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REVIEW OF *STEAL THIS UNIVERSITY: THE RISE OF THE CORPORATE UNIVERSITY AND THE ACADEMIC LABOR MOVEMENT*

edited by Benjamin Johnson, Patrick Kavanagh, and Kevin Mattson
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What happens when *Free Agent Nation* meets *Goodbye, Mr. Chips*? This collection addresses the (un)popular subject of the corporate university and its labor woes with exceptional insight and flair. It will make you angry, whether you're a dean, a tenured professor, or an adjunct toiling in the salt mines of academia (although in the last instance you're probably angry already). But while this volume contains its expected quota of depressing statistics and disheartening case studies of ethically bankrupt administrations and the faculty who support them, it is ultimately one of the best and most hopeful volumes of its kind.

2. The 13 essays are organized into three sections: "The Rise of the Corporate University," "Laboring Within," and "Organizing." The call to action of the final section indicates that not all is despair and gloom, although the first two sections deliver enough bad news that the third can't help but improve prospects. While a few of the essays are of the now-familiar "one semester in the life of an adjunct" horror-story genre, the majority are excellent diagnostic studies of the corporatization of the university (in both labor practices and intellectual life) and the resistance to these trends by labor movements and courageous individuals. Several of the essays are truly groundbreaking and indispensable to anyone interested in the contemporary university and academic labor. In one of the best, the well-researched and cuttingly effective "None of Your Business: The Rise of the University of Phoenix and For-Profit Education," Ana Marie Cox shreds the free-market rhetoric of "efficiencies" at the University of Phoenix, demonstrating how the school exists as a parasite on the public university system. Like too many private industries, Phoenix eats from the public trough while decrying government regulation, using public money to create profits that it could never attain with only the meager resources it devotes to its programs. Despite its claims of being uniquely cost-effective, Phoenix's real operating model uses clever marketing and insider connections to inflate its educational reputation and dramatically overcharge its students, extracting a full-service tuition for a fast-food education. It possesses none of the infrastructure, libraries, or qualified instructors that make public institutions more than worth their cost, yet it has managed to successfully market itself to corporate customers, Wall Street, and Congress with frightening effectiveness. Cox untangles the false logic of Phoenix CEO John Sperling, a slick free-marketeer whose hypocritical paeans to private industry should have long ago been revealed for the self-serving fictions they are.

3. The most disturbing section of Cox's essay is her description of student complacency in the face of this "just-in-time" educational model. If students and the public buy into the marketing schemes that advertise

this kind of slipshod vocational training as a real education, and Phoenix's corporate connections supply an adequate percentage of these students with jobs (many are already employed), the emptiness of the actual education might not become apparent until a generation of students is short-changed by the for-profits. At Phoenix, education not only becomes a commodity, it becomes "as disposable as paper plates and Ikea furniture" (27). Cox points out the advantages of this as a business plan: "What are you going to do when your training becomes out of date? Well, go out and buy some more, of course" (27). As Cox puts it, "Phoenix has done more than almost any other education enterprise to shift the meaning of college from that of a process one goes through to a product one buys" (16).

4. In the second section, two of the best-publicized cases of union busting in higher education are recounted. Corey Robin's story of the Yale grade strike and its aftermath and professor Joel Westheimer's account of his ongoing battle with NYU over his retaliatory firing for labor activism provide enough examples of appalling behavior by administrators and faculty to make any reader's blood boil.

5. While reams have now been written about the Yale strike, Robin's analysis of the Yale psyche—the combined effect of a powerful work ethic, individual achievement, and assumed privilege—is the most insightful explanation yet for why so many nominally liberal professors take leave of all self-awareness and intellectual coherence when faced with what they perceive as a challenge to their authority. After marshaling a wealth of evidence documenting the hypocrisy and vindictiveness of many Yale faculty members and administrators, Robin concludes,

Although they see themselves as the bearers of an exalted tradition of humane learning—which envisions in education an ameliorative path to freedom and progress—they are ineluctably pulled by a not-so-exalted tradition of elitism. . . . [D]espite their best intentions, the faculty float every day further and further from the spirit of Socrates, Mill and Freud. It's not that they don't care about ideas. It's just that for them a job at Yale is an idea. (121-122)

6. This explanation pinpoints the psychology of privilege and defensiveness that can infect the "liberal" practitioners of an inherently conservative discipline, and the class panic that frequently ensues when they believe the foundation of their privilege is threatened. This astonishing blindness to the contradictions between their ostensible beliefs and their lived behavior is more than just psychologists forgetting psychology and historians forgetting history—it's symptomatic of a common university power dynamic. At bottom, this dynamic is based on the assumption that university employees are combatants in a zero-sum game in which the adjunct's medical plan equals the full-timer's semester of release time.

7. Even when faculty can be disabused of these notions, there are other problems that face them, as Joel Westheimer's essay demonstrates. In a move that can only be described as colossally stupid, NYU denied Westheimer tenure and subsequently fired him after he had accumulated an impeccable and well-documented record of teaching and scholarship with the sole exception (from the NYU administration's point of view) of his pro-union activities on behalf of graduate employees. After his firing, an outcry from his colleagues at NYU and across the country led the National Labor Relations Board to charge NYU with illegally firing Westheimer. The irony of this scorched-earth management strategy is not lost on Westheimer. Unwilling to spend a relative pittance on improving grad employee conditions, NYU instead spent millions on high-powered union-busting lawyers and now has nothing to show for it except the enmity of graduate employees and faculty.

