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Review of *The Last Professors: The Corporate University and the Fate of the Humanities* by Frank Donoghue (Fordham University Press, 2008)

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In his recent volume, *The Last Professors: the Corporate University and the fate of the Humanities*, Frank Donoghue paints an unapologetically bleak portrait of the status of universities in America in general, and particularly the decline of the humanities, which he foresees disappearing from the landscape of the university in the not-too-distant future. While this book is undoubtedly a discouraging read for current professors, job seekers, and recent PhD graduates, and a thoroughly demoralizing read for current graduate students, Donoghue's text could serve as an excellent primer about contemporary conditions in the academy for scholars in the humanities.

It's not so much that *The Last Professors* doesn't offer a salient discussion of the climate of higher education, placing the academy in history and contemporary culture. The problem with *The Last Professors* lies in its rhetorical stance, which constructs the "professor" in an indefensible, fatalistic position. In his review of *The Last Professors*, Marc Bousquet raises a caveat with the use of "vanishing tropes" that elide the reality that professors, like the Mohicans, aren't disappearing—they are becoming a new class of marginalized scholars, adjunct and contingent faculty. As Bousquet notes, the future of higher education "won't be 'professorless,' but filled with faculty." Fatalistically, Donoghue rejects any organized action by faculty as too little too late. But scholars like Bousquet counter that academic labor activism has a rich potential, especially in unions of contingent faculty and graduate employees.

Donoghue's analysis draws together a broad discussion of the history of the humanities in opposition to corporate culture in the United States, the debate over tenure in the academy, the prestige wars among stratified higher learning institutions, the casualization of professional labor across the board in American professions, the evolution of the for-profit higher education industry, and technological innovations in education to provide a broad spectrum of factors threatening the demise of the humanities in contemporary higher education. And while his book admittedly offers no optimistic point of entry, nor positive course of action, it does serve as a comprehensive, necessary background and overview of these factors to enlighten and inform scholars and educators in the humanities.

Furthermore, Donoghue demonstrates how the discourses of both corporate culture versus the humanities, and competition amongst humanities scholars for tenure and prestige, despite their longstanding relevance in the academy, are a diversion from more prescient concerns pressing the humanities in academe. Worse yet, particularly in the arena of competition for academic publication and prestige, dissent and competition among the faculty is unintentionally complicit with the corporate agenda. In the current issue of *Academe*, Catharine Stimpson observes that the insight and detail Donoghue brings to the discourse about faculty might lead one to expect “an explicit advocacy of unionization” from *The Last Professors*. However, Donoghue’s argument suggests that rather than defending themselves in the terms of corporate logic as humanities scholars have historically done in the culture wars, scholars in the humanities need to interrogate and challenge the corporate values of “efficiency, productivity, and profitability” (88). Donoghue also advances the circular argument that organized labor activism won’t work, because faculty resist organizing; and even if they were to organize, activism won’t work. Given this ideology, one wonders what, exactly, is the expected uptake on humanities scholars’ interrogation and challenge to corporate values?

Sadly, the text offers little by way of an action plan in that imperative. Dissecting the circular logic of Donoghue’s argument about the academic job market in the humanities, begs to consider the notion of labor activism in the academic community, which, as Donoghue admits, constitutes one of the only growth sectors in labor activism. However, still only a minority of educators are organized. Donoghue cites several reasons that professors resist unionization, and those reasons also contribute to the conditions threatening the job market in the humanities. Chief among these are the myth of meritocracy that pervades the rhetoric about the job market, and also the ways in which academic work in the humanities is romanticized by those who do it. And it begins in graduate school.

In the midst of a profession that has been progressively casualized over recent decades, with teaching positions increasingly filled by adjunct and student laborers, graduate students have become increasingly “preprofessionalized”—being asked to teach more and more undergraduate courses, to travel to present work at conferences, and become published earlier and more frequently. Essentially, as Donoghue illustrates, graduate students are now asked to do what used to constitute the first employment stage on the road to tenure—running on the treadmill in competition for prestige and publication.

Market rhetoric dictates that the humanities are a competitive field, and students need to be productive, efficient and experienced early in their careers in order to remain competitors. Those who don’t succeed are led to believe that this is owing to their own failures: they “weren’t prepared” (67). This type of rhetoric is consistent with the corporate overhaul of the university system in general. The values of productivity and efficiency permeate the student market, and graduate students are motivated to prove themselves in terms of this ideology as a right of passage before even competing for positions as legitimate, salaried employees of the university. And it continues throughout the academic career. The myth of meritocracy in the university belies the reality of the humanities job market, where more and more positions are being staffed,

“not with the best teachers, but with the cheapest teachers” (73). Donoghue points out in a nod to Marc Bousquet’s argument that ABDs, not PhDs, are the true “product” of the educational system, providing a cheap and docile pool of teaching labor.

