

REVIEW ESSAYS

Academic Capitalism, Contingency, and Preserving Privilege

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As Edna Chun and Alvin Evans document in *The Challenges of Minoritized Contingent Faculty in Higher Education*, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, over three-quarters of university faculty were in full-time tenure stream positions and just over one-fifth held part-time contingent positions. In the fall of 2021, less than one-third of faculty were full-time tenured or tenure track faculty, just under 20 percent were full-time contingent, and nearly half of faculty held part-time contingent positions (Colby 2023). Notably, women and members of other structurally marginalized groups have consistently been overrepresented in both part- and full-time contingent faculty ranks. Eric Fure-Slocum and Claire Goldstene have curated a collection on this topic—*Contingent Faculty and the Remaking of Higher Education: A Labor History*—that offers additional insight from a range of interdisciplinary perspectives. Both popular and scholarly commentary has weighed in on these shifts and how they affect the landscape of higher education. The two titles reviewed here focus specifically on the group most harmed: contingent faculty.

Contingent Faculty and the Remaking of Higher Education is an edited volume that largely focuses on the United States and, as the subtitle indicates, is a “labor history.” The book is organized into three parts and concludes with two chapters that suggest strategies for a path forward. The chapters in Part I provide a detailed history and discussion of the intersections of higher education, capitalism, and labor. The authors in Part II explore the experiences of faculty in contingent positions who are members of historically marginalized communities, as well as the complexities of graduate students’ labor, and the consequences for

Contingent Faculty and the Remaking of Higher Education: A Labor History, edited by **Eric Fure-Slocum** and **Claire Goldstene**. Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2024. 296 pp. \$28.00 paper. ISBN: 9780252087653.

The Challenges of Minoritized Contingent Faculty in Higher Education, by **Edna Chun** and **Alvin Evans**. West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 2024. 218 pp. \$24.99 paper. ISBN: 9781612498379.

the quality of education. Part III includes chapters that examine collective resistance and advocacy and examples of specific organizing campaigns.

As their title suggests, Chun and Evans amplify *The Challenges of Minoritized Contingent Faculty* in their short book. While they identify their focus as four-year institutions, the profile of the 20 contingent faculty and diversity officers/administrators they interviewed reveals that all are at doctoral-granting institutions. In addition to drawing on their interview data, the authors provide a valuable discussion of the connection between declining state funding and increasingly diverse student bodies and contextualize their findings within broad trends.

Both volumes offer data and insight that sociologists can use to better understand and contribute to the contentious debate about working conditions in higher education and the role of the university in a diverse and democratic (and capitalist) society. Financial precarity, problematic labor practices, and questions of (who should have) access have long been a part of higher

education in the United States, as is the focus of a chapter by Elizabeth Tandy Shermer in the Fure-Slocum and Goldstene volume. For example, the "land grant" public universities were created on land stolen from indigenous people, and campuses were funded and built by the labor of enslaved Africans. During the Gilded Age, robber barons contributed substantial wealth to ensure research supported the development of their industries, universities prepared workers for these industries and those serving the needs of the industrialists (teachers, physicians), and labor and business practices reflected their ideals.

Higher education grew dramatically over the course of the twentieth century. Joe Berry and Helena Worthen describe how, following World War II (due in part to the GI Bill), demand for training, education, and credentials increased enrollments, though mostly for white men. The Civil Rights Movement and laws enacted in the 1950s and 1960s fostered access to public spaces and agents of social mobility (including education) for Black people and members of other marginalized racial and ethnic groups. As Gwendolyn Alker explains, increased activism in the 1960s and 1970s spurred social and political change that created opportunities for more women to enter colleges and universities. These changes supported the idea that a more educated citizenry creates a stronger society and reflected a commitment to higher education as a public good. At the same time, neoliberal economic thought was gaining traction, shaping the response to the campus unrest, economic stagflation, and loss of faith in government (think Watergate) of the times. Higher education management increasingly embraced market-based solutions to manage these challenges and, perhaps, their own discomfort with increasingly diverse campuses.

