Manifesto of a Tenured Radical

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Walk the halls of almost any large university anthropology, English, or history department and you will meet faculty and graduate students who feel personally empowered by decades of innovative disciplinary and multi-disciplinary work. Yet those same hallways may be peopled by adjunct and part-time faculty who cobble together what is at best an uncertain, nearly impoverished existence on the margins of their disciplines. And those intellectually ambitious graduate students, as they near completing their degrees and start contemplating the disastrous job market, will begin to wonder if they have any future in the field they have come to love. A graduate student who had just completed defending his dissertation in the fall of 1996 turned to me and said, “Now I can see the tunnel at the end of the light.” The tenured faculty rarely
think of such matters. Focused on their careers, they assume we all earn our fates. The scholarship of the last half century has not, unfortunately, encouraged many of these people to ask searching questions about academic culture. Meanwhile, if we have any doubts about the difficulties we face in healing ourselves, we might recall that bond-rating services consider it a sign of financial health and good management if universities make heavy use of adjuncts: it shows they have a flexible (disposable) work force. This is a book about these contradictions.

It is also a book that sometimes offers radical solutions to the problems confronting higher education as it approaches the next millennium. My title, *Manifesto of a Tenured Radical*, is, however, both serious and ironic. The book is very much a manifesto for a series of progressive cultural commitments within academia. As the country has moved to the political Right, such commitments have gradually been radicalized, and the notion of the tenured radical, first popularized by Roger Kimball, has now established itself within popular common sense. As far as the Right is concerned then, I am a tenured radical, a status I must view somewhat whimsically, but which I am nonetheless willing to claim as a provocation. Notably, no one seems to get equally upset about untenured radicals, since it is the aura of permanence, invulnerability, and cultural warrant around tenure that makes tenured radicals an affront. Of course no contemporary “tenured radical” with a sense of history would put him- or herself in the same company as beleaguered university radicals in the 1950s or those radicals outside academia who risk everything in the causes they serve. My field of operations is not the mountains of Mexico but the groves of academe. But I believe in the importance of higher education as a field of work; *Manifesto of a Tenured Radical* draws on some decades of left-wing pedagogy and research to make a series of statements about what higher education must do to heal itself.

*Manifesto* thus examines the dynamic interrelationship between the intellectual and political present and future of the academy. Of course higher education’s controversial commitments to research, its fractured sense of community, its economic peril, its limited capacity to reflect on its disciplinary divisions, and its troubled political and cultural image are already in conflict. What this book seeks to do is to describe these realities clearly and convince readers to take their interrelationships seriously.

I use my own discipline of English simultaneously as a representative case and as an exaggerated instance of forces at work widely in the humanities and throughout higher education. More narrowly, I also use my own period specialization in modern American poetry repeatedly to show how a faculty member’s teaching and historical research can have wider social implications and can be positioned in relation to contemporary debates. More perhaps than any
other discipline, literary studies has reformed and opened its intellectual life in such a way as to fulfill a commitment to democratic values. Yet because English departments often hire large numbers of graduate students or part-time faculty to teach lower-division courses, the discipline also harbors some of the most exploitive labor practices in the academy. In English, therefore, democracy is fulfilled in scholarship and betrayed in the workplace. As in other disciplines, some of those who have helped lead the field’s intellectual revolution are among those most indifferent to the fate of their more vulnerable colleagues. When we turn our attention to the workplace, part of the vanguard becomes a rearguard. The discipline as a whole is in almost complete denial about these contradictions. Yet they must be addressed. I have tried not only to say why that is the case but also how the process of reform might begin.

English has also been at the forefront of the culture wars of the last decade. That has puzzled some commentators, but on reflection the prominent position of English seems unsurprising. First, its size makes its scholarship more visible. Its widespread responsibility for freshman rhetoric or composition requirements means that large numbers of students are exposed to English courses. The discipline has also played a large role in formulating the theory revolution of the last twenty-five years and demonstrating its relevance to textual interpretation. And finally, more than any other disciplinary caretaker of high cultural objects, literary studies is articulated to our sense of national identity. Far more members of the general public feel they have access to (and a modest stake in interpreting) novels than symphonies, paintings, or classic works of philosophy. National literatures are often sites of struggle over cultural and political representation, and the disciplinary organization of literature into national groupings frequently serves myths of national exceptionalism and conflict over national identity.

