CHAPTER 9

On the Permanent Crisis of Graduate Education

What form does science [Wissenschaft] take as a profession [Beruf] in the material sense of the word? In practical terms this amounts nowadays to the question: What is the situation of a graduate student who is intent on an academic career in the university?

Max Weber, "Science as Vocation"

Back where I come from we have universities, seats of great learning—where men go to become great thinkers. And when they come out, they think deep thoughts—and with no more brains than you have. . . . But! They have one thing you haven't got! A diploma!

The Wizard of Oz (1939)

MARKETS

In 1996, I published the first of two essays on graduate education, "Preprofessionalism: What Graduate Students Want," followed in 2000 by "The System of Graduate Education." In these essays I set out to analyze the way in which graduate education was transformed by the collapse of the job market for new PhDs. At the time, there were far fewer analyses of the job situation in print than today, and the field of "critical university studies" did not yet exist. Further, the realization that the job crisis was permanent was only slowly sinking in. The market for new PhDs had improved in the later 1980s but crashed again in the 90s. After a temporary rise with the turn of the century yielded to another slump, it was apparent that the decline was permanent. My essays were controversial, chiefly because they were taken

1. John Guillory, "Preprofessionalism: What Graduate Students Want," Profession (1996): 169-78; "The System of Graduate Education," PSRL 415 (2000): 1184-44. The reader should note that the present chapter is concerned with the condition of permanent crisis in the job market and the effects of that market on the culture of graduate education. There are many other problems confronting graduate education that will not be treated here.

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The "professional" view of doctoral training, common wisdom that pressed upon the season of applying for a job, the market was to improve the educational experience. In addition to having a lab book, candidates were advised to integrate their professional activity with that of their teaching. Graduate students might be professorial, even absurd; a job search in order to stand out from the many, the common wisdom required upon individual job applications in education as a whole. Unfortunately, graduate students did nothing to cross the competition for those generations of young people who from the beginning was only marked of their lives and years of earning power. The situation we inherited from the day, a permanent crisis.

Education of earlier decades, from the system that emerged in the process of admission to graduate school of new and larger graduate programs, and students encountered a field, where merit would supposedly determine the outcome. For women especially, the new order was a revolution; the gender distribution of the professoriate was transformed. Academic careers became more accessible for people of color as well, although at a painfully slower pace. Unfortunately, there were problems with the job market that undermined the equity conditions upon which the meritocratic principle depended. The old hierarchy of schools continued to dominate the hiring cycle, sorting candidates before their files were even read. Worse, universities took advantage of what looked in those years like a temporary downturn in the economy and a disequilibrium in the job market in order to impose a harsh economy on hiring, capping tenure-track positions by employing MAAs and "surplus" PhDs as adjunct or contingent faculty to fill curricular needs. The ratio of contingent to tenure-line employment began steadily to increase. When the number of PhDs produced by the graduate schools reached a plateau from which it did not appreciably decline thereafter, the buyer's market was able to

4. There were two components to the crisis: a turn to part-time labor by university administrations and a run of years in which the production of PhDs overshot the number of advertised tenure-track positions. The precise relation between these two developments is difficult to reconstruct. Alain Touraine, The Academic System in American Society (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 1974), has an interesting account of graduate education written in the early 1970s, setting out from the observation that "economic stagnation" and "reductions in government support for scientific research resulted in unemployment among science Ph.D.'s in 1970-71" (150). He conjectures that "over a long period, the demand for Ph.D.'s will probably be on the decrease after an initial period of rapid growth in the university population. As a result, the country will experience a considerable overproduction of the Ph.D.'s." (151) This is exactly what did happen, while William G. Bowen and Julie A. Sosa's famous prediction in Prospects for Faculty in the Arts and Sciences: A Study of Factors Affecting Demand and Supply, 1987 to 2012 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989) of expanded tenure-track hiring in the 1990s proved disastrously wrong. For a more recent account of what we know about the origins of the crisis, to which I am indebted throughout this essay, see David Laurence, "The Humanities: What Now? What Next?" http://bll.berkeley.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/The-Humanities_What_Now_What_Next.pdf. Laurence demonstrates that despite what we may think from the vantage point of doctoral programs, the growth of the non-tenure-track work force was not driven by overproduction of PhDs. The contingent corps consisted mostly of those holding MAAs. Reducing the size of the PhD-holding population won't have much of an effect on contingent hiring, and arguments for reducing the size of the graduate cohort will therefore have to be based on other considerations. For a longitudinal study of the job market, see David Laurence, "Demand for New Faculty Members, 1995-2016," Profession 2019, http://profession.mla.org/demand-for-new-faculty-members-1995-2016.

5. In order to avoid the awkwardness of "tenure/tenure track," I will refer to both categories inclusively as "tenure-line" or "tenure track."
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degree by revising the form of the dissertation, usually by substituting a collection of articles for the traditional monograph. Other proposals aim to enforce ethical standards, such aspressuring administrations to offer full funding for doctoral students at the level of a living wage, with teaching limited to what does not impede progress toward the degree. Yet the tactic that seemed most urgent in earlier decades—reducing the size of graduate programs—has become much less so, for reasons to be considered later.

