

The Politics of Contingent Academic Labor

by Claire Goldstene

The alarming stories from adjunct faculty, who now comprise a majority of higher-education teachers nationally, share troubling commonalities: adjuncts paid less than a living wage, some as little as \$900 per course; adjuncts ineligible to receive health and retirement benefits; adjuncts eligible for food stamps; adjuncts concurrently teaching seven courses on four different campuses; adjuncts forced to choose between paying for health care and groceries; adjuncts who enjoy a mere fifteen weeks of job security at a time; adjuncts assigned to teach the day before school begins; adjuncts required to schedule office hours without offices; adjuncts excluded from university governance despite their high numbers among faculty; adjuncts who, notwithstanding years of service, remain nameless and faceless entities in their departments. The frustrations are financial, personal, and professional.

In decades past, most adjunct faculty worked full-time outside of academe and taught an occasional course based on a particular expertise or practical experience; today, however, with a sharp decline in the number of tenure-track positions, an increasing number of adjuncts seek to earn a living through teaching. In the 1970s, adjuncts comprised 20 percent of college faculty nationally, a percentage that has now climbed to well over fifty. Joining the growing ranks of adjuncts are other contingent teachers, including one-year or multi-term faculty

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and post-docs. According to the American Association of University Professors, “non-tenure track positions now account for 68 percent of all faculty appointments in American higher education,” a figure that does not take into account the teaching done by graduate students.¹ While reliance on non-tenure-track faculty is highest at community colleges, this shift toward contingency is also seen at public and private four-year colleges, research universities, and liberal arts colleges.

Woodrow Wilson commented (and Henry Kissinger notably repeated) that the nastiness of academic battles correlates to how little is at stake. And while this may frequently be the case, the stakes related to contingency in higher education

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are actually quite significant, and extend well beyond salaries and university budgets. The outcome will affect not only those directly employed as academic labor, but the millions of students seeking college degrees, the nature of the education they will receive, and the role of the university in the public sphere. Such a perspective necessarily directs our attention to the political dimensions of these changes.

Current conditions for academic labor mirror larger national economic trends—an abundance of qualified candidates for a shrinking number of tenure-track positions, an expanding pool of part-time and underemployed contingent faculty, and more and more Ph.D.-trained graduates pursuing non-academic work. But, in spite these realities, a mythology persists on the part of many affiliated with higher education that universities are insulated from the realm of political economy. Instead of the tawdriness of financial pursuits, the search for truth and enlightenment unfolds within the protective confines of ivy-covered walls and under the aegis of a medieval-like guild system where apprentices absorb knowledge and aspire to become masters. Such thinking calls to mind Thorstein Veblen’s use of the concept “cultural lag”: adherence to anachronistic ideas in the face of contradictory historical evidence. In a de-industrializing economy, education constitutes an essential factor of production, and the labor relations that define it should be considered in this vein.

Ronald Reagan’s election to the presidency in 1980 generally marks the start of the successful rollback of worker advances made since passage of the 1935 National Labor Relations Act, which recognized the right of workers to bargain collectively. The diminishment of labor rights over the past 30 years ranges from the firing of 11,000 air-traffic controllers, the weakening of the National Labor Relations Board, the growing number of right-to-work states, and the cumbersome processes required

to form a union, to recent efforts in Indiana, Ohio, and Wisconsin to end collective bargaining for public employees. The intensification of the trend toward academic contingency constitutes part of these larger developments.

In higher education, the expression of this national mood has involved a campaign to corporatize universities through reductions in public funding, lowered labor costs for faculty and some staff, increased numbers of highly paid administrators, and measures of success related, not to the quality of education but, instead, to universities as engines of economic growth via real estate deals, collegiate sports, and entrepreneurial activities. Between 1975 and 2005, decades of ris-

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ing college enrollments, the number of full-time faculty grew 50 percent, while the percentage of those employed as university administrators swelled 85 percent and administrative staffers by 240 percent.² This expansion of non-teaching staff and greater reliance on contingent academic labor has made those with tenure an ever-shrinking part of campus communities who, consequently, speak with a blunted voice on matters related to university governance, a condition that amplifies a growing administrative influence.

