Manifesto of a Tenured Radical

Nelson, Cary

Published by NYU Press

Nelson, Cary.
Manifesto of a Tenured Radical.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/76358.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/76358

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=2682139
As any faculty cocktail party conversation from Maine to California will reveal, wishful thinking about the job market is alive and well in academia. I sometimes think wishful thinking is academia’s major contribution to the public sphere. But every colder gaze cast on our economic future suggests that things will not get better either now or later. The job market—especially in the humanities, but also in the social sciences and the theoretical sciences—may remain depressed throughout the decade and beyond. And if all of us in higher education remain disengaged—indifferent to our public image, to the network of institutions and values that define our options, and to the competition for limited resources—the job drought may outlast us. The kinds of professional identities many of us take for granted now may no longer be available to us in a
decade. The life of a college professor will almost certainly no longer resemble what it does now. Already, the once transitory identity of job seeker has become semipermanent for many. As for those of us who train Ph.D.s, if we were really training people for jobs as professors, we might only supervise two dissertations in the course of our careers.

The capricious and often brutal job market in academia is unfortunately part of a general transformation in the nature of American employment. Over the next decade we are likely to see a gradual increase in the percentage of part-time and fixed-term college teachers, a decrease in the percentage of tenured and tenure-track employees, increased teaching loads, and a notable drop in salaries for beginning faculty in some markets. With book publication increasingly threatened in the humanities it may become difficult to justify hiring research faculty. With many college teachers looking more and more like migrant factory labor—lacking health benefits, job security, retirement funds, and any influence over either their employment conditions or the goals of the institutions they work for—the ideology of professionalism seems increasingly ludicrous. Once an accoutrement of privilege, it is rapidly becoming an impediment at once to self-understanding and effective action. Certainly few part-time or term-contract faculty would readily identify themselves with Yeshiva University’s faculty, who were judged ineligible for unionization because they had managerial responsibilities. While many faculty have not yet acknowledged the changes under way, college teachers are nonetheless in the process of joining late capitalism’s transitory and disempowered work force.

That is not to suggest, however, that large-scale economic changes leave the education sector powerless or that its own actions are irrelevant. Modern Language Association president Sandra Gilbert suggested in a 1996 MLA Newsletter column that academia’s job crisis was part of a national pattern we could do nothing to resist. And she suggested as well that by counseling resistance I was proving myself “disaffected.” Yet when resources are scarce and public support undependable, the obvious need is to enter the competition, not remain on the sidelines. Indeed, the first thing we need to do is to recognize how we have abetted the crisis. The overproduction of Ph.D.s, for example, which is one of our own contributions to the crisis, has helped make academia economically and politically vulnerable. Obviously if the new humanities Ph.D. were a relatively scarce commodity, it would be far more difficult to treat Ph.D.s like unskilled workers. Similarly, academia’s opportunistic (and wholly unreflective) acceptance of government predictions about the 1990s job market helped turn that market into a disaster. The U.S. Labor Department looked at anticipated retirements, matched them with expected numbers of high school graduates, and estimated how many new faculty positions would open up, nowhere asking
whether the social will to authorize those positions would materialize, nowhere asking whether other social needs might be given higher priorities both by state legislators and by the nation’s citizenry. Academia’s own inclination to see itself as immune to other sectors of the economy was thus reinforced by Labor Department statisticians’ inclination to ignore all determinants they could not quantify. Meanwhile, two academic studies coauthored by William Bowen, based partly on benighted predictions of faculty shortages growing out of the time it takes graduate students to complete their doctoral training, have also helped justify large graduate programs.

Of course there have been signals both academics and government planners might have read differently. In the twenty years between the abolition of free tuition at the City University of New York and the massive budget cuts proposed for the State University of New York by the new Republican governor in 1995–96, signals abound. We might, for example, have asked how the International Monetary Fund’s austerity policies for developing countries helped establish a cultural environment relevant to education’s future in America. We might have asked whether Margaret Thatcher’s effort to abolish tenure in British universities and turn higher education over to technological rationality reflected not only local politics but also widespread cultural tendencies in the postindustrial world. We might have wondered whether the increasing ethnic and racial diversity of California’s postsecondary student population was linked in any way to the public’s decreasing willingness to fund higher education out of tax revenues. We might have wondered whether persistently (and scandalously) unequal funding in elementary and secondary education, with poor communities relegated to substandard facilities, might herald similar disparities in higher education. We might have worried that the loss of any powerful notion of the common good in the public sphere in America might threaten the relatively recent commitment to broad access to higher education. We might have asked whether increasing reliance on industry to fund research in the sciences might have implications for the humanities. We might have wondered what the policy implications might be of the New Right’s cultural attacks on higher education since the 1980s. We might have questioned whether the decertification and disempowerment of unions that began with Reagan’s handling of the air controller strike would prove prophetic for the rights of non-unionized employees in other sectors. In other words, people concerned about higher education might have been interrogating its structural and semiotic relations with other cultural domains and economic and political forces. We might, in short, have been involved in an ongoing cultural analysis of education and in taking actions that analysis suggested. Like many academics, I have waited too long to make some of these issues central to my life. Meanwhile, events we could not have
anticipated—like the end of the cold war and the end of the post–Sputnik era’s paranoid commitment to education—added other problematic elements to the mix. Yet nothing about higher education—neither its disciplinary divisions nor its ruling illusions—made active engagement with such matters likely. So instead, academics wait passively and hope for better times.