Goldstene emphasizes that, as producers and disseminators of knowledge, academics continually reconsider what we (think we) know and demonstrate that "truth" is changeable. As students and faculty with a greater diversity of lived experiences and interests entered the academy, new fields of study (e.g., Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies, Racial and Ethnic Studies, etc.) emerged, often in response to, or as a direct

result of, social movements. They posed new questions, offered alternative analyses, and challenged assumptions about who should occupy positions of privilege in the academy and in society, and why. Challenges to what we think we know can be unsettling and disruptive, especially when we are asked to question our deeply held beliefs, our expectations about where we belong in the social hierarchy, or our assumptions about what it means to be a particular kind of person. If you have taught a sociology course, you have likely observed responses ranging from discomfort to recognition in the classroom. How we (as individuals and as a society) respond to such challenges can be revealing. In this context, as Berry and Worthen note, we observe an emerging discourse of higher education as an enterprise necessary to maintain global competitiveness, rather than one that frames education as a public good that positively impacts communities and society. This shift in discourse has taken hold in recent decades. If you have paid attention to contemporary public discourse (or perhaps work in a field or institution affected by restrictive policies), you will be familiar with the assertions that some disciplines (see those mentioned above and add sociology) are indoctrinating students rather than educating them. In this context, only those disciplines deemed to have clear paths to employment and with potential to obtain revenue for the institution are truly "educating" students and thus worthy of support (or perhaps even existence).

Berry and Worthen argue that administrators would have us believe that their hands are tied—that this more diverse and less predictable student body requires a more flexible and less costly faculty. Rather than centering pedagogy as they present solutions to questions of who should be hired, what should be taught, and the conditions under which faculty work, administrators have responded in ways that reflect their understanding of the desires of the boards, legislators, and donors who control resources. They use terms like ROI (return on investment), workforce-ready, and efficiencies. Rather than asking why public education is underfunded and advocating for increased resources, they accept the premise that

students and their families, not society more broadly, are responsible for paying for what is now viewed as a private commodity. Chun and Evans document examples of administrators hiring consultants (at, presumably, significant cost to the institution) who perform market analyses, recommend "faculty and staff layoffs, salary reductions, hiring freezes, outsourcing of staff functions and program closures," and generally provide support for the administration's cost-cutting decisions (p. 41).

Maria Maisto considers the statement "faculty working conditions are student learning conditions," which education activists have often used to emphasize the institutional structure and systems (teaching, scholarship, and service) under which faculty do their work and in which student learning happens (p. 157). The shift to a market-centered approach that views higher education as a commodity for the benefit of individuals centers student "needs" and defines university education as means to get a job and "get ahead." In the student-as-consumer model, faculty and students are often positioned as adversaries. The power dynamic between contingent faculty and students is complex as students are positioned as evaluators who are paying for a service. It positions students as consumers and encourages transactional rather than transformational relationships between students and professors. Furthermore, Maisto highlights how a public discourse that emphasizes the rising cost of a college education and associated student debt makes it easy to blame the so-called "privileged elites" in the academy for these very real challenges. The discourse suggests that tenured faculty are the problem, ignoring the facts that faculty are not "elite" and that even most tenure-track faculty are not earning high salaries. In fact, the majority of faculty are in often-tenuous contingent positions, managing substantial student loans, job insecurity, and low wages. This discourse obscures the significant administrative bloat and high salaries of university management.