The management of non-profit universities on a for-profit model has joined a continuing effort by conservatives to challenge the perceived liberal ideological bias of university teaching, often through attacks on tenure. Thus, beyond the often-dire effect on individual job seekers of this expanded dependence on provisional faculty also comes a collateral threat to tenure and with it, academic freedom. And weakened academic freedom has particular political ramifications, especially for progressives—if progressive is taken to mean any movement toward a greater equality of publicly effective power.

THE POWELL PLAN

Intellectual independence, in both private and public institutions, without fear of reprisal from donors, administrators, or other parties has been deemed essential to promote innovative intellectual work. Most fundamentally, tenure and academic freedom protect modes of inquiry with the potential to upset the status quo, historically making such endeavors inherently progressive, separate from any attachment to specific policy positions or political party platforms. Meaningful investigation into the natural and social worlds depends on the scientific method, which insists on no particular allegiance to orthodoxy but, instead, embraces the “necessity for wandering.”³ Challenges to conventional thinking are often rewarded.

Modern universities ground the expansion of knowledge in empiricism rather than theology, a practice that accepts the uncertainty of conclusions and the likelihood that they will be modified with the discovery of new evidence. In its broadest consequences, constricted academic freedom threatens the foundation of scientific inquiry and universities as sites for searching, discovering, and advancing understanding. Embedded in this approach is a recognition that the evolution of knowledge should be celebrated, not feared. This is a perspective that contains a disruptive potential.

Despite persistent claims about a chasm between the “ivory tower” and the

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“real world,” this supposed dichotomy misses the symbiotic relationship between ideas and material reality; in fact, it misses what it means to be educated. What happens in university classrooms relates directly to real-world politics, which explains the contentiousness over curriculum. It is no accident that failed Republican Party presidential candidate Rick Santorum derided public schools and ridiculed advocates of higher education as “snobs.” Particularly from the mid-20th century onward, academic environments have proved important sites for the elaboration of ideas essential to progressive politics, particularly those around multiculturalism that have, among other things, expanded the variety and range of groups to whom the promises of equal opportunity are extended and helped to make possible the election of an African American to the presidency.

However, in spite of greater multiculturalism, as the power of organized labor has diminished in the U.S. over the last 30 years, the political left has struggled to provide a unifying vision to compete with neoliberalism, particularly one that captures the complexity of issues related to social class. As Robin D. G. Kelley wrote in *Freedom Dreams*, progressives have proved especially adept at drawing needed attention to social and economic injustice, but less skilled at offering an alternative future to compete with the reality in which people live. Certainly the articulation of that future may appear from outside the institutions of higher education, but the loss of tenure and academic freedom lessens the possibility that it will come in any meaningful way from the academy. The push toward contingent academic labor erodes the university as a basis for the free exchange of ideas, undermines the scientific method as a foundation for intellectual pursuits, and diminishes a potent voice of opposition. The political left ignores this development at its own peril. But it has been long recognized by conservatives and propels the decades-long increase in contingent faculty as part of a larger offensive against tenure and aca-

demic freedom.

Anxiety from the right about the connection between academic freedom and tenure stretches back decades. In his now somewhat infamous 1971 memo, written for the national Chamber of Commerce, future Supreme Court Justice Lewis Powell lamented what he described as a “broad attack” directed against “the American economic system” at universities across the country. This “assault on the enterprise system” jeopardized the “strength and prosperity of America and the freedom of our people.” In his estimation, “the campus is the single most dynamic source” of such criticism.