Not surprisingly, hand-in-hand with passivity and wishful thinking goes increasing anxiety about a future we can almost glimpse but dare not name. For there is widespread fear that large-scale higher education in the liberal arts has lost its public mandate. Not only is it added to a list of items seen not as rights but as privileges, but also any sense of the general societal benefits derived from broad access to anything beyond technical training is being largely eroded. Lack of public support and overproduction of Ph.D.s thus combine to make higher education one of late capitalism’s notably vulnerable industries. As students and faculty in the humanities begin to reflect on the possible long-term collapse of the job market and what it entails, there is a wide range of issues—many rarely addressed—that we should begin to discuss and debate. Had higher education collectively taken up the problems raised in the previous paragraphs we might not be facing quite this crisis today. But we are, and I would like to concentrate first on its human consequences. I will raise a few such issues—growing out of the job crisis—in the form of a short list of lessons learned over the last several years. When appropriate, I will offer relevant anecdotes to lend my arguments experiential weight. These are paradoxical lessons, however, lessons taken from a site of impossible contradiction, lessons that need to be both learned and unlearned.

I am writing, I should emphasize, out of more than a decade’s empathy with students struggling to find employment. Despite hundreds of hours of advocacy and advice, I am haunted by the knowledge that all I can do at the moment to help them collectively is write yet one more book, adding, at the ironic minimum, yet one more line to my own vita. Reaching out to a powerless constituency is not, of course, likely to do anything notable for my career. Still, I feel I owe the unemployed two promises before I begin: I will pull no punches and tell no lies. I will speak the truth as I see it. Here are the paradoxical, double-edged lessons I have learned so far:

1. YOU NEED A BOOK TO GET A JOB. This is the commonsense anecdotal wisdom offered repeatedly these days as a way of imposing at least a cruel reason on the uncertainty of the market. Yet it is far from obvious or straightforward. As the competition for jobs continues to implode on itself, expectations inevitably not only escalate but also become increasingly contradictory. You need not only to be a dedicated teacher and a fine scholar but also to project both these capacities
as mutually exclusive and wholly consuming attributes. Thus demonstrable success at publication—often as much a requirement as an expectation—makes you look like someone who doesn’t care about teaching. Especially at schools where the rest of the faculty have never published, that may be the easiest way to deal with superior accomplishments while reinforcing your own self-image. Intelligence is at once commodified and treated as a potential character flaw. Meanwhile, completing a book—before you get a permanent job—while teaching five courses part-time at two schools at opposite sides of Los Angeles—is neither easy nor conducive to psychic health. And there is the risk that a book completed before you are hired won’t “count” for tenure. Some schools refuse to give tenure credit for work completed before you arrive on campus, a particularly brutal standard for those who have produced major scholarship despite teaching at several institutions for poverty-level wages.

Meanwhile, a book can remove a certain element of humility from a candidate’s persona. Widely published young scholars are less likely to request mentoring, less likely to defer to senior scholars. They may not know their place or act the way untenured faculty are supposed to act. After all, some senior faculty will think, perhaps unconsciously, what’s the point of hiring assistant professors if you can’t lord it over them? Certainly I know of cases where departments passed over more accomplished young candidates because they didn’t have the nervous eagerness of the candidate with, say, only one or two articles or with no publications at all.

In one of the notably schizophrenic ironies of the current market, some now not only tailor their vita and letter of application to meet each job’s specific requirements—a sensible practice—but also “ration” their accomplishments according to what they think a particular school may want and tolerate. In order not to frighten off a department whose faculty doesn’t publish, some candidates will omit publications or conference presentations, simplify descriptions of projects, and omit mention of intellectually challenging or politically controversial commitments. I have not yet met anyone who has taken a book off a vita, a gesture equivalent to a kind of suicide, but certainly many are aware that a book may rule them out of consideration in a department militantly opposed to research. So with publication comes the added anxiety about whether one can publish enough to become attractive to a research university or only enough to be rejected at lesser schools.

