other companies that have 'reinvented' themselves during the past decade." The recommended "lessons" include focusing on the basic mission and "disposing" of "activities not essential to those missions," outsourcing, research alliances with corporations, and replacing tenure with five- to ten-year employment contracts to increase productivity and lower costs. Such changes are consciously motivated by two major forces: the need to deal with the "fiscal crisis in higher education" (e.g., increasing tuition), and the need to provide training for future corporate employees to support global competitiveness (see Council for Aid to Education 1997).

While the business press, government officials, and some in the academy support the growing hegemony of business and economics in higher education, Wesley Shumar provides a clear, trenchant, and damning indictment of these changes. A cultural anthropologist, Shumar deploys postmodern theory and left political economy to examine the "commodification of higher education" as a way of understanding "the social processes that people who work in universities have experienced" but not necessarily understood.

Shumar writes for an audience of faculty members both tenured/tenure-track and adjunct/contingent. He sees both groups as failing to understand critical aspects of their academic work life and its changing context. He roots this analysis in Johannes Fabian's (1983) concept of "coevalness with the Other," the denial of which he sees as part of the discursive tradition of ethnography and anthropology. Coevalness with the Other places the objects of analysis in the same time frame as the producer of anthropological discourse: it means that the ethnographer does *not* see his or her "subjects" as *Other.* However, as Shumar points out, in ethnographic discourse the "informant is by definition the 'other'" (44). Ethnographers see themselves as fundamentally different from those they study. This denial of coevalness with the Other —the denial of commonality between author and "subject"—is part of the attempt to claim distance and hence authority for the voice of the author, thus is one element of the power relations of culture (45).

In the case of academia, Shumar sees the denial of coevalness in the image of the ivory tower or the "imagined community" of the academy: an intellectual, gated community of tenured faculty members. For Shumar, a major aspect of this denial of coevalness in the academy is the failure to see how the processes of end-of-the century capitalism and globalization have created pressures and contradictions for faculty members similar to those for agricultural workers in Latin America, factory workers in Asia, and temporary workers in the United States.

Concrete examples of this denial of coevalness abound in the book. For example, tenured faculty members regard part-time adjunct teaching to be an admirable part of an academic apprenticeship for a graduate student but a clear sign of failure for the same person once he or she has received the doctorate. In almost willful ignorance of the state of the academic labor market and the forces currently strangling it, tenured faculty assume that inability to obtain a tenure-track position with doctorate in hand is due to personal inadequacy and not (global) structural conditions. This "meritocratic" view is also held by many part-time faculty who internalize their marginal position as being the result of personal inadequacy.

The structural conditions of higher education that are ignored by the denial of coevalness are explored in Shumar's analysis of the crises of higher education. He shows how the needs of the capitalist economy for new products, new markets, and a trained work force have created a series of economic pressures on higher education. These in turn have created "a series of fiscal crises in the university that have forced universities to see themselves as businesses providing a product to market" (24). The fiscal crisis of private and public colleges and of universities has led to increased tuition and heightened pressure to contain costs. Imposing and increasing tuition for students at public colleges and universities and the quest for corporate–university research contracts is part of the "privatization" of public higher education. In addition to these fiscal strategies, a major cost-containment strategy has been the growth in use of graduate teaching assistants and part-time adjunct faculty in place of full-time tenured or tenure-track faculty.[1]

Shumar focuses on the work life of adjunct faculty based on his own and fellow graduate students' experiences, both at his alma mater "North Urban University" and at the other pseudonymous colleges and universities where they taught as adjuncts. These stories provide some of the best material in *College for Sale,* illustrating the day-to-day political, structural, emotional, and cultural issues faced by contingent faculty. He discusses how many adjunct faculty strive to become "superacademics," both excellent teachers and much published researchers—a frequently self-defeating strategy when, for example, adjuncts have more publications than the members of the hiring committee.

College for Sale explores the academic labor market by examining the recent history of higher education, including the fiscal crisis of the state and its impact on public funding of higher education. It also discusses the professionalization of academic

1. On the issue of graduate teaching assistants and their labor struggles, see Nelson (1997).

"management," the deployment of various managerial strategies, the conscious shift to "move higher education to a more career oriented focus" by the Nixon administration, and the growth of faculty unions and strikes. Chapters 4 and 5 provide a structural analysis of capitalism and globalization and their direct impacts on higher education. This is particularly valuable and innovative where he considers the close (5–4) 1980 Supreme Court decision denying compulsory coverage of the National Labor Relations Act to a faculty union at Yeshiva University. This decision has been used to deny mandatory recognition of faculty unions in private (but not public) colleges and universities.