So the debates over symbolic investments in the changes in English studies have been singularly intense. And if some of those outside the university have been willing to use developments in literary studies to delegitimate and defund public education, many inside higher education have simply ignored the material conditions in which they work.

Part of what is startling about faculty passivity and indifference is its blindness to anything except short-term self-interest. Longer-term self-interest—even self-interest focused on, say, a five-year plan—would suggest that some collective action to secure individual options is now critical. Thus many scholars scramble to publish their own books and essays, without troubling to notice that the whole system of university press publishing is dying. If they did notice, they would be ill-prepared to take collective action. Meanwhile, the cost of printing scholarly books keeps increasing while the number of copies sold has declined steadily for nearly two decades, in part because library budgets are falling farther
and farther behind acquisition costs. A scholarly book that could easily sell 2,000 copies in 1970 now regularly sells but 500, and some sell even fewer copies than that. All over the country English professors are doing research for books they will not be able to publish. Nevertheless, the enterprise of writing traditional literary criticism continues despite the fact that opportunities to publish it will soon be nearly nonexistent.\(^2\)

Whether this problem really matters is another issue. Publishing books that virtually no one will read is perhaps not a national priority, but books that could make a difference will likely be threatened as well. This is not, in any case, one of the issues I take up here, but there are other crises that clearly do matter, and, like the one in scholarly publishing, they can only be addressed by collective action. One such crisis is the declining percentage of tenured or tenure-track faculty among college and university teachers. These are the people with the greatest protection for their free speech and, moreover, the people with the greatest potential for commitment to the institutions in which they teach.\(^3\) Despite media and legislative assaults on tenure, its real crisis is one of gradual diminution, as retiring faculty are increasingly replaced with part-timers, adjuncts, or graduate assistants. The precise pattern varies, with many private institutions relying heavily on adjunct or part-time faculty and many public universities employing graduate assistants, but the trend away from permanent, full-time faculty appointments is nationwide.

Tenure will thus gradually disappear—not with a bang but a whimper. There may never be an event or a critical decision that provokes a national confrontation over the issue, though the 1996 effort by the University of Minnesota Regents to eliminate almost all tenure guarantees will certainly test faculty resolve. The Regents’ rules would make it easy to fire tenured faculty or cut their salaries not only for programmatic but also for political reasons. Meanwhile, some junior colleges now argue over whether every department needs to include at least one full-time, tenure-track faculty member. The alternative is a faculty of part-timers who are given their marching orders by bureaucrats with no disciplinary expertise and no intellectual commitments beyond cost accounting. When tenure is gone, then anyone who questions corporate authority can be summarily fired. Do any faculty members think such a system would serve students well? Hardly. Yet disciplines like English continue to flood the market with unemployable Ph.D.s and make such “innovations” easier and easier to institute. We are repeatedly told that the job crisis, the focus of the third part of *Manifesto*, is about to end.

For some years I have been puzzled by the good cheer of our high-profile faculty in the face of the long-term collapse of the job market. The reality is that the academic job crisis began in 1970 and 1971. We have had intermittent
periods of relative improvement since then, but even the best years have left
many long-term candidates unemployed. In other words, over a quarter of a
century we have never been able to eliminate the backlog of Ph.D.s without full-
time tenure-track employment. There are now people who have spent their
whole professional lives—twenty or more years—on the margins of the acad-
emy, making do with part-time work, cobbling together courses at multiple
institutions, going on unemployment, covering their own health insurance when
they can. It is astonishing that the more privileged members of the profession
can declare "we're all in this together," when some of us are clearly so much
more equal than others. But most astonishing of all is the decades-long claim
that the job crisis is temporary. At the 1994 annual meeting of the Modern
Language Association, the main disciplinary organization in English, I ran into
glad-handers who declared "we're back" and "the crisis is over" in response to a
miserable 2 percent increase in the number of jobs listed that fall. For them the
glass was apparently 2 percent full, not 98 percent empty. But the greatest
puzzle to me has remained the political and economic blindness of some of our
most distinguished scholars. In the spring of 1996 the MLA president again
declared the job crisis temporary. These delusions are not unique to English, of
course, but it is in English that the numbers are particularly staggering. It is
likely that no more than 25 percent of the English Ph.D.s produced in the
1990s will end up becoming tenured faculty members.