But for candidates who have been on the market for several years—increasingly the case for many people—a book seems the only way to break a pattern of failure. It is no guarantee, especially with large numbers of people on the market with books of their own, but it gives you perhaps an extra fistful of lottery tickets you would not have otherwise. Worst of all, however, is the fact
that the very book that might get you tenure at, say, Cornell University, could easily keep you from being hired there. The sort of work expected of a colleague is often quite different from the sort of work desired of a fantasy object—Professor Clark Gable or Professor Marilyn Monroe. On the job market, publication can be psychodynamically contraindicated.

The problem here is that assistant professor hires are occasions for rampant libidinizing by search committees. They may seek, usually unknowingly, to hire themselves or to avoid doing so. And they will entertain all sorts of speculative fantasies, some semiconscious and others openly acknowledged and debated. The ship of hope can easily run aground on a good book. Why? Because once a book is there you have become less a subject of speculation than a reality. Unlike a manuscript, a publication is already all that it can ever be.

In the sciences, one fantasy predominates—the potential successful candidate is almost always a potential Nobel Prize winner. In the humanities, it’s often a name that signals a fantasy identity. In early 1970, when I was hired at Illinois, or so I learned later, I was touted in Urbana as “the next Northrop Frye.” It wasn’t, I should emphasize, that my future colleagues so much admired Frye, but rather that his was the only theorist’s name they could come up with at the time. One of my colleagues, hired around the same time, was proclaimed “the next Marjorie Hope Nicholson.” Obviously, these fantasies are historically specific, since neither Frye’s nor Nicholson’s name would, as it were, whet anyone’s appetite in the market of the nineties. Well, my colleague didn’t become the next Marjorie Hope Nicholson—notwithstanding the rumors that she attended her funeral hoping like a future bride to catch the funeral wreath when it was flung toward the grave—and I didn’t become the next Northrop Frye. Perhaps in partial compensation Frye did give me a blurb for my first book; my department, therefore, had to settle for seeing Frye’s name half an inch from mine in a *PMLA* ad. The likelihood of a red diaper baby—and a Jew to boot—becoming the next Northrop Frye was never overwhelming, but then fantasies don’t have to be intricately tested against reality. Meanwhile, I hadn’t actually published anything and, happily, no writing sample was requested of me, so Illinois—which might not have liked what it read but didn’t read anything—was free to imagine anything about me it wanted.

A job opening is a field of dreams. If you build one, Roland Barthes will come. And imminent Ph.D.s are the best objects for this sort of dreaming. But an author of a book? Well, once you can read a candidate’s book, fantasies of becoming turn into accomplishments of an always lesser order. It’s one of the reasons senior hires can be so contentious. The unpublished Ph.D. is an untested politician who can promise you anything. Or one—more accurately—that you can use to make any imaginable promise to yourself. A published scholar is a
mere mortal like the rest of us, tethered to intractable material facts and far less pliable psychodynamically.

If there is a real lesson in increasing expectations about publication, then, it's this—every publication before you are hired is a double-edged sword. It's at least as likely to damage your candidacy as to enhance it. Does that news imply any advice, or merely intensify the madness? Well, it does suggest that you be aware of these paradoxes. Ask yourself what dreams others can dream in the presence of your work. Your own dreams, for the time being, may be less pertinent.

2. NO ONE WANTS TO HIRE DAMAGED GOODS. Five years of itinerant teaching (if you are lucky), six years of assembling dossiers and asking for revised and updated letters of recommendation, seven years of revising your dissertation description, eight jobless years of knowing you are more accomplished than any number of tenured faculty, nine years of borrowing money from your family or your bank at a time when you thought you might be giving some back, ten years of grading freshman composition papers every other week, eleven years of paying annual conference registration fees for the sole purpose of winning access to a reduced-price hotel room, twelve years sardined into elevators wondering if the anguished faces around you resemble your own; thirteen years of watching the superstars of the profession strut and preen while you wonder if you can sustain any piece of your own intellectual life—all this and more may exact a price from you. And that price may suddenly increase for no clear reason—psychic inflation being predictably irregular.

I have seen candidates—in interviews—lose control and lapse into bitterness about their circumstances or, alternatively, make brittle efforts to demonstrate how character enhancing all these “opportunities” have proven. In recent years, when I talk with interviewees one-on-one they always break down and plead for the job. In the eighties I never encountered one that did. For years the anxiety built into the job search has been intense. We all know—though few of us admit it—how fragile and circumstantial is the difference between a successful career and no future we can readily imagine for ourselves. The difference is one job offer; that’s all I had, though when I went on the market, it never occurred to me to worry about it. Women, of course, had reason to worry in the job market of the 1960s because many hiring committees discriminated against them, but at least the number of jobs matched or exceeded the number of new Ph.D.s. Now no one does much else but worry.

