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STANLEY ARONOWITZ & ANDREW LONG

## **JOBLESS HIGHER ED: AN INTERVIEW WITH STANLEY ARONOWITZ**

*Andrew:* In your book, *The Jobless Future*, you and co-author Billy DiFazio take great care to locate your analysis of academic labor, what you call teacher work, within a larger analysis of economic and social relations. Unfortunately, there are still many faculty and graduate students who refuse to think of their work in these terms. What do we need to understand about teacher work?

*Stanley:* Well there are two aspects that have immediately to be understood. In the first place, there are more than half a million full-time professors working in American universities, which is an enormous number. And secondly, there are increasingly large numbers of adjuncts, part-time people, and also people who are administrative and clerical. You're talking about a system which represents a million jobs all together and billions of dollars. It is a very important sector of the American economy. And in some communities it is very central to the local economy. The second aspect is that we have a lot of students in comparison to any other country—51 million according to the last count, over nine million full-time students. And there is now enormous pressure on the university system to apply corporate models to their operations. There has always been that tendency, but now it's becoming dominant, almost rampant. Part of that tendency is to pressure professors to quit when they get to be a certain age—not to observe the congressional prohibition against forcing people out at the age of seventy, but to get them out much earlier, with almost a pittance of their salary as pension. *The Wall Street Journal* on November 24th had a story about a college in Vermont, which is trying to get rid of their older professors, and is offering them \$400 a month pension, plus social security.

The first program is getting rid of professors, especially the high-paid professors, who are at the top of the pay scale. Of course this is meant to make younger people favorable toward the side of the administration, because they think they're going to get the jobs. Fat chance. Many of those jobs will disappear. In the case of a Music professor, profiled in this article, his job will disappear, because they're not going to have a music program any longer. That's now a frill to a corporate-oriented cost-cutting operation. In other cases there will be full-time jobs, but people will be paid \$30,000 and will be on three-year contracts. Or they'll break up the job into adjunct positions or temporary visiting positions, where they don't have to pay any long-term pension money. The intention is to get rid of the older professors, hire a minimum number of younger professors and rationalize lines that are vacated by filling them with adjuncts and/or temporary people. It's not going to benefit the younger people coming into the profession.

The second thing professors are facing, particularly at public universities, especially the ones that are not research universities, is increased workloads. *The Jobless Future* talks about a three-tier university system. In the second and third tiers they are increasing workloads with the presumption that you are not a writer or researcher—you are there to teach, so why not teach a high school load, such as five courses a

semester, or four and a ton of advising? And classes are larger, in many cases without TA's, readers or graders. There's a workload issue, there's a retirement issue, and there's pressure on the institution to rationalize basically all the functions of teaching.

Then we come to the next problem. The invasion of distance learning has not yet taken place—where students will sit in front of screens; they will get their lessons from the internet or e-mail; they will e-mail a professor who is sitting in an office. And the professor may or may not be a professor; he or she may be a graduate student, an adjunct, or might be anybody. If they're lucky the graduate student will find a place where they'll sit and do a tutorial. But there will be fewer professors. The stars will deliver the classic lecture course on Shakespeare. Okay, I'm being optimistic, more like Management Techniques. But let's assume it's a serious academic course. And students will never see a professor; they will see someone who is a stand-in, a surrogate for a professor. Not more than five years before we see it big-time, especially in public universities and colleges.

*Andrew:* I have two questions about distance learning. First, in what ways is it different from what in England was perceived to be a very progressive development, namely the televised courses of the Open University, which was championed by Raymond Williams and by any number of the people whom we now know as the leading lights of the Birmingham school? Second, what is our response to those who ask what a professor in a classroom provides that a video monitor cannot?

*Stanley:* Artists, hippies, and counter-cultural people are often the gentrifiers of ghettos. There's no reason that we can't make an analogy to the way progressives, Marxists, and cultural studies types are now at the vanguard of distance learning. Obviously, they didn't think about the use of this for corporate purposes. The Open University did something quite different. They develop a textbook, which is a treatise on a given topic, such as liberty, freedom, democracy, socialism, a whole variety of subjects in the Humanities and Social Sciences. Some of those books are as good a treatise as anything that exists. The reading material is very rich. It is not simply a lecture which merely presents a reading from a book or from a dog-eared set of lecture notes. It was a program that could compare favorably with many programs in British universities. The Open University had groups. People met in groups to discuss not only what was on the television but what was in the readings. How it would be used was unanticipated. And the way it will be deployed by the corporate types is incommensurable with the Open University.

*Andrew:* Are we longing for the Oxbridge type tutorial?