Administrators argue that employing contingent faculty allows them to quickly respond to changing student needs and to shift resources in order to meet them. Yet

the increasing reliance on contingent faculty may negatively affect student learning. Diane Angell, Miguel Juárez, Claire Goldstene, and Claire Raymond reveal how contingent faculty are often excluded from conversations about curriculum, may have little time to prepare for courses, and are isolated in their institutions—especially, as Chun and Evans emphasize, those faculty who identify as members of structurally marginalized communities in predominantly white institutions, who are first-generation, or who are women in male-dominated fields. All of this may influence what and how contingent faculty teach and assess students, discouraging them from taking risks to promote significant learning. Much like the No Child Left Behind policies that encouraged "teaching to the test," student evaluations of teaching are a powerful administrative tool that can be wielded to remove contingent faculty. Thus, the precarity of contingent employment may lead to faculty "teaching to the standard" rather than teaching critical thinking, which is more difficult to evaluate and to directly connect to student outcomes like employment or high LSAT or GRE scores. This, as Chun and Evans assert, is especially problematic for women and faculty of color, who are overrepresented in these precarious ranks. In short, as Sue Doe and Steven Shulman contend, teaching evaluations are a way to keep contingent faculty in line.

Hierarchy, inequality, and reliance on external funding have been embedded in the structure of the academy from its founding. In 1940, the AAUP created its Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure as a way to protect faculty from the whims of donors, politicians, and others in positions of influence (i.e., the robber barons). While tenure was created for the mostly white men in the academy at that time, the statement remains relevant today. Although ostensibly awarded on merit, the tenure process developed decades earlier was based on gendered assumptions that "faculty" had no need to concern themselves with the challenges of pregnancy, childbirth, and childcare during their pre-tenure years and had wives to manage domestic labor (and perhaps also to type their manuscripts). Notably, the value of tenure began to decline

as women and other members of structurally marginalized groups entered the faculty ranks (see Alker's chapter).

Chun and Evans explore how funding cuts to public education, enrollment declines, a large pool of potential faculty, and internal competition for resources have contributed to an "unbundling" of the usual faculty work of teaching, research, and service. This unbundling has happened alongside a "shift from one prestige system (a traditional academic system with expert-based power) to another (an entrepreneurial system with market-based power)" (Metcalf and Slaughter 2008:81). This system of academic capitalism requires the monetization of research and defines faculty scholarship principally as a potential revenue stream. It is dependent on contingent faculty, who relieve tenure stream faculty from teaching so they can focus their efforts on potentially profitable and prestige-enhancing research. To complicate matters, these contingent faculty may also be graduate students who concurrently support their advisor's research. Erin Hatton explores how academic capitalism has created a system in which graduate students' "work and working conditions are entirely *contingent* on their faculty advisors" and tenure-track faculty success (prestige) is dependent on the exploitation (no matter how good the circumstances) of these students and other contingent faculty (p. 152). The system also takes these experts out of the classroom, denying the next generation the benefit of their knowledge and experience.

The "rational, individualistic, and competitive market-based criteria" of the contemporary prestige system normalizes the marginalization of some groups, reinforces structural inequality, and preserves gendered and racialized hierarchies (Metcalf and Slaughter 2008:82). It enables (white) men to recover some of their traditional privilege in the academy. Research-intensive institutions and STEM fields with higher potential revenue generation (and a higher proportion of men) are conferred high prestige. Teaching-intensive institutions and the undergraduate, first-generation, working-class, and community college students they enroll are lower in the academic hierarchy. Goldstone further observes that disciplines

whose value are better measured by peer assessment or their contributions to the public good, rather than market-based metrics, are also less prestigious and often have a higher proportion of women (Metcalf and Slaughter 2008).

Administrators have largely responded to the "cost crisis" of higher education by increasing the proportion of contingent faculty, raising tuition and fees, and imposing other austerity measures. Students and their families bear some of the burden, and not simply in financial terms. Rather than follow their passions, students who anticipate substantial debt may choose majors they think offer an obvious path to employment in "high-demand" fields. They may forego graduate school. Concern about future debt may make the more prestigious universities that continue to offer robust liberal arts curriculums feel inaccessible, rendering elite networks that facilitate access to leadership and positions of power inaccessible as well. Such a system disadvantages not only individual students and their families, but all of us. When society is deprived of a great novelist, humanitarian, or social thinker because they felt unable to choose that path due to purely economic concerns, we all lose. Preserving internal institutional hierarchies sustains external societal disparities.