These proposals seem reasonable to me, and yet they somehow falter when departments are faced with the task of implementation. The idea of a more streamlined dissertation, for example, has been discussed for decades, but it does not seem ever to advance beyond discussion. Why is this the case? On the one hand, it is obvious that professors have not given graduate students either models for an alternative to the monograph or encouragement to adopt this form. On the other hand, one wonders whether most graduate students continue to hold out hope for a tenure-track job and perhaps believe that an "alternative" dissertation will damage their prospects. Very powerful structural determinants must be at work, if reasonable courses of action seem in every case to falter. Cassuto and Weissbach puzzle over this situation: "Once we review the current attempts at doctoral reforms, it's difficult not to be discouraged. The defects of doctoral education have remained constant and have resisted any number of solutions" (99). I suggest that we have arrived at a moment in which solutions to the "mess" of graduate education address problems but not the problem. There are to be underlying conditions that account for the permanence of the crisis, for the inability of the academy to take actions that have been so long considered and so generally approved. This is the question I would like to explore in this chapter. I should say, however, that greater clarity about these structural conditions will not guarantee resolution of the crisis. My purpose in this chapter is rather clarity itself, as a condition for estab-

8. Both the Ford Foundation and the Mellon Foundation funded experimental programs, in which grants to individual graduate students were used to encourage shorter time to degree. Both experiments yielded disappointing results. On the Ford and Mellon experiments, see Cassuto, The Graduate School Mess, 170–76, and Cassuto and Weissbach, The New PhD, 32–43. A shorter dissertation was already proposed in Don Cameron Allen in The Ph.D. in English and American Literature as a means of speeding up the production of PhDs in response to the "crisis" of underproduction in the 1960s (115).

9. In addition to the question of the dissertation, Cassuto and Weissbach note that the problem of time to degree has fallen into the same rabbit hole: "We have been having the same arguments about time to degree for more than 60 years" (The New PhD, 274). See also Robert Weissbach, "The Liberal Arts at Work," in Lemon M. Hortin et al., eds., The Reinvented PhD, quoting a comment by David Diamond: "If everybody knew what needs to be done, why isn't anyone doing it?" (14).


11. The notion of a "job system" is not incorrect; in the sense that every social process has systemic aspects; what is problematic is rather the rejection of the concept of a job market. The job market belongs to the system of graduate education and to the system of professional employment. My argument in "The System of Graduate Education" set out from the observation that the systemic features of graduate education were the result in
academics who are anxious about their professional status because the very concept is a status insult. As I noted in chapter 1, professions aim to control as much as possible the market for their labor, and one way in which they do this is to present this labor as transcending market conditions and values. Professionals have never conceded that their services have a "price" in the same sense that a commodity has a price, but let us admit that this claim to transcend the market is an ideological gambit and that it does not always succeed.2

Bousquet, Nelson, and Watt also reject the idea that graduate schools "overproduce" Ph.Ds, along with the notion that the equilibrium of the market can be restored by restricting the labor supply—a strategy that is in fact how many professions historically have controlled the market for their labor. Bousquet calls this a "supply-side fantasy" and counters that universities "underproduce jobs." In the early years of the job crisis, departments were not yet schooled in this higher wisdom, and some did reduce the size of their incoming classes. It is difficult to tell at this distance what result those efforts had, but they were certainly not enough to bring the market into equilibrium for those seeking tenure-track jobs. This disequilibrium, however, is itself an effect of our point of view; if we were to aggregate all of the teaching jobs perennially available in the job market, something closer to an equilibrium of supply and demand comes into focus: of the total number of positions in any given year, some offer terms of professional employment, as defined by the tenure-track, academic freedom, and the concept of the "career." The remaining positions—the majority of positions—are defined by contingent terms. These are jobs, but not careers. They offer meager compensation and little hope of security or advancement. As administrators and departments discovered, both kinds of positions were readily filled by drawing from the same corps of job seekers, who possessed MA or PhDs. By virtue of contingent hiring, it must be admitted, universities were able to continue raising compensation for ladder faculty, which had traditionally been very low, as well as to reduce teaching loads further—both features the tenure-line professorate welcomed, part of the decentralized organization of graduate education in the United States. This system has no executive level, but it reproduces itself by the mechanism of mutual initiation, described in chapter 2 as "institutional isomorphism."2


14. See, for example, Heather Stich, "Institutional Proliferation in the Twentieth Century," Chronicle of Higher Education, November 28, 2010, https://www.chronicle.com/article/Institutional-Proliferation-in-the-20th-Century/. I too have described contingent academics as "proliferated" in "The System of Graduate Education," and any reservation applies to that use as well. I have generally preferred the term "contingent" to "ad hoc," partly in order to temper the rhetoric attached to the latter term, but also because the composition of the academic professoriate is extremely heterogeneous, a fact that complicates devising measures to address casuistry. On this subject, see Jeremy C. Young and Robert B. Townsend, "The Adjunct Problem: Is a Data Problem?" Chronicle of Higher Education, August 30, 2021, https://chronicle.com/article/the-adjunct-problem-is-a-data-problem/