*Stanley:* Well I think the Oxford style tutorial is worth considering. But we ought to be thinking about styles of pedagogy and how universities, colleges, and classrooms become an alternative public sphere. There are a lot of professors of all political stripes who simply drone on for two hours. They are easily replaceable by a lively video, sure. But suppose you do close reading, close textual study. Suppose pedagogy is interactive, involving discussion of a chapter of *Capital*, or of something by Raymond Williams. You can't do that through distance learning. It's an ersatz interaction. E-mail is a very alienated kind of activity. You write a letter, and it comes back maybe a day later. They contrast e-mail and snail mail. I'm not sure that contrast is that accurate. With distance learning, there's no intention to educate, there's only the intention to cut costs.

*Andrew:* There is something valuable about face-to-face interaction with a live person who can help you struggle through sentences and over what they mean.

*Stanley:* Yes. Not only struggle through the sentences for knowledge purposes, but have a discussion which is grounded in the understanding and knowledge both of the teacher and the learner. I've always found that I learn as much from the interaction and discussion as the students do.

*Andrew:* How do we argue for this in the face of attempts to rationalize teaching? What sort of rhetorical struggle do we have to wage?

*Stanley:* The way we have to pose it is education as opposed to training. This is not about going back to the Oxford style for the sake of the Oxford style, or defending lecture courses concerning material that could be learned better otherwise. The struggle needs to be for pedagogy that genuinely engages students and for active learning—the activity of addressing significant ideas and significant concepts students have to grapple with.

*Andrew:* Do you see any links between the struggles facing university teachers and the issues involved in the UPS strike of last summer?

*Stanley:* The parallels are striking, startling. The UPS strike was over trying to end or at least mitigate the two-tier wage system and create full-time jobs. The demand of the 130,000 members of academic unions today should also be to end the two-tier wage system and create full-time jobs. It's a simple parallel. Unfortunately, the tenured professoriate seems relatively impervious to the demands of adjuncts and unemployed people. They have not been demanding either in their contracts or in their faculty senates a lot of full-time jobs, even in many of the universities that are experiencing a relative decline of full-time jobs in comparison to part-time jobs. The professoriate in this country, with some exceptions, has become complacent. I don't mean that they don't know somewhere that their position is being threatened by the changes that are taking place. Some of them are very upset. But there is an environment of hopelessness among many of them, a 'make me a better deal and I'll get out' kind of orientation, rather than fighting, not for the soul of the institution necessarily but fighting for the soul of their own trade, their own craft. That doesn't come out of venality, it comes out of despair. I think the politics of despair is the individuation of destinies. That's the problem at this point. People are individualising their own destinies and not looking at the collective needs. The administrations are taking advantage of it by every year offering another deal to get out. And people are taking the early retirement deals, and they are winnowing the ranks of the tenured professoriate.

*Andrew:* What is happening to faculty unions and what are they doing?

*Stanley:* Faculty unions are being weakened by the restructuring of the university. And they've shown no propensity to take cognizance of the changes and wage a fight against them. Nor for that matter have they put forward proposals to make the university something else, something other than what is being made of them by corporate-model restructuring.

*Andrew:* Could you speak about the temporary work force in the universities and colleges, the adjuncts and visiting professors?

*Stanley:* The adjunct has no security. The adjunct is not even hired to a three-year contract. One of the things you have now is semester by semester hiring of adjuncts. Adjuncts are hired as the needs of a given department or a given program demand them. So they are always in a position of extreme insecurity. That's a form of flex capital, and that's becoming more and more common.

*Andrew:* Adjuncts are a flexible, mobile work force that can be shifted around.

*Stanley:* Yes. There are more and more adjuncts who teach three, four, or even five courses spread out among different universities and colleges. They have no sense of place. The analogy is to a building trades worker who may work this week at this building site and next week at another building site. The only difference is that in this country, because of the extreme mobility and insecurity of the building trades,

workers have organized a strong guild to protect their benefits and their wages, so they have some control over the market. The great legacy of Albert Shankar and the American Federation of Teachers, when it first started as a real union about 1960, is that he never tired of telling teachers, 'Forget your professional pride, you are workers. And they are treating you like shit, so fight as if you were just like any other worker who needed to get better wages and working conditions.'

*Andrew:* What do you say to adjuncts, students and professors about class and class consciousness — is class relevant and important here?

*Stanley:* I think there is an ambiguity, perhaps an ambivalent or contradictory class location for full professors with tenure in leading research universities in the United States. It is not clear to me at all, even though in Europe they are organized, that they are not part of what used to be called the liberal middle class. They are people with a certain degree of prerogatives. For instance, I do teach what I want. I work only as I please, except for a few small requirements. My rewards come largely out of my writing and my speaking as well as my teaching. So there is a certain relationship to the institution as well as to society as a whole that is not the same as that of a working class person working for wages, even though I am a salaried employee. It's not the same for two other groups of people within the faculty. It is not the same for people in community and four year colleges. And it is not the same for part-timers and adjuncts—those who are temporary, those who are contingent. I think those people have been not only proletarianized in a metaphoric sense but they have become proletarian knowledge workers. They are knowledge workers, and not much more. Whatever they write, whenever they get a chance to do scholarship, do any kind of genuine intellectual work, instead of transmitting knowledge into the heads of students, whenever they do anything different, they get their heads slapped. They are regarded as rate-busters even by their fellow people. So if they want to stay in this relatively subordinate place, they better behave. They need to be re-hired on a semester by semester basis. I don't see any difference between them and someone in the workplace. It's not manual labor, but it's labor.