In my own case—going out on the market in 1969 with a dissertation fully drafted and scheduled to be defended the following spring—I caught the declining wake of the sixties boom and got a job at the University of Illinois. As
I arrived on campus in the fall of 1970, the market collapsed almost entirely; that year there were virtually no jobs to be had. If I had spent one more year earning my Ph.D. I probably wouldn’t be writing this essay. I’d most likely be a forgotten instance of its subject matter, an unemployed Ph.D. I keep my own history in mind when dealing with today’s graduate students; it’s a practice I recommend to others as well. For those of us with tenure, it’s not a time to naturalize our identity and status but rather to recall their historical contingency. These contingencies are, of course, not only personal but also social and institutional. Put simply, we will not be able to adapt to new social and political pressures if we cannot reflect on our own individual and institutional histories.

As time goes on for the typical long-term candidate of today, of course, the strain accompanying that individual history is more difficult to disguise or displace. The risk increases that you will appear irretrievably wounded—that you will already seem a casualty of the market long before you have given up marketing yourself. It’s what I am calling the “damaged goods” phenomenon, and it’s one of the costs of the current market we never seem to address.

In fact, since the job crisis in various forms has now gone on for a quarter of a century, some people have been long-term candidates for twenty years or more, piecing together a course here or there, sometimes a visiting appointment, while they publish books and essays and reapply for tenure-track jobs year after year. At some point, part-time work combined with futile annual job searches clearly defines the shape of a person’s entire career. One department head who hires a number of such people feels free to call them the profession’s “discards.” Damaged goods indeed, but sometimes accomplished scholars and teachers as well.

Despite such realities, the acceptable self-presentation and identity for job candidates has always been clear: I’m available but sought after. I’m interested but not anxious. There are other schools interested in me, but you have a chance if you act quickly. I’m eager but not needy. And above all, I am psychically unencumbered: cheerful, seasoned, but not bitter. Damaged goods? That’s the person in the hallway waiting for the next interview.

But increasingly many long-term candidates are damaged goods, and there is an often unconscious reluctance to bet on their chances for recovery. The implicit pressure on candidates to hide or misrepresent their emotional condition could hardly be more intense. No one wants to hire an unheroic, unheralded victim, however much sympathy we might be able to muster. For the long-term candidate, then, the unreality of the identity they must put forward in interviews may be intensely alienating.

For hiring committees to become conscious of this problem is hardly to guarantee any benefit to the long-term candidate. So, once again, is there any
advice to offer about the psychology of extended candidacy? Or only another cost to be acknowledged—a cost of overproducing and cheapening the commodity of the new Ph.D.? Well, I can only say that those who go through repeated job searches without suffering disabling consequences are to some degree living their lives elsewhere. Though they do everything they need to do, the job search is not the emotional center of every fall and every spring. They break through into a kind of calm, occupying themselves more with their work, their friends, their family, whatever identity matters to them. The sooner you get there the better off you’ll be.

3. S/M DAYS—OR—THEY CAN’T DO ANYTHING TO YOU THAT THEY HAVEN’T ALREADY THOUGHT OF DOING. Scant reassurance, you may say, and that is my point. We are looking at a future in higher education that will feature a new wave of abuses—petty and not so petty—invented in response to a long-term buyers’ market.

In 1994, one of Illinois’ best students was called for an on-campus interview at a small Midwestern school. For years, bottom-feeding departments have proposed on-campus interviews either with no reimbursement of travel expenses or with reimbursement conditional on accepting a job if it’s offered. In other words, in the latter case a candidate who is rejected by them gets reimbursed but a candidate who rejects them doesn’t. The school in question dangled package No. 2. As I always do, I recommended that the graduate student wish them well, decline to make the trip, and break off negotiations. But no one takes this advice anymore. As it happened, the candidate made the visit and was met not by a department member but by the dean. The English department consisted of three full-time faculty; under the circumstances the dean took charge of all new appointments. After a fairly conventional day the dean took the candidate out for a one-on-one dinner. Drinks and appetizers were encouraged and indulged in, and the dean did his or her best to sell the school. By the end of the dinner it was clear an offer was on its way. With another campus visit a few days off, the candidate deferred a decision. Within a week, however, she called to decline the job, realizing that meant no travel reimbursement. But that was not the end of the matter.

