

## 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."<sup>1</sup> In those 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," *PMLA* 115 (2000): 1154–63. 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.

onal" view of doctoral training.<sup>2</sup> Common wisdom that pressed upon the season of applying for the buyer's market was to improve the attractive. In addition to having a book, candidates were advised to tie their professional activity with a record of excellence in teaching. Graduate students might be professionally intuitive, even absurd; a job requirement in order to stand out from

whole, the common wisdom re-creates demand upon individual job education as a whole. Unfortunately, graduate students did nothing to intensify the competition for those generations of young people who from the beginning was only marred by their lives and years of earning degrees professionally when the academic 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 suppos-

Its Time: The Panic over Early Professionalism, Lambert, "What [Does] Do [Woman] at Obscure Object of English Desire," Eisenstein and Ken Petri, "Working as We Live By," *Journal of the Midwest*; Jeffrey Williams, "Career Choices,"

the job market is more complex than the above. Walter Broughton and Williams, *Profession* (2001): 39–51, conducted the desire most often expressed is for a fit. What goes into the notion of "fit" is very specific to individual departments.

edly 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 early 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 MAs and "surplus" PhDs as adjunct or contingent faculty to fill curricular needs.<sup>4</sup> The ratio of contingent to tenure-line employment began steadily to increase.<sup>5</sup> 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 Ann Sosa's famous prediction in *Perspectives 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://blc.berkeley.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/The-Humanities\\_What\\_Now\\_What\\_Next.pdf](http://blc.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 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 MAs. 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."

meant by the “system of graduate education”—the decline of administration and faculty, and a redirection of resources away from these externalities came to the fore. An internal tendency of graduate education toward a surplus student population provided a context, even while the surplus labor of the faculty. At the same time, doctoral education more fiercely in the zero-sum game of an increasingly prevalent agenda in the academy exceeded preparation for the job market. I tried to describe those effects, and my contribution into what I will describe as the permanent crisis was the phenomenon I called

crises from my earlier work as a result of structural determinations that resulted in the inability to move beyond its crisis. In the history of literary study, which makes its crisis the concept of “permanent crisis”—but this is not altogether helpful in the relationship between the numbers of job openings and the number of graduates—has become a permanent dysfunction, and it should reproduce themselves. If we think of the purpose of doctoral education as an alternative purpose. Many scholars have proposed many reasonable ways to change the situation. Still, it is my impression that we manage graduate education in a way that is subject. I do not mean here to talk about “alt-ac” or “public humanities” or anything else, but the basic structure and the most part the same as they

globalization was remarked as a desideratum in *World and American Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995). I would, consequently, stop thinking of the person with a cultural degree. They are teachers, and public accountants” (104).

were four decades ago. So far as I can tell, there have been only two major structural changes in the system of graduate education. The first is the growth of the predoctoral MA, a reanimation of the MA degree after being abandoned by its earlier constituencies, as a result of which many students now seek the MA chiefly in order to improve their chances of admission to a doctoral program. The second is the emergence of the “postdoc” for humanities PhDs, which extends the period of the job search and sometimes does lead to a job. These new structural features of graduate education have systemic consequences I will consider later in this chapter.

It will not be my aim, let me underscore, to consider in any detail recent work on what Leonard Cassuto aptly calls “the graduate school mess.” I have great regard for the work that has been done in recent years on the problem of graduate education, including that of Cassuto in his earlier book (with the title just quoted), and his more recent study coauthored with Robert Weisbuch, *The New PhD: How to Build a Better Graduate Education*.<sup>7</sup> In addition to these and many other book-length studies, the last two decades have seen hundreds of articles and blogs. My sense in surveying this work is that something close to a consensus has emerged about courses of action that are within the authority of the professoriate. These include mentoring students with a view toward the diversity of career possibilities; career counseling that makes information about alternative careers available to doctoral students; establishing a “public humanities” curricular option that makes connections with nonacademic institutions such as libraries, foundations, and publishing houses, and reducing the time to

7. Some major statements: Leonard Cassuto, *The Graduate School Mess: What Caused It and How We Can Fix It* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015); Leonard Cassuto and Robert Weisbuch, *The New PhD: How to Build a Better Graduate Education* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2021); Leanne M. Horinko, Jordan M. Reed, and James M. Van Wyck, eds., *The Reimagined PhD: Navigating 21st Century Humanities Education* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2021); Kaitina L. Rogers, *Putting the Humanities PhD to Work: Thriving in and beyond the Classroom* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020); Gordon Hutner and Feisal G. Mohamed, *A New Deal for the Humanities: Liberal Arts and the Future of Public Higher Education* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2015); Kathleen Fitzpatrick, *Generous Thinking: A Radical Approach to Saving the University* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2019); Ronald G. Ehrenberg et al., *Educating Scholars: Doctoral Education in the Humanities* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010); Chris M. Golde and George E. Walker, eds., *Envisioning the Future of Doctoral Education: Preparing Stewards of the Discipline* (Stanford, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2006); Sidonie Smith, *Manifesto for the Humanities: Transforming Doctoral Education in Good Enough Times* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2015); George E. Walker et al., *The Formation of Scholars: Rethinking Doctoral Education for the Twenty-First Century* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2008).