Also bolstering the cheap labor pool in the humanities are the ways in which academics across the board tend to romanticize their labor as a labor of love in what Donoghue describes as a sort of starving-artist fantasy. For the love of their subject or the profession, “academics [. . .] are uniquely willing to tolerate exploitation [. . .] in the workplace” (64). The problem here, as Donoghue points out in example after example, is that “job satisfaction” substitutes for reasonable compensation, job security, or benefits. To further complicate this situation, university students are oblivious to the difference between adjunct instructors and actual professors, and administrators turn a blind eye to any discrepancy between the two. As a case in point, at the California State University where I teach freshman composition as a graduate instructor, administrative communications are addressed to me as “Professor” despite the chasm that separates actual professors from adjunct or graduate labor in terms of working conditions, compensation, and employment benefits. My students are confused when I explain to them that I am not a professor, and they should not address me as such. In the popular imagination of my students, at least, all college teachers are professors. And university personnel accommodate and encourage this perception. It would seem that the moniker compensates somehow for employment discrepancies by conferring a sort of romantic stature and prestige.

And yet, university educators still resist seeing themselves as “labor” precisely due to the romanticized vision of their work. Donoghue is not remiss in pointing out the immanent conditions in the university that will impel university teachers at all levels to become aware of themselves as labor—a principle and expensive (yet perhaps expendable?) tool of production in a profit-oriented university system.

Emily Greenleaf reviews *The Last Professors* in the current issue of *Academic Matters*, and she concludes that “if there is one message to be taken from Donoghue’s book, it is that the postsecondary world functions much better when understood as a system than it does if each institution, instructor, and student perceives themselves as an agent in pursuit only of their own self-interest.” It would follow logically that labor activism is a necessary development in the academic community, and Greenleaf acknowledges that many of the problems Donoghue writes about could be challenged and solved by collective action. But according to Donoghue, even labor activism will not halt the decline of professors in the humanities in the face of their view of themselves as artists, performing a craft, their role in universities competition for prestige, and the casualization of professorial labor across the board (69).

It seems to me that the first two of these factors are more of a characterization of professional attitude toward labor—constituting the resistance to activism, rather than predictors of the result of activism in the academic community. And attitudes may be changed: in fact, are constantly evolving. Awareness fosters activism: this is merely a labor objective. Of Donoghue’s objections, only the third—the casualization of labor

across the board—has a real significance in predicting the bargaining power or outcomes of organized labor activism. And even casualized labor has potential power if it is organized, as Bousquet, Greenleaf, and Randy Martin have argued (among others.)

In fact, Randy Martin sees professors behaving squarely in the tradition of organized labor in the United States. According to Martin, in a recent Edufactory interview, professors are already operating in the terms of organized labor: they evoke disciplinary authority, participate in university administration, they engage in “craft” type activities. As Martin argues, most professional work in the United States has already been industrialized and proletarianized, and professors need to engage industrial unions.

In his recent PMLA article “Academic Activism,” Martin suggests that in order to access the potential in labor activism, faculty need to do some “rethinking of the current conjuncture of government authority, industrial interest, and professional formulation” (839). In other words, rather than capitulation, professors might look to the ways in which our work is currently constructed and how that work might be reconceived in ways that access and maximize faculty power—for example, service work, currently positioned as an administrative time-grabber, offers an opportunity to exercise institutional power. Alliances across knowledge sectors, according to Martin, are also rich in possibility (843).

Other points of interest in *The Last Professors* include Donoghue’s analysis of the shifting student demographic, which he argues will dictate demand, or lack thereof, for a liberal arts-based humanities curriculum, and the convergence of the the publishing industry with CMS software. Donoghue envisions a liaison between textbook publishers and CMS companies, which effectively and permanently removes ownership and control of course content from the hands of professors.

The Last Professors offers a comprehensive background in the various factors threatening the professoriate in the humanities in American universities. The biggest concern with the text is that at the end of it, one is left with the question of what to do with this information. Donoghue offers no action plan, no optimism, and no potential. If taken at its word, *The Last Professors* suggests that, perhaps, scholars occupy themselves in writing their own obituaries...or perhaps seeking out a new application for their humanities doctorate. The rhetorical construction of the professor as dying breed essentially turns what could have read as a cautionary tale and perhaps call-to-action into a capitulation and screaming detour sign: “The fate of the humanities is sealed. We are hammering down the final nails in the coffin. DO NOT ENTER!” Read it to become informed, but if you’re seeking proactive ideas, look to more progressive scholars in the field of labor activism such as Bousquet, Rhoades, Martin, or the *Workplace* collective.

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