As it happened, the dean had paid for the candidate’s hotel room (one night) with his or her own credit card. A note arrived a few days later asking the candidate to reimburse the dean for the night’s lodging. Apparently the dean could hardly sign his or her own reimbursement form. Catch-22. But there was another surprise in the envelope—a demand to pay for the dinner as well—and not just for the candidate herself. The dean also wanted his or her own dinner to be paid for; after all, the dean presumably reasoned, if it were not for the need to entertain the candidate, the dean could have eaten more cheaply at
home. Seeking only her own counsel, our graduate student wrote to say she’d pay for the hotel as soon as she got her next paycheck, which she did. But the dean wasn’t letting her off so easily on the meal. Over a fortnight a series of dunning phone calls were placed demanding payment for dinner for both of them. Our student’s resolve began to falter, and she asked for our advice. Don’t pay for either meal, we all urged. And I added a special caveat. I wanted to be able to tell the story—with the student’s permission—and she would come off better at the end if she stood her ground and refused to pay for the meal. And so she did refuse. A small victory in the job wars, but one that pleases me nonetheless. For the request to pay for dinner is highly unusual, but the request to pay for your own travel is not. An MLA official told me in 1995 he doubted such practices ever occur. I have encountered them so often I can only wonder what world he’s living in. Several job candidates have written to me to suggest the refusal to pay travel may reflect the fact the department already knows whom it wants to hire and doesn’t want to waste money on fake visitors. Their institution, on the other hand, may require multiple campus visits. In any case, institutional claims about poverty are really claims about priorities and about power. They will meet the expenses they feel they have to meet. Moreover, if professional associations penalize this kind of activity it will largely cease.

Finally, the story about the dinner—exquisitely petty to be sure—is instructive nonetheless, for it lets me modify the lesson: they will sure as hell do things to you that YOU haven’t thought of. The advice: despite all efforts to undermine it, your dignity is worth preserving, at least on those strategic occasions when you can identify the possibility. As to the dean, whether he or she borrowed money to pay the dinner bill, charged it to an expense account, robbed a bank, worked overtime, or tightened his or her belt and chalked it all up to the perils of life at the top, I do not know.

But I take this story—and others like it—as warrant to ask that all professional organizations establish commissions to investigate abusive search practices. I recommend public censure of departments that, for example, can be proven to have conducted fake job searches. And I recommend that offending departments be barred for a specified time from access to a profession’s job market infrastructure—job lists, convention hotel rates, and so forth. Professional organizations are very reluctant to police either members or member departments. Even those that have accepted such responsibilities—like the American Medical Association—do not have a very impressive record of results. But only disciplinary organizations can set appropriate job search practices. In the current climate, unenforced standards are often meaningless, for the buyers’ market is guaranteed to multiply abuses.

Of course many abuses are difficult to prove. And certainly some who think
they have been mistreated have simply succumbed to the paranoia attending an abusive market. But investigative procedures and modest (but public) sanctions would be a deterrent. Simply having discipline-based committees that could talk to departments about unprofessional practices would be a great help. Who else is to do it now? Job applicants? Members of the offending department? Neither is well positioned. The most one could commonly expect from these people is to report abuses. As the American Association of University Professors has found, schools would rather stay off a censure list. That’s one of the reasons the AAUP’s censure list has a preponderance of less distinguished institutions. Quality schools would rather not join that group.

I suspect that a whole range of practices we have traditionally deplored and some not yet invented are going to become commonplace in academia. We cannot drastically overproduce Ph.D.s for years without transforming the market and, sooner or later, the nature of academic employment. At some colleges and universities, such transformation has been occurring for years—the practice of farming out courses once taught by full-time tenure-track faculty to part-time instructors who work on a kind of piecework arrangement with neither future guarantees nor current benefits; recent studies suggest that perhaps 45 percent of all faculty in higher educational institutions are now part-timers, compared with 34 percent in 1980 and 22 percent in 1970. And though academic life at many institutions has managed to sustain its traditional perquisites, it does so largely by inertial force. Sooner or later the people who balance the books will recognize openings and opportunities and seize them, especially since many other industries have already undergone similar changes. Faculty members in higher education must assert their difference from other industries.

Imagine the following conversation between the president of a state university, a member of the state legislature, and the state’s governor. The president: “I know you feel we should improve the student/faculty ratio and offer more small courses, but we can’t afford to do so with our current budget.” The legislator: “How much do you pay new faculty members in, say, English or history?” “Well, we pay them $35,000 to $38,000 a year. Of course we could advertise new assistant professorships for $20,000 and easily fill them—in fact, we could probably hire twice as many faculty for the same amount of money—but that wouldn’t be fair. We’d make a lot of students, parents, and voters happy as a result, but it wouldn’t be right, don’t you agree?” The legislator: “You mean the people of this state are paying twice as much for college professors as they have to?” The governor: “Hell, I can cut salaries for new faculty in half and proclaim myself ‘the Education Governor’ on the same day.”