8. What both the Yale and NYU accounts have in common, Westheimer points out, is that although these experiences seem like extreme cases, the basis for them is structurally embedded in the administrative makeup of the modern corporate university, and often appears in more subtle and insidious forms. Corporatism and anti-unionism go hand in hand in the academy as well as in the private sector. As Westheimer writes: "When the weeding [out of non-conforming faculty] is completed, the anti-

intellectual mission of the corporate university becomes clearest. The bottom line is raised to the top. Research that promotes the financial and hierarchical health of the administration is rewarded, and independent scholarly thought is punished. Institutions of higher education become ones of education for hire" (134-135). Westheimer's courageous battle with this insidious anti-intellectual corporatism at NYU is genuinely worthy of the Albert Einstein axiom he cites: "Setting an example is not the main means of influencing another—it is the only means" (137).

9. Westheimer's compelling story provides the background for the third section of the book, "Organizing," which begins with Lisa Jessup's essay "The Campaign for Union Rights at NYU"—the happy ending to Westheimer's personal legal battles. After a four-year campaign that ended in 2002, NYU became the first private university in the country to successfully organize a union. The list of benefits for graduate employees that ensued is impressive: a 38% pay increase, full health care coverage, workload protections, and a fair grievance procedure (146). Jessup describes in detail NYU's effectively strategized and marketed campaign, including the union's recruitment of sympathetic elected officials—most notably U.S. Senator Charles Schumer—to attend major union events; their efforts to secure a solid base of faculty and undergraduate support; and their hosting of well-publicized meetings to encourage public support. Jessup also outlines the standard administrative union-busting ploys that were used against the organizers: hiring expensive law firms that specialize in blocking unions; enlisting faculty to discourage or threaten graduate employees who take part in organizing; and most effectively, using legal tactics to delay recognition until the movement loses its leaders to attrition and as a result loses its momentum as well. Happily, none of these were effective in the NYU drive, and even more fortunately, a series of National Labor Relations Board decisions forced by NYU consistently went the way of the graduate employees, setting useful precedents for future organizing drives.

10. The darker side of Jessup's story is found in "Democracy Is an Endless Organizing Drive" by Michael Brown, Ronda Copher, and Katy Gray Brown. This essay recounts the 1999 failure of the graduate student organizing drive at the University of Minnesota. Demonstrating considerably less logistical, media, and political savvy than their NYU counterparts (albeit in a larger, more diffuse, and more difficult university setting) the Minnesota organizers present a cautionary lesson in the mistakes to avoid in a union campaign. The lessons that emerge are to never feel secure until the union is recognized, to maintain momentum throughout the drive, and most importantly, to recognize one can't be paranoid enough about the university's ability to mount a sudden and massive resistance. Although the authors acknowledge they made many mistakes during the drive, they also find it disturbing that students seemed unable to distinguish truth from craftily marketed fiction: "Democratic organizers of all stripes should be deeply troubled by the inability of Grandson's face-to-face organizing to triumph over a blitzkrieg of misinformation. The work of hundreds of committed students over three years was undermined by a handful of busters with access to resources and a computer" (187). While the burst of anti-union activity before the final vote could hardly have been unexpected to experienced unionizers (which, unfortunately, most of the Minnesota leaders were not), the specifics of the anti-union group's underhanded tactics (which were probably covertly subsidized by the university) might have been a surprise. Although the mistakes of the Minnesota campaign are clear enough in hindsight, the all-too-human errors of complacency, overconfidence, and strategic miscalculation are recounted in painful personal detail, illustrating how a few missteps can compromise years of effort.

11. Cary Nelson describes a different type of battle, this one from within the system. In his essay, Nelson recounts his long struggle as a member of the Modern Language Association's Executive Council to commission a discipline-wide survey of part-time faculty salaries and benefits. The title of the essay, "Moving River Barges," is a reminder of how slowly large professional organizations like the MLA shift directions, even with the ongoing efforts of highly committed agents of change within their leadership structures. While the primary target of Nelson's ire is an entrenched MLA senior leadership that is seemingly unwilling to accept the changes to the profession of the last few decades, member apathy (an average of 20% voter turnout for major elections) is also a problem for those who would enlist the

organization for progressive purposes. In the end, though, Nelson tells a tale of triumph—the survey was finally commissioned, the results posted, and institutions that had deliberately hidden their embarrassingly low pay and benefits found themselves on the other side of market pressure in their search for qualified part-time faculty. Using this survey as the impetus for a region-by-region leveling upwards in salaries and benefits for part-time faculty is the most encouraging story in the collection—Nelson gives himself and his fellow advocates of the survey too little credit for how much they actually accomplished in this seemingly mundane world of board meetings and council politics. As impressive and exciting as the organizing movements were at NYU and Yale, Nelson's example of cannily using the discipline's own tools to force it to publicly own up to its labor practices appears to be a far more effective engine for truly wide-ranging reform—reform available to education workers unable to support a union movement for legal, political, or other reasons.

12. The desired audience for this collection is set forth in the introduction: those working within the academy or interested in learning more about it, as well as those interested in labor and progressive politics. But despite the inclusion of admirably clear journalistic essays like Ana Marie Cox's dissection of the University of Phoenix, the highly specialized nature of some of the essays and the essay collection format itself (even with a relatively high-profile lefty imprimatur like the Routledge imprint) limits the book's potential audience to a mostly in-group academic readership. Although *Steal This University* is not the academy's *Nickel and Dimed*, it's a great step in the right direction—of accessibility, of reaching out to the general reader as well as the intellectual, and of collaboration. For anyone concerned enough about these issues to be reading this journal, this book is indispensable.