This interplay between English and the rest of academia runs through the
total book. Manifesto opens with a critical review of the way a succession of
influential interpretive theories have accommodated themselves to disciplinarity.
English is the model, but the pattern is repeated throughout the humanities and
social sciences. The same is true of the role anthologies can play in imaging
social life, the subject of chapter 2, and the possibilities opened up by a
relativistic historiography, the focus of chapter 3. Chapter 4, a polemical account
of the Americanization of cultural studies, speaks directly to all the fields where
cultural studies has made inroads.

The book’s second section, “The Academy and the Culture Debates,” also
moves outward from English to the academy as a whole. Its opening chapter
uses modern American poetry to mount a plea for a historically grounded
progressive pedagogy, while the last chapter poses the challenge of left research
and teaching at a more abstract and general level. In between, Manifesto ad-
dresses the debates over the canon and hate speech regulation. In the latter case,
I try to make it clear that a progressive politics need not support restraints on
speech.

If Manifesto is unapologetically on the Left then, it is not programmatically or
conventionally so. In a number of areas—from its commitment to maintaining
substantial portions of the traditional canon in the curriculum to its rejection of hate speech ordinances—the book negotiates a principled passage through issues the press usually treats as politically given and dichotomous. In its support for teaching assistant unions, for example, Manifesto breaks with more traditional campus liberals who find graduate student unions unacceptable. Indeed, I criticize those who do progressive research but resist applying its lessons to employment practices on their own campus. Far more than the media has encouraged the public to believe, this kind of mix of positions is common among progressive faculty. Perhaps Manifesto can make a small contribution to dispelling public myths about unanimity of opinion on campus.

Finally, as I suggested above, the last section of the book uses English departments and the Modern Language Association as key examples because they display the problems of other disciplines writ large. “Lessons from the Job Wars” also opens and closes with anecdotes and comments about the efforts to unionize graduate teaching assistants in New Haven. The reactions of Yale faculty and administrators to such efforts highlight the difficulties we face in trying to make campus communities more equitable places to live.

Here and there the contradictions become rather stark. At Yale, after years of organizing, cafeteria workers won the right to be assigned other duties in the summer rather than be laid off and have to go on welfare. That also gave them year-round benefits and some security for their families. But the Yale Corporation remained restless about its concessions. Other schools were more ruthless; why should Yale waste money and decrease its profits? So in 1995 a Yale spokesperson declared the university to be looking for a “humane” way to reduce salaries and benefits. Step one: break the local union. Some faculty cared deeply; others were indifferent to the nature of the community they worked in or the values of the institution to which they were devoting their labor. After all, their lives proceeded on a higher plane.

Institutions that mistreat whole classes of employees, we need to realize, have little claim to public respect, let alone an exalted self-image. With higher education under assault and under scrutiny, it is no longer so easy to maintain public acceptance of the academy’s self-idealization, especially when higher education’s labor practices too closely resemble those long associated with California agriculture. “Health care for me but not for you” does not seem a particularly saintly faculty slogan. Nor does “living wages for tenured faculty only.”

Part of the problem is the increasing spread of the ideology of careerism through the postwar academy. A faculty member who entered the profession in the 1960s remarked to me that the first thing he did when he arrived at his first job was join the American Association of University Professors, a group devoted
to defining and promulgating general professional principles, not to individual career advancement. Membership in the AAUP has declined by over half in two decades.

One is tempted to conclude that some faculty members see the profession as a whole primarily as an audience for their scholarship, an applause track in the background of their lives celebrating their personal accomplishments. When they wonder whether the job market will improve, they look for an answer to the only evidence that signifies: their publications. A good job market would be just one more confirmation of their own value. Given what they themselves have produced, how can the country but reward them yet again? Careerism encourages us to take everything personally; there is no other measure that counts.