If all this seems unnecessarily paranoid, remember that there are already here and there across the country full-time faculty earning $25,000 a year to teach

---

1 LATE CAPITALISM ARRIVES ON CAMPUS

163
four or five courses a semester. One American university greeted 1995 by advertising a new kind of position—a tenure-track lecturer in English, not eligible for promotion. In other words, after the probationary period, tenure could be granted but not promotion. The position was as a lifetime lecturer. No accomplishments could make the person eligible for promotion. The teaching load would be set at four courses per semester; salary is negotiable, but I was told by the chair of the search committee it would probably be in the mid-20s. Finally, to avoid embarrassing tenured faculty of higher rank, occupants of lifetime lecturerships would be actively discouraged from publishing in areas other than pedagogy. I did not ask whether lecturers would have to wear a scarlet “L” on their jackets. Nor did I ask whether these positions were devised in dungeons replete with instruments of torture. To that question I already knew the answer: the jobs were crafted in the bright light of the university’s new identity as corporate boardroom.

And while we are speculating about the future we might contemplate faculty salaries or teaching loads—or perhaps the abolition of tenure—as an initiative on the November ballot in one state or another. While that may not be likely to happen soon, contemplating the possibility makes for an instructive exercise in gauging the degree and nature of our public support. In fact in 1995 and 1996 the University of Minnesota began discussing the possibility of decoupling tenure from salary—you would have lifetime employment but not a guaranteed salary. One proposal was to link a portion of a faculty member’s salary to tenure, say 50 percent, and have the balance subject to reduction for reasons of funding or job performance.

What we know now is that we have drastically overproduced new Ph.D.s in the humanities. (I propose a program to combat this oversupply in the next chapter.) Despite most tenured faculty not wanting to confront the consequences, we are beginning to see what the human cost of this programmatic self-indulgence has been. What we don’t yet know—but can begin to learn from the example of other industries—is what the structural and institutional cost will be. Meanwhile, we are burdened with what may become the academic equivalent of the passenger pigeon, a species driven to extinction—two full generations of faculty members brainwashed into believing they are above politics and economics, that the public sphere is a soiled space they are metaphysically empowered to transcend. That distaste for the public sphere cuts many ways. It leads faculty members to distrust young scholars who have had to work outside academia for a few years. And it leads many of us to claim powerlessness before the legislature and the public. That is a powerlessness we have eagerly embraced for decades, trading safety from public scrutiny and rage for any
chance of influence. We have embraced political impotence as part of our identity as professors for so long we have come to believe it is inevitable.

It is hardly surprising in this context that disciplinary organizations like the Modern Language Association opt to fiddle while Rome is ready to burn. I choose this cliché advisedly, for if humanities disciplinary organizations insist largely on celebrating their traditional cultural commitments while social support for higher education is crumbling, if they disdain the public sphere and avoid challenging their members, then fiddling while Rome burns is an apt metaphor. Indeed, one member of the MLA staff privately insists there is no job crisis. And as for the Association of Departments of English (ADE), it preoccupies itself with defending English departments and handing out soap and towels at summer camp institutes for department heads. I believe the organization’s response to the anguish of hundreds of young scholars has been wholly inadequate. For twenty-five years it has been part of the problem, not part of the solution, denying or minimizing the crisis, collecting statistics so as to minimize the problem, and carrying on with business as usual. Both these organizations risk becoming corrupted by the unjust economic and social relations in which they are embedded and which they help to sustain. I recommend that the ADE find a new national director willing to take on these issues aggressively. I place special pressure on the MLA and the ADE here because they are the professional organizations I know best and have some direct responsibility to change, but the patterns in other disciplines are no better and often worse. In many respects, alas, the MLA is the most progressive disciplinary organization. Moreover, its national leaders inevitably feel considerable need to balance various constituencies against one another.

Thus real change, if it is to come, may also require mass action from below. Given the low priority most tenured faculty give to addressing our economic problems or confronting graduate student exploitation, it would be a mistake to rely on them. It is one thing to educate tenured faculty and put pressure on them, quite another to depend on them for either solutions or action. Thus I believe it is imperative for the unemployed to rise up and either transform the existing structures of professional disciplinary organizations or pull them down. Building strong organizations for job seekers, planning street theater and perhaps civil disobedience at annual meetings, might be places to start. Even if the more disruptive of these actions are not taken—since few people on the market, understandably enough, wish to risk their chance for a job by disrupting an annual convention—there is real educational value in debating the advisability of these sorts of direct actions. The threat to intervene in talks and cocktail parties could win concessions and help awaken faculty to conditions they now
choose to ignore. (Similarly, serious efforts to unionize graduate students on a
campus can win improved working conditions long before the unions themselves
are formally recognized.) In any case, a sympathetic MLA or AHA (American
Historical Association) or APA (American Psychological Association) president
might well, for example, be happy to grant time for a brief but effective symbolic
intervention at a public event, such as a presidential address. Such a project
might more easily gain faculty support. If we do not begin discussing such
options, we will never know what they are. Meanwhile, those who no longer
have anything to lose might ask how they can work together to awaken the
organizations that have abandoned them.