15. See Zuberbier et al., Educating Scholars: "the employment experience of those who leave graduate school departs substantially from the stereotype of the unemployed or non-driving graduate-school dropout. These years after leaving school, their employment rate topped 96 percent, and most held professional or managerial jobs" (18). See also Mariel Nereil, Rebecca Assoumou, and Joseph Cerry, "So You Want to Become a Professor: Lessons from the PhDs-Ten Years Later Study?" In Paths to the Professoriate: Strategies for Enhancing the Preparation of Future Faculty, ed. Donald H. Wolff and Ann E. Austin (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004); and Mariel Nereil and Joseph Cerry, "From Rumors to Facts: Career Outcomes of English PhDs-Results from the PhDs-Ten Years Later Study" (1999), cited in Cassano and Weidman, The New PhD, 117-18.
that members of the noncredentialed working class do not and better prospects accordingly. To say this is not to diminish the conditions of precarity suffered by doctoral students in the event of an unsuccessful search for a tenure-track position; it is rather to insist on the difference between the kinds of poverty and social disruption our neoliberal order occasions. The job crisis of the university is a development in the history of professional labor; its relation to other sites of labor in the economy is more complex than is expressed by the concept of "proletarianization."

CREDENTIALS

Here we begin to touch ground, after a sea of confusion. The issue before us is not just another calamity of neoliberalism but the specific question of how teaching and scholarship in the humanities are valued, what constitutes the basis for the classification of this labor as professional. In this context, it is telling that the job crisis is worst in the humanities, though hardly confined to that division of the university system. Nor is the problem of valuing knowledge work confined to the university, which is one site of a much larger social struggle. There is an ongoing crisis of expertise in our society that parallels what is happening in higher education. The "death of expertise" manifested in climate change denial or vaccine skepticism has national and even global consequences, vastly more disruptive than the job crisis for PhDs." I want to insist, however, that the decline in the credibility of expertise in our society is related to the collapse of professional employment for our doctoral students in the humanities. These are two sites of the same struggle. The difference of the latter site is that the challenge to credentials in the humanities is coming from the university itself, as the main employer of humanities PhDs.

If the repudiation of expertise in general seems to emanate from an amorphous coalition of groups in contemporary society, what is happening in the university can be localized as a conflict between managerial and professional elites. This conflict has been underway for a very long time, less visible to the public by virtue of the fact that managerial elites also present themselves as professionals. Over the course of the university's development in the twentieth century, a managerial cadre—the university administration (specifically, its upper stratum)—has successfully wrested control over the conditions of work from the faculty, the corps of professional knowledge workers. The orientation of these two cadres diverges: the upper administration operates more like the managers of a business enterprise—hence the notion of "corporatisation." Rather than privatise profits from incomes, however, universities redirect resources in order to compete with each other for students and for prestige. Income streams for institutions of this sort have nowhere to go except back into the institution, as the means to further its growth and reputation; these become the aims of quasi-corporate management. University managers take advantage of whatever helps to accomplish these aims, including divisions within the faculty itself, such as that between the humanities and the sciences. The other professional schools, such as law, business, engineering, and medicine do not enter into this conflictual situation in the same way, and indeed, they are closer to the interests of the professional managers who run the university today.) The casualization of labor is more severe in the humanities disciplines because of the historical weakness of the humanities in relation to the sciences, but this weakness does not explain casualization, which occurs in the sciences as well.

The most portentous fact about the job situation in the humanities is that the PhDs who have been relegated to contingent positions possess the same credentials as those who have attained tenure-track jobs. The meaning of the job crisis is simply this: the credentials of humanities teachers and scholars have been devalued. But on what basis? It is not that administrators are judging the value of humanities scholarship adversely or that they are judging its content at all. They typically assess scholarship only with reference to the reputation of individual scholars and departments, in competition with other universities. The basis for devaluation of the credential is rather the connection between humanities disciplines and lower division teaching, such as composition, general education, language instruction, and introductory-level courses. By and large, the contract professoriate (whether full time or part time) has been relegated to this level of teach-


ments are the expensive ones, always measured by administrators against the economy of hiring contingent faculty. Not surprisingly, new categories of contingency have been introduced into faculty hiring, which now encroach upon the upper division, including contract faculty with the status of "lecturer" or (at my institution) "clinical professor." Sometimes temporary appointments for new PhDs are structured as "visiting professorships." These innovations give administrators the ability to deliver the curriculum at all levels while constraining the ranks of tenure-line faculty. Although it does not seem likely that tenure will disappear in the near future, the contraction of the tenured faculty is without question ongoing. It is only a question of the rate at which this contraction takes place, and whether there will in the future be a tipping point that fatally undermines departmental control over the constitution of its own faculty. What is at stake in this process ultimately is the question of who controls the reproduction of the professoriate.

