



Rhoades, G. (1999). Medieval or modern status in the postindustrial university: Beyond binaries for graduate students. *Workplace*, 4, 16-22.

GARY RHOADES

Medieval or Modern Status in the Postindustrial University: Beyond Binaries for Graduate Students

Are graduate students apprentices, with their feudal roots, or employees, with their modern trappings (Vaughn, 1998)? Depending on the issue at hand, and on which status enables the institution to withhold or appropriate more value from the student, academic managers have said that they are both. However, depending on the issue at hand and the particular graduate student population in question, and depending on which status enables students to claim more by way of entitlement from the institution (and from faculty), graduate students have also invoked both images. I suggest that in the post-industrial university graduate students should move beyond these binary categories and beware the shortcomings of both statuses. Neither affords full protection of basic rights to which graduate students might aspire. Both offer the possibility of degrading (Braverman, 1974) essential dimensions of academic work. To cast one's lot, then, with either of these binary choices, is to ennoble one over the other, overlooking the threats to professional labor that are embedded in each. Perhaps graduate students should fashion a status that combines the best and minimizes the worst elements of the medieval and the modern, of social compact and economic contract. Perhaps they should fashion a status that goes beyond defining themselves purely in terms of their officially determined work within the organization. Perhaps they should fashion a status that enables them to play a role they have historically played, particularly in other countries, challenging institutions and society to live up to their claims and to change in ways that serve social justice, serve the broad public interest. Making these choices involves rethinking the metaphors and mechanisms by which one organizes academic work(ers).

Due to the timeliness of the struggle of teaching assistants and other graduate student employees to gain collective bargaining rights, and because such efforts are prominent among graduate students in English, I foreground a focus on unions. At the same time, I don't want to lose sight of another recent struggle undertaken by graduate school deans and students to force faculty to provide more mentoring for graduate students. The former effort is designed to create a contractual employment agreement between graduate students and the institution. The latter effort is designed to strengthen an educational social compact between graduate students and faculty, enforced by academic managers. If these struggles are in some ways distinct, in other ways they have much in common. First, in seeking to further formalize dimensions of dependence, neither confronts key challenges to the position not just of graduate students but of the academic profession. Whether in regard to workload, academic freedom, job security, use of instructional technology, or intellectual property, neither the medieval compact nor the modernist contract necessarily advances the position of graduate students (and faculty) in the post-industrial university. Second, in focusing on the teaching and employing organization, neither questions the role of graduate students being cast as subjects of educational work and objects of economic work. Whether in the classroom as learning place or as workplace, neither the apprentice nor the employee role affords graduate students an active role in the world of education or of work. Both encourage students to focus narrowly on their own formal role within an organization, eschewing any broader conceptions of education, work, and their relationship to society and social change.

Recently, in response to the efforts of University of California graduate students to unionize, system President Richard Atkinson argued to the California Public Employee Relations Board (PERB) that collective bargaining rights should be denied graduate students because they are apprentices, not employees (the PERB rejected that and other arguments). The irony of the UC's argument is that on matters of intellectual property rights, leading research universities have taken quite the opposite position—claiming that students are employees (if they receive remuneration through the university) and that whatever intellectual property (patents and software, for example) they create is owned by the university. The university's position about the status of a student varies depending on the economic savings and gains that attach to different designations.

Yet there are also ironies embedded in the actions of graduate students. At the same time that state-employed, instructionally-oriented graduate students are fighting for employee status, other graduate students, generally in the sciences, and often research assistants who are being supported on external research grants, seem relatively content with the status of (research) apprentice (which can pay better than the position of instructional apprentice—just as faculty salaries vary dramatically by field, with some assistant professors in Business and Engineering making more than some full professors in English—see Rhoades, 1998). Also at the same time, many other graduate students (including some of those who are working for employee status) have been pushing for what could be called enhanced apprenticeship rights—the right to be mentored, to have contact with the masters, and to have a quality experience. Such apprenticeship rights are quite distinct from the rights that come with employee status. In other words, graduate students' position about their status varies depending on the economic and educational benefits that attach to different designations.