*Andrew:* What counts as knowledge today in our universities and colleges?

*Stanley:* What counts as knowledge is technical knowledge. So for language, it means teaching English skills and for philosophy it means medical ethics. You are basically transferring a measure of cultural capital to a student which enhances in theory the value of labor power. From the point of view of the worker, knowledge is a component of increased value of labor power, that is, increased salary in the market. From the side of the employer, knowledge is often a component of capital. You don't have much in this economy, which some exceptions, except knowledge-based technologies, knowledge-based labor processes. These knowledge-based labor processes are part of the function of the university to provide. I'm not saying they produce value. What they do produce is a commodity that can be bought and sold, ultimately in the marketplace, and becomes a component of capital.

*Andrew:* Does, for instance, an undergraduate major in French literature count as knowledge anymore?

*Stanley:* It's useless knowledge from the perspective of capital. From this perspective, the Humanities by and large, except for English, provide useless knowledge. Studying English can be used to help managers write better memos and to help people to write better resumes. Perhaps French or German or Spanish can be used in international trade. Something like Classics is more or less useless from the perspective of capital.

*Andrew:* It seems like the future is pretty bleak for those of us in the Humanities: Do you see the possibility of a turnaround?

*Stanley:* The President of the Modern Languages Association, Elaine Showalter, indicated at a meeting of its Executive Committee that maybe we ought to consider going along with the corporatization of the university. This includes such things as the new roles for the English and languages profession, contract and labor issues, not producing so many PhD's, masters degrees being the requirement for teaching composition, and an agreement that we will have a two-tier or more system. Given what I understand, that position is gaining some currency. People were horrified at the meeting, but that's only a temporary horror. There doesn't seem to be at this moment much of a prospect for a turnaround. I think that what is going to happen is that the elite universities and major research universities are going to continue to hire at a much more moderate pace than in the eighties and the early nineties. The state schools, non-research universities and community colleges will have negative growth. I think the overall picture will be stagnation and decline for the foreseeable future. Unless there is a counter force that emerges from unions, adjunct organizing, and graduate student organizing, from those people who begin to project their own needs onto a much broader national dialogue and debate around the future of the university itself.

*Andrew:* We are in a paradoxical situation. The conservatives who nominally have power in boardrooms and as trustees of universities are the same people who supposedly value the core curriculum and bemoan its collapse. Yet a Liberal Arts education, and particularly the Humanities, are central to a core curriculum. Corporate America decries the loss of standards and curricular change, and yet the real threat to college and university education is corporate restructuring.

*Stanley:* I think you have to understand that the core curriculum discussion is meant for Harvard, Yale, Princeton, Brown, Duke, Stanford, the University of Chicago and a few others. If you read Alan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind*, which became a sort of blueprint, you see that they don't mean that the core curriculum concept should be applied broadly to the state schools and perhaps even to the small private colleges. What they mean is that there has been a loss of standards even at the level of the Stanford's, where there was a big fight several years ago about the core curriculum. And that's what they are concerned about. I don't think they are concerned at all with the core curriculum, the loss of Western cultural traditions in the second or third tier.

*Andrew:* What about at CUNY?

*Stanley:* I think there's no fight for the core curriculum. There are some schools, Brooklyn and some others, that actually have a core curriculum that reproduces the core curriculum concept. But CUNY is heading towards a three tier system as well. Queens, Baruch and Hunter Colleges are scheduled for the first tier, and the second tier will be the vast majority of CUNY's four-year colleges, and the third tier will be the community colleges, in which there really is no expectation of a transmission of what might be described as high culture.

*Andrew:* A good part of *The Jobless Future* and your recent work in *Post Work* concerns working less. Could you speak about this?

*Stanley:* Work less and create jobs, for one thing. We need a full employment economy on the basis of the four-hour day. I'm for full-time jobs to replace part-time jobs. I think though that what a full-time academic job should be is what many part-time people now work, two three courses maximum. If they limited people to two three courses a semester, you'd have more jobs.

*Andrew:* Well a lot of university administrators wouldn't argue with having many people work two to three courses each.

*Stanley:* You demand more full-time jobs. Less work and more jobs. That gives you more time to do other

kinds of work that are self-controlled. We should value worthless pastimes. Decommodified knowledge is the most important, probably the only important knowledge.

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