I have encountered annoyance at these suggestions from all quarters. Let me
answer the one reaction I take seriously—anger from the unemployed that I ask
them (rather than tenured faculty) to take the lead in promoting change.
Obviously some tenured faculty will speak out on these issues as I have, among
them my colleague Michael Bérubé, Stephen Watt at Indiana, and Robert
Holub at Berkeley. But too many tenured faculty respond to the job crisis by
wondering whether they can get through their careers without having to deal
with it. Of course everyone concerned should press their tenured colleagues to
act, but I would not count on them to do so. In any case, it is probably naive to
imagine that a mass movement for change will come from above rather than
below.

At the very least it is time for job seekers to work together to explore what
collective power they might have; choosing whether to exercise it is a separate
issue. At present, disciplinary organizations apparently consider job seekers a
powerless, temporary, and generally irrelevant constituency. They will either win
jobs and acquire different interests, or they will give up and disappear. National
officers consider it counterproductive to risk alienating permanent members
who pay full dues. Moral suasion alone apparently will not drive these organiza-
tions to do anything to inconvenience or discomfort permanent members.
These seem the only explanations for the extraordinary and consistent resistance
disciplinary organizations display toward even the most modest changes in their
practices—such as refusing to permit member departments to require writing
samples and dossiers with initial applications, until now a common and expen-
sive practice burdening job applicants. The perceived power relations have to be
altered. Job seekers have to become a constituency to be reckoned with, a
constituency dangerous to ignore. There is no other option.

I am glad there was a session or two at the MLA’s 1995 and 1996 annual
convention and an issue of MLA’s annual journal Profession devoted to the job
crisis, especially since the 1994 issue of Profession includes several good essays,
but there wasn’t much evidence of official interest in these topics in the organiza-
tion before then. Meanwhile, these business-as-usual responses look more like structures for representation and containment than responses to a crisis. To get some sense of what a professional organization can produce, compare the thorough and realistic social, political, and economic assessments in AAUP publications like *Academe* and *Footnotes* with the sometimes self-satisfied, patrician, condescending remarks in recent issues of the *MLA Newsletter*. Here is Patricia Meyer Spacks, in a fall 1994 “President’s Column,” commenting on the series of letters she received in response to her remarks in the previous issue:

Graduate students . . . preoccupied with their fear of unemployment . . . recorded personal horror stories, and they frequently communicated their rage—often rage directed at the MLA. . . . I felt grateful for all these letters and gratified by them, even the angry ones, because they implied willingness and effort to participate in a large conversation. . . . I will now bring to my own involvement in the discussion of academic unemployment and its consequences a consciousness informed by all the reactions, all the suggestions, I have encountered. Those who responded to my column will have at least indirect voices in determining the future course of the MLA.

So glad you have packaged your pain and sent it to me in letters, MLA’s president seems to say, I hope you are uplifted by this epistolary audience. How pleased we should all be that my consciousness is enhanced. Let us have a conversation about a profession that eats its young. The real problem, of course, is neither with a few leaders nor with the MLA, both of whom mirror their tenured constituencies. But we need MLA and other disciplinary organizations to lead not follow, to challenge their membership not pander to their most reactionary elements. Not quite ready to sing “Happy Days Are Here Again,” the MLA’s national staff contents itself with offstage renditions of “Keep Your Sunny Side Up.”

Yet if I did not think there were a good chance of shifting some of the organization’s resources and priorities away from traditional publication and toward political and social engagement with the practical issues confronting higher education, I would not be ending this essay as I am. And the MLA already does more than many other academic groups in terms of offering advice and gathering data, even if its data can be misleading. A job in Afro-American literature, offered every year for a decade without being filled, looks to a reader of the MLA’s reports like ten tenure-track jobs. Despite two decades of wondering how many people are actually on the market, we still have no mechanism for answering this question, though we know that less than half of new Ph.D.s
have found tenure-track jobs in most of the last twenty-five years and though a national survey of MLA members and job candidates could be attempted. Other disciplines need to do the same thing. A questionnaire at the front of the annual job list would be a start; designed to be returned by applicants and to elicit their personal histories, it would enable us to see for the first time how many people are actually on the market and how long they have been actively seeking a job. Dealing with these and other challenges means devoting money to them and not to other things. If people attending annual professional conventions only to be interviewed are to be excused from paying a registration fee, the rest of us will have to pay more; so be it. These are some of the things we must demand. For the gap between our disciplinary organizations’ present commitments and the social reality we face is wide and unacceptable.