Faculties in the sciences might seem to be insulated from the devaluation of their credentials, but this is not entirely so. They suffer from a less extreme version of the employment crisis: many of their graduates have been relegated to adjunct teaching as well or sentenced to a purgatory of serial "postdoc" appointments. The status of the sciences is not my concern in this chapter, but it is worth acknowledging the fact that all the core fields of the university—all of the "liberal arts"—suffer from the crisis of expertise that extends to the horizon of American society. Here I would only point out the ambiguous results of the relatively recent introduction of postdocs into the humanities, on the analogy of the sciences, as a way of improving the chances of new PhDs to secure a tenure-track position. Despite the good intentions of the strategy, the postdoc itself has come to function as a kind of contingent labor, helping humanities departments to deliver the curriculum, often upper-level courses, and thus exerting a downward pressure on tenure-track hiring. The very fact of the humanities postdoc is an artifact of the job crisis. If the decline in the value of the PhD degree for the humanities is a front in the much larger conflict over expertise, all university disciplines have a stake in a better resolution of this conflict than appears to be in the offering. The humanities, the social sciences, and the natural sciences are all in the situation of having to defend the social value of their knowledge and the credentials that certify their identity as professional knowledge workers.

Taking in the full scope of the problem, we see that the conditions I have remarked are nested within each other. The extramural "death of expertise" encloses the intramural crisis of the liberal arts disciplines, and within that corps, the humanities disciplines. The social value of these disciplines,
highly skilled or professional employment where credentials are required. In every society that we know of, there is a compression of personnel at the higher strata of skilled or professional jobs. The tasks performed by persons in these positions might be crucial for the society, but the number necessary for these tasks will always be limited. This fact has been difficult to accept in American society, where anyone can become president, but it makes obvious sense. How many lawyers does a society need? How many heart surgeons? How many aeronautical engineers? How many museum curators? How many teachers of literature? No profession is founded on the principle that a society can absorb an unlimited number of such professionals. Conversely, there are far more jobs in this and every other world human beings have created that are tedious, painful, and poorly compensated. Societies might never solve this problem, but let us acknowledge that the distribution of work is as much a matter of concern in a hypothetically just society as the distribution of resources. Our society favors an opposing principle, however, that seems to deny the real-world conditions of labor. This notion is expressed as "equality of opportunity," which does not describe a real-world condition but nonetheless has enormous effects in that world.

The number of those who seek the "opportunity" to succeed in highly skilled or professional jobs will in the ordinary course of things exceed the number of positions available. This fact is not tragic but an inevitable consequence of the hierarchical division of labor. At the upper end of the hierarchy, there is always a disequilibrium of supply and demand in the job market—a permanent crisis, although we always hope that the effects of this crisis will not be ruinous. The educational system exists in part for the purpose of preparing aspirants to compete for places in a hierarchy of labor. The job of college professor is one such place for which aspirants compete; like most other higher-end occupations, to be a college professor requires considerable knowledge in a disciplinary field, along with the credential that certifies possession of this knowledge.

The life of the professor of literature is regarded by many of our undergraduates as well worth the expenditure of effort, time, and money it takes to acquire the doctoral degree. This fact is confirmed whenever we speak to our students about applying for graduate school. They want to study lit-

23. For a discussion of this point, see Freidson, Professionalism Reborn, 160–61.
24. Those of us still committed to socialism might ask why tedious and unpleasant work might not be shared, with appropriate compensation for the exacting of pain and tedium. On the same principle, we might ask why pleasant and interesting work might not be similarly shared.
want the life of the college professor. In order to regard, for example, teaching in the classroom or working in the lab, the professor must have a professional aspiration—often a love of knowledge and the joy of teaching. This love is the driving force behind their work. However, the profession is also subject to the demands of higher education institutions. These institutions require professors to publish their research, mentor students, and maintain a high level of expertise. The pressure to perform can be overwhelming, leading to burnout and a lack of work-life balance.

Considerable delicacy: As we know from our own experiences, the demand for the PhD still receive dozens or hundreds of applications for each position. The competition is fierce, and the financial burden of paying off student loans can be overwhelming. This phenomenon of “credentialism” in this context refers to the increasing importance of credentials in society. In a narrower sense, credentialism refers to the increasing demand for credentials and their falling value. This demand for credentials is driven by the increasing number of students entering universities, but also by the rising costs of education. As a result, the demand for credentials has increased, leading to a decline in the value of those credentials.

The crisis in graduate education is not just about the financial burden of student loans. It is also about the decline in the prestige of graduate studies. The decline in the value of graduate degrees has led to a decline in the prestige of graduate education. This has led to a decline in the number of students seeking graduate degrees. The decline in the number of students seeking graduate degrees has led to a decline in the prestige of graduate education. The decline in the prestige of graduate education has led to a decline in the number of students seeking graduate degrees. This is a vicious cycle that is difficult to break.

In conclusion, the crisis in graduate education is a complex issue that involves the financial burden of student loans, the decline in the prestige of graduate education, and the increasing number of students entering universities. It is a crisis that requires a comprehensive solution that addresses all of these issues. Only then will we be able to ensure a healthy, vibrant graduate education system for future generations.
and all must have prizes.” This is a fantasy scenario, of course, as the attrition rate in the colleges and universities confirms. If we ever did achieve universal postsecondary education, it would have to have other purposes than credentialization.