There is an additional, particular irony in the choice of UC graduate students to be represented by the United Auto Workers (UAW)—postmodern graduate students in post-industrial institutions turning for support to the modernist structure of an industrial trade union. In the United States, unionization in the private sector (largely in industry) has declined dramatically in the last two decades, as compared to increased unionization among white collar employees in the public sector (Johnston, 1994). Only 12% of the workforce in the private sector is covered by collective bargaining agreements, nearly a third of what it was in organized labor's heyday. Autoworkers are a particularly striking example of such changes. Indeed, it is probably in part their steep declines in membership that contributed to the UAW's courtship of graduate students.

Affiliation with the UAW highlights the contingent nature of graduate students' organizing victory. It also underscores a choice that graduate students need to address in pursuing unionism. In many regards, students can gain a good deal by unionizing—most obviously, better wages and benefits. What are the limits of what they have gained, and what are they in danger of losing?

A consideration of legislation, the state, and higher education is useful in this regard. Graduate students can benefit from reflecting on the post-industrial condition of universities internationally (see Slaughter and Leslie, 1997). They can also learn from the experience of unionized faculty nationwide (see Rhoades, 1998). There are at least two patterns of appropriation that are particularly relevant to the condition of graduate students. First, there is the pattern of financial appropriations from the federal and state government to support students and institutions. The pattern is of marketization and privatization. By that I mean that the federal government has increasingly moved to link higher education to the private sector and corporate marketplace, in research support and student aid. In the former, which includes monies for graduate student support, there is a supply side pattern of reducing monies to fields in the social sciences, humanities, and education, and increasing monies to engineering and science, with a push for these fields to engage less in curiosity driven and more in commercially relevant work. In the case of student aid, the explicit policy has been high tuition and high aid, with two provisos—the high aid never fully materialized, and the aid shifted from a predominance of grants to loans. At the same time, financial appropriations to higher education at the state level have declined as a share of total state appropriations,

and state monies have declined as a share of public research universities' budgets. The pressure from both levels of government has encouraged an academic capitalism that is particularly evident in public research universities, but is found elsewhere in higher education as well (Slaughter and Leslie, 1997). More and more there is an emphasis within the institution of maximizing revenue generating units and activities. Productive work is increasingly equated with work that has immediate commercial value, and service activities and fields are increasingly undervalued. More and more there is a pattern within institutions of supply-side appropriations of state and tuition dollars (Rhoades and Slaughter, 1997).

The pattern of academic capitalism is linked to a second pattern of legislative appropriation, with significant implications for activities within universities. In the 1980s and 1990s, at the federal and state levels, legislation has been enacted that enables and encourages public universities to own the patents prosecuted by "their" faculty. The legislative push has been to make employment in the public sector more like that in the private sector, with the employing organization owning all the time and products of its employees. Graduate students are at double jeopardy in this process. On the one hand, as apprentices, their discoveries are often appropriated by the masters. On the other hand, in receiving any financial support from a university (e.g., as a teaching or research assistant, or simply receiving a tuition waiver) they are treated as "employees", and the institution lays claim to whatever they produce. Another legislative push focuses not on intellectual product but on process, on workload and academic freedom. Increasingly in the 1980s and 1990s, legislatures are demanding more accountability, are attempting to define workload as an issue that is outside the scope of collective bargaining, and are according managers the power to determine the form of instructional delivery (using instructional technology, promoting distance education). Again, graduate students find themselves squeezed in the middle, as institutions are criticized for using too many teaching assistants and as institutions hire increasing numbers of part-time faculty (cheaper than teaching assistants) to deliver ever larger portions of the undergraduate curriculum. Overall, social relations within the university are being privatized, increasingly modeled on social relations in the business world, with students becoming customers, administrators becoming managers, and faculty the production employees whose work is increasingly monitored and controlled externally.

As increasingly managed and stratified professionals (Rhoades, 1998), what exactly are the terms of labor for unionized faculty, what strategies have faculty bargaining agents utilized, and what are the implications for graduate students? In the following paragraphs I walk through some of the basic terms of faculty employment, examining the benefits and limits of working collectively as employees or independently as apprentices. In the process, I offer some alternatives in negotiating the position of graduate students in capitalist, postindustrial universities.