We can begin to glimpse what is at stake by looking at the political economy of graduate training and instruction. The economic facts—for large-scale public universities—are astonishing. Consider just my own department, the English department at the University of Illinois, one of the campus units that makes heavy use of graduate students as instructors. In the 1994–95 academic year my department paid graduate students to teach about five hundred courses. Their starting salary was $2,500 per course; the average graduate student salary was $2,642 per course. A starting salary for a faculty member in English is about $9,250 per course; the average departmental faculty salary is $11,875 per course. Most graduate students and faculty have the same teaching load, two courses per semester or four courses per year. Ignoring the significant differential in benefit costs (graduate students receive none) and using the starting salaries for comparison, we can make a simple calculation. How much more would it cost to hire assistant professors to teach those five hundred courses? The answer: almost three and a half million dollars, which happens almost exactly to match the department’s existing budget for instructional personnel. So we would nearly need to double our annual personnel budget in order to transfer these courses to faculty members. If we base the same calculation on average graduate student and faculty wages, which provides a more realistic estimate of expenses over time, the annual cost difference comes to $4,616,500. Of course we could increase the teaching loads of the existing faculty—say to six courses a year—but that would give us the highest teaching load among peer institutions and still leave us with four hundred courses to staff. The conclusion is unambiguous: my department is completely dependent on cheap graduate student labor.

Now, is there any way to consider this a fair arrangement? Well, after three years of teaching, graduate students become rather experienced in the classroom, often more experienced than the young faculty we hire. New faculty of course have completed their dissertations, whereas advanced graduate students have
merely *almost* completed their dissertations, a difference often more symbolic than real. All in all, only academic politics and an entirely artificial hierarchy justifies the huge salary differential. Needless to say, the state of Illinois is not about to give us the extra four million dollars to hire more English professors. What underwrites the fragile ethics of this whole enterprise is the logic of apprenticeship—graduate students are in training to become higher-paid professors. But if there are no jobs the whole logic of apprenticeship collapses and graduate student teachers become exploited labor. As for the ethics of hiring part-time faculty? There the ruling concepts are market opportunity and fiscal expediency. Meanwhile, the injustices generate rage and self-loathing, contained by the ideology of professionalism. At stake in any effort to change this system is the entire complex of economic, social, and political forces operating on higher education.

Understanding that social reality, once again, will require a major education effort, for faculty members must be encouraged to look beyond their disciplines to recognize the broader forces shaping their future. Educating their membership is another key role for disciplinary organizations. For the emergent work patterns in academia replicate those in the culture at large. The simultaneous increase in unemployment and underemployment (part-time positions) characterizes many American industries. Increasing class size or teaching loads represent much the same sort of speedup and productivity pressure we see on assembly lines and among office workers. Shifting from tenure-track employees to disposable term-contract or part-time teachers saves paying benefits in academia in quite the same way as it does in a factory. Meanwhile, special benefits for corporate executives look much like the high salaries and postretirement deals worked out for college administrators.

While for industry generally this partly represents a return to working conditions that preceded unionization, for academia it is a real change. While hardly utopian working environments, modern universities have never in the past depended so heavily on disposable employees for their teaching staffs. Even clerical workers in some departments have long been considered employees to be nurtured—their skills to be developed, their performance to be rewarded over time—rather than temporary employees to be discarded the moment they would become eligible for benefits and long-term employment. But universities are now moving toward the broader pattern of work in America—the disposable employee with no security and no voice. The exploitation of many graduate teaching assistants—given less than 30 percent of the pay of a full-time faculty member for teaching the same number of courses, in a fake apprenticeship that no longer leads to a permanent job—is only one of the more obvious consequences. While it is unlikely either factory workers or university teachers will
soon see common cause in their situations, it is time at least that those of us in academia recognize the parallels and act accordingly.

What the MLA and other professional organizations should do is admit the nature and scale of the problem instead of relentlessly trying to put the best possible face on it, and call a moratorium on business as usual for a year. Stop devoting so much of the organization’s financial resources and staff time to its book publishing program for a year; if the books are viable, they should be issued by university presses. Cancel all annual conference sessions on literature, language, and theory for a year, and devote the conference instead to examining the state of the profession, the crisis in the job market, and the future of higher education in America. Consider this a call for just that action. Perhaps it would be the only annual MLA meeting in a decade the New York Times would not ridicule.

Of course, such a conference would require different organizing strategies, and it might take special effort to get people to attend it, though many tenured faculty have stopped attending their discipline’s annual conference anyway. My point is that the kind of debate that needs to take place cannot take place in the shadow of business as usual. If that means that the Edgar Allan Poe Sniffing Society and the Sons of Sir Walter Scott cannot hold their annual brunch and keepsake exchange at the convention, so be it. Again, I write on behalf of every job candidate to tell you the academic profession is sick and broken and in need of change. In the meantime, take Mao’s advice: dig tunnels deep, store grain everywhere.