Although access to undergraduate education was expanded slowly in the first half of the twentieth century, and very rapidly after World War II, the expansion of access to graduate education did not get underway seriously until the 1960s. This expansion was motivated less by an affirmation of access as a democratic principle than in response to a severe disequilibrium of supply and demand in the professoriate: There were not enough professors to teach the mass of college students. The rapid expansion of the undergraduate population forced the graduate schools to open their doors to new aspirants and to mint new professors as fast as they could. In fact, the graduate population expanded at a greater rate proportionally than the undergraduate population. It is difficult to register today how utterly transformed the system of higher education was, in consequence. Before the 1960s, nearly everyone who applied to graduate school was accepted. Nearly everyone looking for a tenure-track job found one. The notion of a “job crisis” meant the opposite of what it means today.

Nostalgia for these halcyon days is neither necessary nor warranted, because that system was in fact as selective as its successor. But it was a system of self-selection, an internalization of cultural values that held down to a very small number those persons who regarded the career of college professor as desirable at all. Let us remember that at the time, the job of college professor was characterized by high prestige and low pay, a combination that, along with other cultural factors, gave us a professoriate that was largely white, male, and upper middle class or higher.28 The growth of the undergraduate population and the response of the graduate schools transformed the social conditions for the reproduction of the professoriate. Graduate education would be very different in the future, beginning with a new relation between the BA and the PhD. As the BA came within reach of half the American population, it was inevitable that more undergraduates would find postgraduate degrees desirable, including the PhD in literature.

In the meantime, the credentials crisis remarked by Collins did not depress the desire for the BA. On the contrary, the BA came to seem all the more necessary for acceptable employment, the marker of a threshold below which no one wanted to fall. This fact may explain by a perverse logic why our undergraduates are not put off by our cautions about the job

market for new PhDs: a postgraduate degree must seem to them like the aspirational goal the BA once embodied. If this speculation has any validity, there may be more rationality in the desire for the PhD than is generally supposed, given that compression at the top for professional-managerial positions is universal, generating intense competition at every point of access to the next level, including the job search for those with a BA. Some students no doubt worry that even though their BA might gain them a remunerative job, it would be unexciting at best. Why not try, instead, for something more interesting: the career of college professor, a lifetime of reading, writing, and teaching about literature? They might be wrong in the calculation of their chances, but the possibility of a better working life than they would have with a BA makes the risk of graduate school seem worth taking.

Of course, this is speculation, because the train of thought I have been trying to follow is not necessarily something that is elicited in our conversations with students. They only tell us how much they want to study literature and, further, that they know all about the job market for new PhDs. Understanding the psychology of decision-making at this moment in their lives is not easy. We can only be sure of the fact that the BA is no longer enough for these students, that it no longer promises the career that most appeals to them. This failure of the BA in turn makes the PhD desirable and drives multitudes of students in quest of it. The fact that the job market at the end of this quest will function like a lottery, in which only a fraction of those who buy the ticket will win the prize, is a truth that for these students can be conceived abstractly but not internalized.

The liability of students to penetrate the weakness of the PhD is the result of their position in relation to their possible futures, a position in which probability is easily overruled by desire. I want to underscore here that the appeal of the PhD is a consequence of the decline in the value of the BA. Students do not see the PhD from the perspective of the professoriate, which has to contend with the fact that the proliferation of PhDs has driven the value of that credential down too. The PhD would ordinarily be sustained by the immemorial professional strategy of limiting its proliferation, but these are extraordinary times, and there are several reasons why the professoriate is ambivalent about reducing admission to graduate school. First, as I have suggested, the professoriate sees graduate school as an instrument of access, of opportunity. The professoriate would like to extend access to the PhD more or less for the same reason that drove the democratization of the BA. We tend to name this reason now by the term “diversity,” a concept that condenses a long history of oppression and exploitation and gestures toward the redress of that history. But there is a
very similar, and I will not attempt to reprise them here in any detail. Markovits and Sandel develop the earlier critique of meritocracy by the inventor of the term, Michael Young, in his satiric treatise, *The Rise of the Meritocracy.* Young summed up the object of his critique in the formula IQ + Effort = Genius. This was a mock Einsteinian formula for producing Einsteins. What Markovits and Sandel demonstrate with abundant evidence is that the American educational system has been, so to speak, thoroughly rigged by the efforts of the wealthy to ensure that their children are the ones who are passed on from one level to the next. "Equality of opportunity" is something that does not exist in the real world. Here is Markovits's summary statement: "American meritocracy has become precisely what it was invented to combat: a mechanism for the concentration and dynastic transmission of wealth, privilege, and caste across generations" (72). The distinguishing feature of this system is that its mode of transmission is no longer the inheritance of wealth but the intense preparation of the children of the wealthy for entry into the "best" schools, from preschool to the graduate and professional schools. The strategy for subverting meritocracy has been hugely successful, even though the educational system is nominally committed to establishing equality of opportunity. Among many statistical measures of the subversion of equity conditions is the fact that, as Markovits reports, "at Harvard and Yale, more students come from households in the top 1 percent of the income distribution than from the entire bottom half" (25).