Unions have most clearly benefitted faculty in an area of much concern to graduate students—salaries and benefits. Salaries for unionized faculty are higher than those for non-unionized faculty in comparable institutions, although the difference is decreasing. General salary dispersion (the gap between average salaries in higher and lower paying fields), as well as the gender gap in salaries, is less for unionized than for non-unionized faculty, although again the difference is decreasing. But before one celebrates the success of faculty unions too much, a few provisos should be noted. First, controlling for inflation, faculty salaries nationally have remained the same throughout the 1990s, and about the same as the early 1970s. Second, throughout the country bargaining agents are fighting a losing battle against cuts in benefits. Third, unions do not have a good record either of organizing or of securing livable wages and benefits for part-time faculty, to whose situation graduate students are closer than to that of full-time faculty. Nevertheless, the alternative model for graduate students, of relying as apprentices on the good will of the university and the masters, has proved for many to be untenable.

The emphasis on wages is part of a long standing, trade-union strategy of focusing on wages and protections in the collective bargaining process. In the increasingly capitalistic domain of higher education, this has proved problematic, as it has in the business world. What is the pattern in the private sector of our economy—increased layoffs, fewer full-time jobs and more part-time and contingent

employment, increased use of technology to the detriment of full-time production employees? Each of these patterns is found in higher education as well. Faculty unions have negotiated retrenchment/layoff clauses that seek to extend and complicate the process, establishing procedures such as consultation, notice, and layoff order, that make it too difficult and time consuming for managers to lay off full-time faculty. Yet the courts have sided with managerial prerogatives in laying off tenured faculty for a range of economic and academic reasons, as simple as engaging in a reorganization of academic programs. And what campus in this country has not experienced some reorganization effort? A few contracts specify certain ratios of full to part-time faculty, to protect the number of full-time faculty positions. However, the overwhelming number fail to ensure either the future of full-time faculty positions or professional conditions of work for the current part-time faculty workforce. And in the last two decades the number of part-time faculty has doubled, to account for between 41 and 45 percent of total faculty (with the numbers being even higher in some fields and institutions). Academic managers are increasingly investing in instructional technology, at great expense, expanding the delivery of courses and programs at a distance (by part-time faculty), and pushing for the increased use of technology in traditional classes. Just over 50 percent of collective bargaining agreements nationally fail to even address the issue of instructional technology. Of those that do, they offer some protection for current faculty—ensuring that the use of technology is voluntary, that it will not displace current faculty, that it will not be used for surveillance of faculty, and that faculty have some say in the reuse of courses that they have produced. However, few contracts ensure that current employees will receive adequate support and training (and pro-rated compensation) for utilizing new technologies. Few ensure that instructional workload will not increase—e.g., with increased demands for preparation, increased time interacting with students, teaching more students, and on and on. In short, faculty unions have been unable to sufficiently protect faculty's basic working conditions.

Of course, for all the shortcomings of faculty unions' wage and protection approach, the alternative does not hold much attraction either. Restructuring and marketization in higher education have had drastic consequences for graduate students, particularly in fields that are not seen as being close to corporate markets, and particularly in the area of instruction. In research universities, the number of tenure-track faculty positions is stagnant, academic workload is being increased, and the emphasis is on productivity and accountability in terms of undergraduate credit hours and students. All of this bodes ill for the apprentice graduate students—their employment futures are bleak and in the current context they are not the priority of their masters. Moreover, as apprentices, graduate students are left with little recourse, with no course of collective action.

Some alternative approaches to the current situation are being pursued among faculty unions. Most prominent is a push for a "new unionism" that is focused on quality and professionalism, and on interest based bargaining or co-management (Rhoades, 1999). In my view, such an approach needs to be conceived much more broadly than is currently the case. In the face of the trends identified above, faculty (and graduate students) need to continue to pursue a healthy measure of so-called "old unionism." Wages and basic benefits and job protections are under assault by academic managers intent on increased flexibility and control of the workforce. At the same time, bargaining agents should also be more proactive in their strategies. That means ensuring faculty and student involvement in basic strategic and budgetary decisions surrounding reorganization, use of part-time faculty, and use of instructional technology. It means not just reacting to the plans that management has developed, being consulted (as in, meet and defer). Rather, it means being in the room and at the table developing plans. It also means paying attention not only to the protection of current employees, but to the future position of the profession.