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Powell outlined a wide-ranging and centrally coordinated response that, while not immediately adopted by the Chamber, provided a blueprint for conservative political organizations. Recommendations included the cultivation of “a staff of highly qualified scholars in the social sciences who do believe in the system,” a speakers bureau for campus appearances, evaluations of the content of assigned textbooks, expansion of the Chamber’s leverage within graduate schools of business, monitoring media for perceived anti-business bias, and an insistence that all campus events include representatives of business interests in the name of “balance.” Finally, noting that most universities received public financing that in his rendering came disproportionately from taxes paid by businesses, Powell advocated threats to university funding, as well as the exertion of greater influence from business leaders who serve on university boards of trustees.⁴ In the memo, Powell explicitly distanced himself from any recommendation that would impugn the integrity of academic freedom. But while not calling it by name, his program was intended to achieve exactly that.

Powell recognized the inherent tendency of higher education to challenge accepted norms, a propensity that could help shape national dialogue underlying political, social, and economic policy. Recent literature dedicated to understanding the strategies of neoliberal proponents for molding domestic and foreign policy grounds that success, at least in part, on the establishment of think tanks and affiliation with academic departments across the country.⁵ In *Invisible Hands: The Making of the Conservative Movement from the New Deal to Reagan*, Kim Phillips-Fein narrates the trajectory of a collaborative campaign by conservative business interests to challenge New Deal programs and the ideological foundation that supported government regulation of the economy, not only through direct lobbying, but by framing public discourse about economic policy. This strategy helped

to engender broad support for conservative economic principles when Reagan assumed the presidency in 1980.

The culmination of these efforts is glaringly revealed in the documentary *Inside Job*, about the 2008 financial collapse, which illustrates the intimate connection of academic economists and business-school faculty to corporate America. In a university environment of already limited latitude for the development of ideas outside the strictures of neoliberalism (in 2007, 47 percent of Harvard University graduating seniors entered the fields of finance or consulting), and the dominance of business programs, the political consequences of an increase in contingent fac-

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ulty are significant.⁶ The curtailment of academic freedom, exacerbated by a majority of such faculty, will undermine the progressive politics intrinsic to open inquiry, further narrowing an already shrinking space for the development of a countervailing power to the dominant neoliberal and corporate worldview.

FACULTY AS WAGE-LABOR

The conditions of academic labor reflect the mission of universities. Should they be defined by a commitment to intellectual inquiry—sites to explore the nature of knowing, to acknowledge and then endeavor to clarify the complexities of the natural and social worlds, to expose students to alternative perspectives and to propose new ways of thinking—all of which requires academic freedom, a freedom historically protected by tenure? Or, should universities be defined according to corporate values, that is, their ability to attract “customers,” increase endowment funds, reduce labor costs, and act as businesses in a market-driven economy? This latter, neoliberal view, increasingly embraced by a growing cadre of administrators, has yoked corporate values to a longer-term conservative assault against tenure protections manifested, in major part, through a greater dependence on adjunct and contract faculty.

Rather than acknowledge the narrative of a slow and deliberate move toward academic contingency, those who have long sought to eliminate the protections of tenure in pursuit of a particular economic and political agenda present this development as a recent phenomenon that has resulted from an acute economic crisis.⁷ Thus, this moment of financial distress seems to present only a desperately narrow range of choices, among them an allegedly new reliance on contingent faculty. Under the guise of a fiscal emergency, opponents of tenure have weakened its standing in higher education, and with it academic freedom, largely without the

political fight that likely would have erupted under other circumstances.

While the loss of endowment money, reductions in philanthropic giving, shrinking federal research grants, and squeezed state finances have detrimentally affected university budgets and the resources available for new faculty hires, the shift toward contingency extends back years. Though accelerated by the current economic climate, to have arrived at a place where contingent labor now comprises the new faculty majority represents the culmination of a thirty-year effort, and has prompted an emergent union organizing effort among adjunct and contingent faculty across the country.

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This new reality, despite the claims of many, did not result from autonomous and remote market forces where a purported overproduction of Ph.D.s now suffers the consequences of a “free market” of supply and demand. On the contrary, rising college admissions have expanded the necessity for teachers over the last three decades, hence the seemingly endless need to hire adjunct faculty. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, enrollment in post-secondary institutions increased 38 percent between 1999 and 2009.⁸ More people teach college now than ever before; this does not suggest that too many Ph.D.s have been granted. The rise of contingency does, however, make clear that too many Ph.D.s compete for too few tenure-track jobs. As enrollments have climbed, along with the need for teachers, the number of tenure-track jobs has fallen. And this is a consequence of choices by university administrators and those who decrease public funding for higher education, raise tuition costs, hire more and more high-salaried administrators, construct new campus buildings and high-end sports complexes, and reduce the resources dedicated to paying faculty.