I forgo here further summary of this thesis, which I take to be persuasively presented by Markovits and Sandel. The pertinence of the thesis for my argument is that it permits us to understand better the interaction between democratization of access and the judgment of merit that determines ultimately who enters the higher ranks of the professions. To put this simply, the educational system is organized by the antinomies of access and merit. What is called "meritocracy" is a spurious reconciliation of these two antinomic principles. Unfortunately, there is no moral algorithm of which I am aware that reconciles access and merit; there is no set of procedures that adjusts these principles to one another in such a way as to guarantee that access is not subverted or that merit is not a false honorific for the winners of a rigged game.

Markovits and Sandel confidently identify the cause of subversion as income and wealth inequality. There is no point in the course of anyone's
The incoherence and irrationality of this situation is worth remarking only in passing. What is more important is to recognize the ramifying effects of this systemic feature, beyond its immediate precincts. Students will always be driven by the need to demonstrate merit to seek new ways to do so. In the context of admission to doctoral programs, for example, one wonders whether those seeking admission have been compelled more and more to acquire an MA as a means of improving their chances. I have not been able to confirm empirically that this is so, but my experience of the last several decades is that almost all of the applicants to the doctoral program at my institution now hold an MA.\(^3\) These students do in fact have an advantage over those who do not have this degree: they know how graduate school works and can present themselves as already professionalized. They have recommendations that testify to their performance in graduate seminars. The systemic effects of this effort to demonstrate merit, however, are unintended: another layer of time, expense, and credentialization is interposed between the BA and the PhD. One might observe here a symmetry with the humanities position, as an item that brings additional merit to the job market. The “time to degree” increases with these additional layers, which also multiply points of application and multiply committees whose task it is to make judgments at these points. These structural innovations in graduate education would seem to be an instance of the “mess” into which it has fallen. Behind these and the other local deformations to which I have drawn attention is the ultimate fact of the compression of personnel at the top end of the professional hierarchy, the structural feature that is the condition for permanent crisis.

PROFESSIONS

The question of numbers has been at the center of this analysis, most conspicuously greater numbers of graduate students and job applicants and lesser numbers of jobs. The disparity between these numbers constitutes the condition of “crisis.” If we were to look at graduate education in the

31. On the earlier decline of the MA, see Cassuto, *The Graduate School Mess*, 44. Cassuto and Weltzbach, *The New PhD*, 144, condemn the use of the MA as an “audition” for doctoral study; they point out that, in MA programs are seldom supported, students who take the MA are adding a lot of educational debt in advance of the PhD. Later in their study Cassuto and Weltzbach argue for a rehabilitated terminal MA, which would have a broad spectrum of uses (216). Recently, the master’s degree has come in for a good deal of criticism because of its use as a “cash cow” by universities, see Kevin Carey, “The Great Master’s Degree Swindle,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, August 5, 2011, https://www.chronicle.com/article/The-Great-Masters-Degree-Swindle/
bers tell a different story: we would see a very
number of doctoral students than today. Students
would be relatively isolated from students in other
institutions, social media, or internet blogging to es-
con between students in far-flung institutions.
graduate student was highly variable, more or
less a student cohort, and above all, the interests
achers. By contrast, the reality of graduate edu-
cation of students constitutes a national and
students are connected with each other by all the
forms but also by new associational forms, such as
these new forms have transformed
graduate students into a distinct culture, which
g of this essay as a "semiautonomous profes-

I attempted to describe this culture, though
not at the time have a sense of the difference
the cultural life of graduate students, as this
thing into common use. None of us could fore-
pective the technology would be, both for so-
duate school in particular. I have no desire
tly, which is by many orders too
effects to characterize as good or bad. I re-
stions raised by my earlier essays on graduate
it again a description of the culture of graduate
collapsed job market and the emergence of a
ntes are "preprofessional" in the simple sense of
-track jobs, whether or not the term "prepro-
any other sense. From our later vantage, the
graduate students should or will engage in ac-
ose of their professors is moot. Most incom-
know quite a lot about professional activity in

earlier essays, I was most struck by what I saw as the
alization and politicization in graduate education.
inization" can be taken for granted for both the graduate
theme is discussed at length in chapters above, I have
e of professionalization.

literary study and want to engage immediately in these activities. In fact,
undergraduates were becoming much more informed about the profes-
sional aspects of graduate study already by the early 2000s. One graduate
student commentator on my earlier essay, Craig Fehrman, writing in 2009,
called attention to what he termed "pre-preprofessionalism," by which he
meant that many seniors applying to graduate school had thoroughly
internalized the norms of professionalism and approached the application
with the design of presenting themselves in this light.44 Graduate
school today, I suggest, involves a process of continuous professionaliza-
tion. This continuity of focus on professional life creates what I will call a
"culture of professionalization." The graduate seminar is only one site of
this cultural activity and perhaps not the most important one. Professional-
ization is different from "apprenticeship," a concept that graduate students
have vehemently rejected in recent years, partly in the context of unioniza-
tion, but more fundamentally, I suggest, because it does not capture their
sense of themselves as already professionals. Unlike apprenticeship, pro-
essionalization is not a means to the end of the degree or even of employ-
ment; it is an end in itself. Or rather, every moment of professional activity
implies the possibility of further "professional development."