Yet, I would suggest going even further still in pursuing alternative strategies. It has been argued that the key for public sector unions is to gain community support (Johnston, 1994; Rhoades, 1998). The modernist, economic industrial union strategies do not work so well for professional workers, ironically because of the feudal social compact between professionals and society. White-collar, professional, public

sector unions do best when they develop political strategies that enable them to win the political support of the public. Neither faculty nor graduate students have that support. Indeed, they are the subject of much public and political critique. That suggests that part of any collective strategy must involve connecting the interests of the academic profession (faculty and graduate students) to the broader public interest. The major public interest issues in higher education today are not unlike what applied to the critique and reorganization of health care—cost (in the case of higher education, tuition), access, and quality (not in terms of internal professional standards, but in terms of the quality of social relations with clients, and acting in the interests of one's clients). Graduate students should address these interests both within and beyond the confines of collective bargaining agreements. Contractually, that means building in provisions that have to do with peer review and time with students to be included in calculating instructional load. It means providing for the evaluation of the use of instructional technology—in terms of the quality of the overall program, its costs (relative to traditional classroom instruction), and who gains access (underserved populations?). It means not just negotiating over who owns and gets the profits from intellectual property, but defining a certain proportion of those proceeds that will be used to address high profile issues of public interest. In going beyond the contracts, addressing the public interest means addressing issues of child poverty, school (and university) dropout rates, and of access for students of color. By this I mean more than announcing political positions and making political demands on administration to "do something." Instead, I mean that graduate students should themselves "do something"—perhaps defining some such outreach and educational activities as part of the calculation of their workload.

In making the above suggestions, it is critical that graduate students recognize their position vis-a-vis "the public." Graduate students are not proletarianized workers. You are part of an educational elite—nationally, less than 10 percent of the population has advanced degrees. I understand that you are at the bottom of the professional food chain, and I understand that the doors of that profession are only very narrowly open. But in your political action you must understand that you are not in the position of a "worker." Indeed, much of the public questions whether what you (and I) do is real work. Many might ask, in words different than I am using, what surplus value you (and I) are creating. Virtually none of the public would understand the language we are using. I hope that you will forgive my digression here, and that you will give me a postmodern break. I am not just a tenured full professor, relatively comfortably ensconced in an air conditioned office of a public research university. I am also the son of a theologian born of the working class, and spouse of a former (bilingual) elementary school teacher who taught in East Los Angeles, where the average child lived in federal project housing. In my graduate school days, a group of radical students from UCLA (all white, and virtually all upper middle class) marched on May Day in East Los Angeles. They did the things that radical students in those days did—offering up chants and waving placards and burning flags. They were violently attacked by the "locals," some of whom were gang members, and escaped only with the help of the LAPD. What happened? They didn't understand their audience. They didn't understand the territory(ality). Not a lot of UCLA graduates live in East L.A. But a lot of families there have sons who were killed in Vietnam, because one of the few professions open to them was the military. To people whose daily lived experience is grinding, real poverty, the complaints of privileged university students about their position ring false. Other, less dramatic stories would offer the same moral with regard to people of various other social class backgrounds. My point here is not to say, quit complaining and be happy with what you've got. Rather, my point is that you, we, need to understand how we are viewed by the "external" world, if we are to connect our interests with the general public interest, and if we are to obtain community support.

Before I conclude, let me offer one other thought about the role of students, in our society, and in our higher education institutions. In this country, and even more so in most other countries, there is an important history of time and again of students successfully challenging society (and higher education) to live up to its publicly pronounced values. In each of the last four decades, student movements have been a central part of not just criticizing but transforming key institutions and practices—from the civil rights movement (e.g., freedom summer) and anti-war protests to divestment in South Africa and sweatshops

overseas. If some would have us believe that today's students are less socially conscious and politically active than the students of the 1960s, data on the extraordinary range and depth of current student activism belies that view (Levine and Cureton, 1998; Rhoads, 1998). By taking on an apprenticeship role, as mentee, or an employee role, graduate students run the risk of losing sight of the critical social role they have played historically.