Shumar contrasts the Supreme Court's majority opinion and its concept of faculty as managers/professionals with the position of the National Labor Relations Board (in support of the faculty union). In other words, are faculty members *employees of* the university or does the faculty constitute the university itself (103)? Shumar discusses how the frequently invoked images of the (Fordist) factory with administrators/managers, faculty/workers, and student/consumers are more relevant than the Board's image of the university as an "odd sort of factory." However, he also concludes that this factory image does not represent the current university nearly as well as the post-Fordist concept of flexible specialization.

Further, Shumar examines the implications of Fordist and post-Fordist images not only for the academy, but also for collective bargaining by faculty unions. He concludes that unions have been critical to faculty organizing, but that they ultimately must be reconceptualized in concert with faculty reimagining their position in a flexible accumulation academy (113). Such cultural issues of imagining and discourse and their implications for power relations and the economic position of tenured and adjunct faculty are integrated throughout this text. The discussion of the position of deans and the "symbolic prestige" of faculty and the "ritualistic deference" that administrators pay to faculty are poignant in this context (108–9).

Drawing on the work of Perry Anderson, Jean Baudrillard, Pierre Bourdieu, and others, *College for Sale* uses cultural theory to explain many aspects of university life. It examines the commodification of the college degree, where education matters less than the credential and where students become (alienated) consumers. Clear signs of such commodification include changes in admissions materials sent to prospective students as a marketing device. In a section on the semiotics of college life, Shumar details a double shift where the admissions office has been transformed not only into a site where commodities are marketed, but one targeted at different class segments of the market. For example, he discusses how "academic journals and college catalogs before 1960 looked more like bibles" than the slick, market-differentiated magazines they have become (127). Other issues considered by Shumar include political correctness, multiculturalism, corporate–university research connections, and faculty strikes and collective bargaining.

College for Sale is a major contribution to the resurgent left literature on the academic labor market and the corporatization of higher education in the United States. More than any other single work, it has helped me to understand my own lived expe-

rience as a faculty member at a small private university. It connects the pieces of academic work life—teaching courses, sitting on committees, responding to administrative pressures/directives/initiatives—by showing how they are connected to broader political and economic forces. It also provides needed critical perspectives on this work life and the discourse my colleagues and I construct daily to understand and survive the contradictions and struggles of our work life. In this dimension, Wesley Shumar's book is very successful.

While Shumar has provided a more extensive and rigorous theoretical treatment of the "commodification" of higher education than other authors, there are three issues I would like to raise with the text. First, while one of the strengths of Shumar's analysis is the interweaving of cultural theory, political economy, and historical analysis, the theoretical exposition is uneven and unclear as to its audience. In some places, Shumar is writing to provide a theoretical and epistemological critique of his own discipline of cultural anthropology/ethnology; in others, he presents the theoretical material primarily to motivate and examine his focus on the commodification of higher education. This unevenness makes the introductory chapter more difficult than necessary and his concluding chapter less persuasive than it might otherwise have been.

Second, as useful and revealing as Shumar's use of the concept commodification is, it limits his analysis of higher education and its current struggles. For Shumar, the commodities involved are education and the labor-power of part-time adjunct faculty and educated students (i.e., graduates). Shumar's discussion of the commodification of education—a product that consumer/students wish to purchase so that they can successfully become commodities themselves (i.e., get good corporate jobs)—begs the question of what education could be if not a commodity. There is little discussion of how students and faculty might fight to redefine the content of education as one way to resist and struggle against the forces of downsizing, deindustrialization, marginalization, and globalization. The possibility of such an alternative, oppositional content of education is mentioned in the chapter on symbolic struggles, yet it is treated briefly and not raised as a major issue. Rather, struggles over knowledge and the context of education (with the exception of multiculturalism) are portrayed as settled, past struggles (as in the discussion of the shift to a more career-oriented academy).