Professionalization as an end in itself brings us back to the state of gradu-
education since the 1970s and the collapse of the job market. Graduate
education takes place under the sign of this collapse, the possibility or prob-
bility that the years a student spends in graduate study will not culminate
in a tenure-track appointment. The professional life of the graduate stu-
dent, however, cannot wait for a job that may never happen; it begins with
the first day of graduate school. It has a minimum duration in the number
of years students spend in the esophagus of graduate study. This is currently
anywhere from six to twelve years, but on average around nine. These are
years in which students live and act as professional scholars and teachers.
As I observed in "Preprofessionalism," students have an abbreviated form
of the professional career, which can be experienced as passing through
phases, having high points and low, and offering considerable satisfactions

33. Erik D. Curren, "No Openings at This Time: Job Market Collapse and Graduate
Education," Profession 1994 67–61. Curren was writing as a graduate student at the time.
34. Craig T. Fehrman, "Pre-Preprofessionalism: Rankings, Rewards, and the Graduate
Admissions Process," College Literature 36 (2009): 184–201. See also Jonathan Mul-
35. This phrase is intended to invoke Burton Blustein's The Culture of Professional-
ism: The Middle Class and the Development of Higher Education in America (New York:
transinstitutional, that it escapes the control of the graduate faculty of any one institution; hence my modifier, "semiautonomous." Further, I want to suggest that this semiautonomous professional sphere might model a version of literary study beyond the career of college professor. Currently, the graduate professional sphere is self-reproducing, but only within the confines of graduate programs, of individual institutions. Can we imagine such a sphere liberated from these institutions? Or perhaps, fostered and supported by the university but existing in its own space, self-reproducing in a public sphere. Graduate education in its semiautonomous form might then model a literary and intellectual culture that no longer needs the career of college professor as its only home, its only way to exist. It would no longer need a job market for its reproduction. Literary study would be dispersed among the professions.

Now, I am more than willing to admit that this is a view of graduate education that is, for the present, counterfactual, even fantastic. I am speaking only as yet of a model. But I would like to use this model as a frame of reference in order to advance our understanding of what has happened in consequence of the collapse of the job market, even to see in what I once regarded as a simulacrum of the literary profession something more like its transcendence. Or, I should add by way of qualification, its ideal transcendence. In order to assert the bigger claim, it will be necessary first, however, to make a very brief survey of what the culture of graduate education looks like now.

By any standard of comparison, graduate education is far more complexly organized than before its transformation in the 1970s. In addition to seminars—the foundational practice for reproducing the discipline—graduate school entails teaching, giving papers at conferences, participating in workshops, and writing for publication. In the end, there is the dissertation, but this is the task that is the most challenging, where students often founder, because it is the most solitary. Publication promises at least an indeterminate number of readers, and essays are often "workshopped" in advance of submission. Most dissertations will be read by only a handful of professors. Communal activity is dominant in graduate education over the scene of individual reading and writing, a fact that is not unproblematic and that possibly contributes to the long time to degree of graduate study. The sociability characterizing graduate school, it is worth adding, disappears when a candidate for a job accepts a tenure-track appointment. As busy as the professor's life can be, the occasions of communal activity are actually fewer.

Efforts have been made to compensate for the solitariness of thesis writing by the use of dissertation workshops, though I do not know how
of a bureaucratic nature faculty members do in the course of their days and nights or how little of it is of intellectual interest.

The narrowness of specializations is an old complaint about the academic professions, and it is more or less true, depending upon the intellectual habits of individual scholars. I am less interested in repeating the complaint than I am in observing the difference between the conditions of reading and writing for faculty and for graduate students. This difference is what makes it possible for the aggregate corps of graduate students to constitute a niche public for itself and a reading public for the professoriate and, further, to exercise a feedback function in the dissemination of scholarship. This function is quite important and explains, in my experience, the shrewdness graduate students demonstrate in their judgment of new scholarship. Their understanding of new work is often well ahead of their ability to bring their own writing to fruition and sometimes inhibits their writing by holding it to the high standard of recent publication. Their judgment can only be faulted on the grounds that it has too short a timeline, that it is too strained to the moment. The feedback loop between the faculty and graduate students is an ambiguous benefit for literary study. This loop tends to accelerate the turnover of movements and tendencies in the discipline, submitting scholarship to the demands of fashion. As a result, even scholarship that is relatively recent by historical standards gets retired very quickly and is largely forgotten.