For some time there was no large-scale institutional problem either with faculty doggedly supporting their own rights and privileges while seeing no need to grant anything comparable to anyone else on campus, or with faculty focusing exclusively on their own careers and ignoring the common good. In the 1990s it is another matter. There is a name for this ideology—capitalism—and it is not so compatible with expectations of public largesse, let alone with passivity.

Meanwhile, the basic categories of university life are in doubt. A shakeout of research universities is under way; many of them will not merit the designation a decade from now. As it is, less than 10 percent of our institutions of higher education devote a significant portion of their resources to research. Yet despite their centrality to the effort to keep higher education current everywhere else, including the majority of institutions whose faculty have neither time nor money to do research, these schools lack public support for their mission. Tenure is increasingly and falsely viewed as a "problem," a source of excessive costs, indifferent performance, and an undemocratic prestige of intellect. To a considerable degree, views like these are installed as unquestioned common sense in the media and public opinion. At the same time, the political Right wants only cultural indoctrination, respect for authority, and either unfettered greed or technical expertise from college graduates. Even those few academics who glimpse these threats mostly express helplessness before them. "What can we do?" they ask. Manifesto for a Tenured Radical tries to begin answering that question.

Is there, then, any reason for hope in the picture I paint? First of all, the intellectual life in many disciplines—including English—is at a higher level than it has been in more than half a century. As always, there is no shortage of mediocre work, but the sheer quantity and inventiveness of the best work is remarkable. This scholarship has theoretical resources we have not yet used to examine either ourselves or the social formations in which we as academics are embedded. It is critical to do so collectively.
Secondly, here and there are sources of inspiration. In September of 1995 I had dinner with a group of graduate student union activists and their faculty supporters in New Haven; in May of 1996 I had a similar meal with student union leaders in San Diego. Both groups were rainbow coalitions of multiple races, ethnicities, and economic backgrounds. They were working together, sharing their varied pasts and their more parallel presents. The Yale and University of California administrations were gearing themselves up to threaten or fire these people. The administrators were unable to realize they are an inspiration, not only for New Haven and San Diego but also for America. Here was our multicultural present and future in miniature, and it worked. They were engaged in an alliance politics that extended from the classroom to the maintenance shop and the cafeteria. Yale or California may break these unions for now, but each one of these students has been turned into an agent of change. It is happening all across the country.

Higher education almost certainly faces if not a kind of meltdown, at least a future that is likely to be economically mean and brutish. It cannot be altogether resisted, but it can be partly blocked, and we can create communities that are in some important ways better than those we will lose. The difference between this partial success and failure will be the difference between a form of higher education that is and is not worth working in a decade from now.

For faculty members, higher education is a career that entails relearning your discipline as it changes over time. Many faculty members in fact remake themselves repeatedly in the course of their careers. If higher education becomes like high school, or like community college teaching, so thoroughly crammed with scheduled responsibilities that it offers little time for independent intellectual pursuit, then it will lose the difference that makes it what it is. In the false name of a repressive efficiency, corporate-style administration would make higher education pay people as little as possible and extract the maximum labor from them. It will be done in the service of several narratives, including, ironically, the need to compete in the global environment. Of course American higher education already attracts students from all over the world. But if current trends continue—such as the wholesale shift from tenure-track faculty to underpaid part-timers and adjuncts—quality will decline and we will no longer compete so effectively.

Meanwhile, higher education remains the only proven means of social mobility, the only antidote to poverty, and the only large-scale corrective for the ravages of capitalism. It is in short the only workable solution to some of America's worst social problems. Yet many conservative politicians would drastically reduce its size and reduce student access to it at the same time. All these forces must be resisted, but faculty members cannot do so without collectively
looking outward at the world for the first time in decades. The process can only succeed if we understand our disciplines in terms of their larger social meaning and prove ourselves worthy, as communities, of the respect and support we ask of the public. Using the discipline of English and my own historical specialization, modern poetry, as examples, Manifesto offers some prescriptions for how we might begin. My aim is to help make the book’s predictive warnings untrue.