How then to conclude? By suggesting a rethinking of the metaphors and mechanisms by which one organizes academic work(ers). In some ways, medieval and professional metaphors and their attendant mechanisms can be useful for students in that they connote obligations and responsibilities (of master to apprentice, of professional to client-student), and in that they enable the individual to win favor through "merit". Although these metaphors are not very powerful in a context of academic capitalism, there is some benefit currently that graduate students gain from their designation as students, and from negotiating their position as such interpersonally and individually. As such, they can make certain claims on the university—claims that are weakened if they simply become employees. For instance, they move from being customers whom the enterprise should try to satisfy, to employees who are largely seeking to satisfy other customers (e.g., undergraduates) and whose own satisfaction is essentially immaterial. Still, the mechanism for advancing claims is very limited and not particularly powerful. In some ways the modern metaphor of employee and mechanism of collective bargaining can be useful to students in that they connote a set of conditions to which they are entitled (wages, benefits), and about which they are entitled to negotiate as a group. However, there is another side to modern, economic metaphors. They reduce students to credit hour generators, workers who must be productive and be accountable for any shortcomings (rather than simply be learning). Most importantly, the modern metaphors reduce students to the status of people who are managed by others, in a context that is not particularly supportive of conventional union tactics and culture, and in a time when academic managers are gaining and exercising greater discretion in restructuring higher education and professional work. That would suggest the need for some change in mechanisms, towards a more proactive and public interest oriented approach to collective action.

In short, I would argue for a post-modern approach to agency and action. Reject the implied forced choice between competing metaphors and mechanisms, between apprentice or employee, between private, individual negotiation and public collective bargaining. Such universals are too all encompassing, and they inhibit students' ability to call on other historical roles and strategies. Instead, pursue post-modern spaces such that the metaphors, mechanisms, and definitions are not all confining. Proactively reshape a multiplicity of complex metaphors, from apprentice to employee to student to social critic to change agent to.... Similarly proactively enact a multiplicity of complex mechanisms, from the private to public, the individual to the collective, and from the campus and the employment contract to the social compact and social movements that reach beyond the academy.

Do not get me wrong. The postindustrial university is neither post-structural nor post-modern in the pressure and convergence of distinctively modernist structures of social relations—whether feudal, professional, or capitalist—on the lives of graduate students. In this understanding of the restructuring of universities and professional labor, I am, as I have written elsewhere, unabashedly modernist and structuralist (Rhoades and Slaughter, 1997). However, I am also convinced that for faculty, and graduate students, adopting a modernist stance in the context of current U.S. higher education is to ensure defeat in the struggle to improve the terms and conditions of professional work. As higher education privatizes, it would be well to recognize that the modernist struggle between employers and employed has already been played out in the private sector, to the definite disadvantage of employees. Thus, in challenging the prevailing patterns of social relations in the postindustrial university, I believe that a post-structural, post-modern stance makes sense, to the extent that it is built on an understanding of the powerful modernist forces at play. Part of that political economic struggle is defining the terms of the negotiation. Universities are indeed workplaces. But they are much more than that. To the extent that universities become only that, or only places where students prepare for the workplace, a major part of the negotiation is over. To the

extent that graduate students and faculty take on the metaphors and mechanisms only of modern workplaces, they accept and further push the academy down its current "postindustrial" path of increased corporatization.

References

- Braverman, Harry. 1974. *Labor and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century*. New York: Monthly Review Press.
- Johnston, Paul. 1994. *Success Where Others Fail: Social Movement Unionism and the Public Workplace*. Cornell: ILR Press.
- Levine, Arthur, and Jeanette S. Cureton. 1998. "Student Politics: The New Localism." *The Review of Higher Education* 21.2: 137-50.
- Rhoades, Gary. 1998. *Managed Professionals: Unionized Faculty and Restructuring Academic Labor*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Rhoades, Gary. 1999. "Managed Professionals and the New Unionism." Paper presented to the annual NEA Higher Education Presidents Meeting, August, 1999, San Francisco.
- Rhoades, Gary, and Sheila Slaughter. 1997. "Academic Capitalism, Managed Professionals, and Supply-Side Higher Education." *Social Text* 51/15.2: 9-38. Reprinted in Randy Martin, ed. *Chalk Lines: The Politics of Work in the Managed University*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1998.
- Rhoades, Robert A. 1998. *Freedom's Web: Student Activism in an Age of Cultural Diversity*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Slaughter, Sheila, and Larry L. Leslie. 1997. *Academic Capitalism: Politics, Policies, and the Entrepreneurial University*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Vaughn, William. 1999. "Apprentice or Employee? Graduate Students and their Unions." *Academe* 84.6: 43-49.

Gary Rhoades, University of Arizona