The engagement of graduate students with what is current in literary criticism is strongly determined by the culture of professionalism; the temporary career is one that is necessarily speeded up. The desire to be current, to be of the moment, is retroactively determined by the job market, which will cut many students off from further participation in the semi-autonomous public sphere. This should trouble us greatly, because underpinning the enthusiasm for professional practices and rituals is genuine intellectuality. The question I would like to raise here is whether the culture of professionalism encourages this intellectuality to develop outside or beyond the professional sphere of the graduate school or, rather, whether the graduate faculty has succeeded in showing how these engagements might become permanent, even if graduate students do not go on to careers in the professoriate. It seems to me that a permanent engagement with literary study can only be achieved on the condition of an unequalled freedom of inquiry, by which I mean freedom from anxiety about what will look acceptable or desirable from the vantage of the job market (or more crudely, what is fashionable). For the faculty, unfortunately, the interest students express in their dissertation tends to be overly monitored, with one eye on the market. I would like to think that the devastation of the job market
out the organization of the profession, without the structure of graduate school? To ask this question is to put the intellectual seriousness of the literary disciplines to the test. Literary study in its disciplinary form obviously cannot be separated from the organizational structures of the university and the departments of which it is composed. But it is surely within the power of these departments to reconnect with former students and bring them into contact with graduate students currently in the system. To do so would be to enlarge, in small increments, the sphere of intellectuality by tapping the intellectual sociability in the corps of former graduate students. There is no reason why intellectual engagement with literature has to exist only in the form of a profession, however gratifying professional life may be, however abundantly scholarship has thrived within the academy. I gesture here to the realm of what Merve Emre calls the “paraliterary,” all those sites where literary study is cultivated outside the purview of graduate education. At these sites one might find long-standing projects such as the “medical humanities,” but the more promising locations in this context are less disciplinarily organized. These are sites (for the most part) of intellectual exchange on the internet, new versions of “little magazines,” such as n+1, or of journals such as The Point, as well as the now vast proliferation of blogs on cultural matters, some of which host high-level exchanges. Such sites disclose the widespread desire for an engagement with literature and culture that is more serious than the habits of mass consumption and that demands new genres and forms of discourse.

My gesture of support for outreach to our former graduate students—

40. Merve Emre, Paraliterary: The Making of Bad Readers in Postwar America (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017). For comments on humanities study outside the university in the postwar period, see Wellmon and Reiter, The Permanent Crisis, 247–49. Similar to the public constituted by our former graduate students is the one served by adult education (sometimes conducted under the rubric of “continuing studies”). This public includes former undergraduate majors but probably many others besides. My sense is that if we really care about the future of the discipline, adult education should be a much larger part of what we do. But this is a subject for another venue. My point here, which I would hope reinforces the arguments of other chapters in this book, is that the literary disciplines must figure out how to create a public that does not consist only of professors and graduate students.

41. I do not mention here “reading groups,” which have been around since the nineteenth century, but which are less organized and less “public” than internet venues. What is important for my purposes is the level of organization that is achieved in the niche public sphere: less than professional, but more than amateur. For a relevant discussion of the aims of The Point, see Len Gutkin’s interview with its editors, Jon Baskin and Rachel Wiseman, “The New Intellectuals and the Academy: A Conversation with The Point,” chronicle.com/newsletter/chronicledreview/2021-08-30. The editors discuss the origins of their journal in their unhappiness with graduate study.
some graduate programs have already been making efforts of this kind—as not offered as a solution to the crisis of the job market, only a reminder of the fact that our former students are everywhere and that they are certainly still interested in literature and in intellectual life broadly. The collapse of the job market has deformed graduate education by burdening students with enormous anxiety and by constraining their freedom of intellectual inquiry in response to the market. But it has also established the conditions for the transformation of graduate school into a semi-autonomous professional sphere. Insofar as this sphere transcends the organization of individual graduate programs, it has moved graduate education closer to a niche public sphere. Reconnecting our former students with our current students will strengthen the autonomy of this sphere, and if it does not resolve the calamity of the job market, it will at least reassure our students that the life of the mind can survive the crisis of the profession.

[CHAPTER 10]

Evaluating Scholarship in the Humanities

It is my personal opinion that Mr. Wittgenstein’s thesis is a work of genius; but, let that as it may, it is certainly well up to the standard required for the Cambridge degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

G. E. MOORE, READER’S REPORT ON WITTGENSTEIN’S Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus

SCENES OF EVALUATION

The evaluation of scholarship is a difficult subject to discuss as a matter of general principle or procedure. At this level of abstraction, discourse about evaluation becomes awkward, uneasy, inarticulate. The chronic institutional disadvantage of humanities disciplines in relation to the natural and social sciences exacerbates this difficulty. In recent decades, we have also had to acknowledge a very real crisis in scholarly publishing, evidenced by the collapse of some university presses and the reduction or elimination of the humanities line in others. In a widely cited letter to the literary professoriate of 2003, Stephen Greenblatt delivered a warning about the possibly dire consequences of this development for the future promotion or tenure of younger scholars. Although there does not seem to have been

1. Commentary on this subject is so extensive now as to require an annotated bibliography that would far exceed the length of this essay. For a representative statement see Abtin B. Kersten, ed., What’s Happened to the Humanities? (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997). For an account of the formation and development of humanities disciplines, see Lawrence Weyrs, “The Plural, Organized World of the Humanities,” in Gleason and Voss, The Organization of Knowledge in Modern America, 1860–1930. I wish to express my debt here to my colleagues Edward Sullivan, Robin Kelley, Mary Poovey, and Mary Louise Pratt, with whom I collaborated on a memorandum entitled “Assessing Achievement in the Humanities,” for use internally by New York University administrators in the context of tenure and promotion.