In this brave new world of contingent faculty, threats to tenure and its complement, academic freedom, are occasionally overt and frequently subtle, but with similarly disturbing consequences. Some administrators have sought to eliminate tenure altogether, notably Charles Reed when he served, from 1986 to 1998, as chancellor for the State University System of Florida, an effort that ultimately failed. (Reed, who announced his retirement in June of this year, has been chancellor of the California State University system since 1998.) Many newly formed, non-profit universities do not offer tenure and the ballooning number of for-profit colleges typically offer only part-time faculty appointments. A 2011 survey of college presidents conducted by the Pew Research Center in association with *The Chronicle of Higher Education* found that 69 percent of respondents would prefer to

govern a university comprised of mostly contract, non-tenured faculty.⁹

Yet less direct administrative maneuvers also undermine tenure and academic freedom. A growing number of academics are employed on a year-to-year or multi-year basis, either as term faculty or post-docs, and occupy a middle ground between adjunct and tenure-track/tenured faculty. Salary packages may include health and retirement contributions (benefits often unavailable to adjuncts), but they remain contingent: contracts contain no guarantee of renewal. Some contract faculty, in addition to teaching at a high level are expected to produce peer-reviewed and published scholarship to retain their positions and seek promotion

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in the ranks. Essentially, this group of contingent faculty fulfill the requirements associated with achieving tenure without the possibility of attaining not only its economic security but, more importantly, those political protections that encourage and support academic freedom.

Beyond these institutional efforts to weaken tenure and its safeguards are the myriad ways in which perpetual economic uncertainty induces self-censorship. Anxiety about student evaluations can lead contingent faculty to avoid controversial material, reduce the rigor of course requirements, construct syllabi and select reading material with administrators, rather than students, in mind, and retreat from the notion that the job of the professor is to profess. This diminishes teaching and undermines the mission of universities to expose students to varied perspectives. A large pool of financially vulnerable workers is unlikely to promote classroom discussions that challenge conventional wisdom.

THE POLITICAL FALLOUT

While these new realities of academic life most immediately affect job seekers, contingent faculty, and their students, the long-term consequences permeate the atmosphere of the university. Though conservative critics have overplayed the perceived liberal bias of university faculty and curriculum, they have correctly identified higher education as contested political terrain. Education should provoke skepticism and promote exposure to viewpoints that question traditional ways of thinking. Given this, for those dedicated to protecting existing inequalities of power the stakes are quite high. Adjunct and contingent academic labor are integral to this larger political drama. Current trends in academic labor are not merely a response to an immediate economic crisis. The expansion of contingent faculty corresponds to a decades-long effort to abolish tenure and curtail academ-

ic freedom in the interests of advancing a conservative political agenda. These are crucial matters of power. Contingency weakens the autonomy of all faculty since it weakens institutional commitments to job security and academic freedom. It thus alters university culture, a chain of causality with particular political implications. Contingent labor undermines tenure, which undermines academic freedom, which undermines progressive politics. 

ENDNOTES

1. American Association of University Professors, "Background Facts on Contingent Faculty."
2. Ginsberg, *The Fall of the Faculty: The Rise of the All-Administrative University and Why It Matters*, 25.
3. Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World*, 298.
4. Powell, "Confidential Memorandum: Attack on the Free Enterprise System."
5. For recent examples of conservative political activities in the realm of higher education see Mayer, "State for Sale" and Greenwald's documentary film *Koch Brothers Exposed*.
6. "Surveying the Class," *The Harvard Crimson*.
7. Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*.
8. National Center for Education Statistics, "Fast Facts."
9. Stripling, "Most Presidents Prefer No Tenure for Majority of Faculty."

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