In a context of global pandemic, gun violence, war, glaring structural inequalities, and political uncertainty, the "shared space" of the university can be charged. The more precarious workers feel, and the more able administrators are to control them, the more difficult it is for workers to do their jobs, much less challenge authority. In an already fraught environment, when the majority of faculty hold contingent positions, faculty as a whole are disempowered and academic freedom for all faculty is threatened. Yet the contemporary prestige system makes it difficult to convince faculty to identify as workers, rather than professionals with a "calling," complicating solidarity. Contingency plays an essential role in maintaining hierarchies within academia—among institutions, within institutions, and between faculty. Attention to the diversity of institutions and the prestige assigned to them is necessary to understand the full impact of contingent labor on higher

education and the larger society in which it operates.

Berry and Worthen observe that a “reset for higher education, then, is part of a reset for society” and encourage us to ask, “What reduces inequality?” (p. 66). The great challenge, of course, is that these resets must occur alongside each other. One remedy to the “problem” of precarity in higher education is to build structures and policies in society that reduce precarity for everyone. This requires simultaneously dismantling deeply embedded systems of inequality and closely held beliefs about meritocracy and personal responsibility. Historically, one of the institutions meant to contribute to this work is higher education, and these two books attempt to offer suggestions about the “paths forward.” *Contingent Faculty and the Remaking of Higher Education* concludes with a chapter by Goldstene and one by Naomi Williams and Jiyoung Park that center possibilities for individual action. They emphasize the need for faculty solidarity across rank and position and encourage contingent faculty who are working in isolation to connect with others in similar positions and to reclaim their power. Chun and Evans identify higher education decision-makers, government entities, and faculty as their audiences and provide specific policy and practice suggestions that focus on changes at the institutional level.

“Crisis” is, of course, socially constructed, and the appropriate resolution is a matter of perspective (Gigliotti 2020). Sociologists are trained to look below the surface to uncover evidence that can inform and clarify complex social phenomena. We might use this history to inform an analysis of the contentious debate about the role of the university in a diverse and democratic (and capitalist) society. Such a close examination of higher education will likely reveal the often-uneasy relationships among democracy and capitalism, belief in meritocracy and the reality of structural inequality, stability and possibility, segregation and inclusion. It will tell us something about broader society, social change, and American values. Perhaps such an analysis can deepen our understanding of the consequences of this current iteration of higher education, inform how the “problem” is framed, and provide

insight into solutions that emphasize the greater good.

I am a tenured full professor, and yet Fure-Slocum and Goldstene’s volume really resonated with me. While the contingent faculty across our three-campus university system have been unionized for some time, tenure stream faculty have not. In a context of declining enrollments, austerity measures, a push to “transform” our regional comprehensive university into one that trains students for “in-demand” jobs (Chun and Evans even call out an all-too-familiar consulting firm by name), and amid ongoing attacks on the liberal arts, the tenure-track and tenured faculty on our (decidedly not-prestigious) campus claimed our status as workers and were recently recognized as a bargaining unit. Tenure stream faculty on many campuses will likely be aware of graduate student strikes at major research universities, unionization efforts by faculty across ranks and status, attacks on academic freedom, and the closure of academic programs and entire institutions. While both of these volumes focus on contingent faculty, we are well past the point at which they are the proverbial canary in the coal mine. Contingent faculty may be the first to go when (or before) programs or institutions close, but these publications should serve as a warning to tenure stream faculty as well—pay attention. These are your colleagues, and you are laborers in the same institution. You may keep your job, but what will it look like, and what will the consequences be? Is this the kind of society you want to live in?

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