Further, the focus on the part-time adjunct labor-power commodity leaves the impression that only these faculty members are exploited workers within the university. Indeed, by contrasting the marginalized position of part-time adjuncts with the relatively privileged position of tenured faculty members, Shumar leaves the impression that the former are exploited by the latter or, at the very least, that the privileges of tenured faculty are paid for by the superexploitation of the contingent faculty. There is little doubt that part-time adjunct faculty are severely exploited, that they have much worse working conditions (detailed by Shumar) in terms of invisibility, exclusion, selection, academic freedom, and power (not to mention pay and work load) than tenured faculty. Yet at the same time that he chronicles the conditions of the adjunct working class in detail, Shumar also mentions the deterioration of the working conditions of many full-time tenure-track and tenured faculty, in part due to changing

power relations and the academy's increasing reliance on the contingent faculty labor force.

What Shumar does *not* do is raise the question of exploitation in the academy in general. He does not ask the question: what are the class relations within the university? This question would lead him to consider whether the production and sale of the education commodity (which he details) is joined in the university with the class processes of the production, extraction, and distribution of surplus-value. In other words, Shumar's analysis itself suffers from a particular denial of coevalness, the denial that tenured and tenure-track faculty members might also occupy the class position of producer of surplus-value—along with part-time adjunct faculty workers as well as nonfaculty workers in the university. Raising this question would open the possibility that the university (public or private) might be a site of academic capitalism. It would be capitalist in the sense that faculty members as teachers produce not only an education commodity but also at the same time create surplus-value.[2]

This possible class analysis of faculty in general is significant in at least two ways. First, it provides a previously untheorized common ground between full-time tenured/tenure-track faculty and part-time adjunct faculty and graduate teaching assistants. This would tend to strengthen possibilities for collective action although, as Shumar does indicate, the specific interests of the two groups of faculty differ in significant ways. (The formation of part-time faculty unions separate from tenure-track/tenured faculty unions at some universities indicates their differences; joint collective bargaining by such unions points to their increased solidarity and effectiveness.) Second, and paradoxically, a Marxist class analysis that demonstrates that faculty as teachers (whatever else goes on in their work life as committee members, etc.) are surplus-value producers may also provide arguments in opposition to the *Yeshiva* decision and in support of faculty unions under the National Labor Relations Act.

In this same vein, the final issue I wish to raise with Shumar's work is that it poses no strategies for combatting the trends analyzed so well in the text. His final paragraph ends: "Universities need to reinvigorate the quest for knowledge; knowledge that serves the interests of people, brings healing and benefit to the planet and reestablishes a concern for human values. This will only happen if university intellectuals become aware of the institutions in which they work and the global pressures on those institutions" (186). This statement reflects the absence of a class analysis, hence falls back on an unchallenging humanism that could incorporate precisely the kinds of liberal discourse he effectively skewers in the book as well as a more progressive and effective class struggle (of the kind acted out in the 1996 Yale University graduate student strike, among others). This is a surprising final recommendation after some of the more concrete issues raised in terms of part-time adjunct faculty, faculty unions, and collective bargaining earlier in the text.

It is disappointing that Shumar does not raise the next set of questions that would

2. I have explored such an analysis with respect to private liberal arts colleges in an unpublished paper (Curtis 1996).

lead us forward from his excellent analysis. However, his work does help us to delineate some of the questions that need to be asked and, perhaps, parameters of some of the answers. These would include questions such as: what kinds of knowledge provide vehicles for opposition to exploitation, both inside the academy and out? How can class struggles in the university be linked with those outside to the benefit of workers in both places? How can undergraduate and graduate students and part-time and tenure-track/tenured faculty members work together to change the (class) form and content of the university? What would a university based upon the communal or collective production and appropriation of surplus labor look like? How can the university, in its theory and praxis, support alternatives to the existing political economic system: its exploitation and contradictions?

Wesley Shumar's text is path-breaking. It clarifies, interrogates, and analyzes many of the current contradictions of academic life that faculty encounter daily in original and innovative ways. In doing so, it has helped me understand many of the events and struggles of my work life as a college professor. *College for Sale* has also made it more possible to rethink not only the current trends celebrated by *Business Week*, but also to return to the question of what education is and of what it should be for faculty, administrators, students, and the broader community.

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