degree by revising the form of the dissertation, usually by substituting a collection of articles for the traditional protomonograph. Other proposals aim to enforce ethical standards, such as pressuring 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. 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.<sup>8</sup> Very powerful structural determinants must be at work, if reasonable courses of action seem in every case to falter. Cassuto and Weisbuch 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” (91).<sup>9</sup> 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 have 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 Weisbuch, *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 Weisbuch 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 Weisbuch, “The Liberal Arts at Work,” in Leanne M. Horinko et al., eds., *The Reimagined PhD*, quoting a comment by David Damrosch: “If everybody knows what needs to be done, why isn’t anyone doing it?” (14).

lishing *honesty* and *transparency* in graduate education. These are values that can hardly be contested, but their absence immerses the professoriate in a miasma of bad faith.

We can point to an example of this bad faith in the emergence of the term “job system” in preference to “job market.” This circumlocution is typical of a certain failure of analysis that offers itself as ideological unmasking. I have and will continue to refer to a “job market” for professional occupations, on the assumption that when jobs are advertised and candidates apply for those jobs, we are in fact looking at a job market. Why is it difficult for academics to accept this fact? We have been instructed by Marc Bousquet in *How the University Works*, and by Cary Nelson and Stephen Watt in *Academic Keywords*, that the notion of a “job market” is a fraud, because the ratio of tenure-track jobs to the number of applicants for these jobs is “artificially” skewed.<sup>10</sup> As Nelson and Watt assert, “The supply of candidates has been artificially increased and the demand for full-time employees artificially depressed” (157). Such a notion implies that the relation between supply and demand in the labor market gravitates to a “natural” state of equilibrium; if there is a disequilibrium, it is no longer an economic matter but (as Nelson and Watt argue) “cultural and institutional” (157). Since when, however, has a disequilibrium of supply and demand ceased to be an *economic* problem? Are not such deviations from hypothetical norms what economists study? The notion that there is a natural state of equilibrium between supply and demand in any market whatsoever is as mystified as the medieval notion of the “natural price” for a commodity, which political economy in the early modern period dismissed in one of its inaugural moves.

We do not need to reinstate the labor theory of value (in the tradition of Smith and Marx) in order to acknowledge that all kinds of labor, including professional labor, enter a market in which labor is exchanged for compensation—a wage or a salary. It is unfortunate that the notion of the “job system” has taken hold in literary study, if not elsewhere in the academy, because it blinds us to a certain reality.<sup>11</sup> “Job market” is objectionable to

10. Marc Bousquet, *How the University Works: Higher Education and the Low-Wage Nation* (New York: New York University Press, 2008); Cary Nelson and Stephen Watt, *Academic Keywords: A Devil’s Dictionary for Higher Education* (New York: Routledge, 1999).

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.<sup>12</sup>

Bousquet, Nelson, and Watt also reject the idea that graduate schools “overproduce” PhDs, 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 MAs 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 professoriate 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 imitation, described in chapter 2 above as “institutional isomorphism.”

12. Louis Menand, *The Marketplace of Ideas: Reform and Resistance in the American University* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2010), notes “the belief, central to the academic’s professional self-conception, that the university does not operate like a marketplace” (16). For an account of the strategies professions have adopted to oppose the market, see Larson, *The Rise of Professionalism*, 40–63.

just as it welcomed an influx of graduate students into its seminars.<sup>13</sup> All of these “systemic” aspects of university employment work together in such a way as to make it difficult to alter any one aspect of the system, thus ensuring its perpetuation.

The notion that universities “underproduce” jobs, as the counterthesis to overproduction, tells us nothing about how the academic job market actually operates. Employers do not “produce” jobs in the same way that professional schools produce degree holders or that factories produce commodities. No employer is obliged to create jobs for all those who might wish to have them—except perhaps in Utopia. The sorting of jobs into two very different categories of employment exposes the threat implicit in the status insult of the “job market,” the prospect of what has sometimes been called “deprofessionalization,” or less accurately, “proletarianization.” The widespread embrace of the latter term makes the status insult apparent, but it does not identify the actual class position of contingent academic labor or the reality of its economic conditions.<sup>14</sup> We know that in fact most PhDs who do not attain tenure-track positions go on to get jobs in professional and managerial fields.<sup>15</sup> These PhDs possess symbolic and cultural capital

13. Richard Lewinton, “The Cold War and the Transformation of the Academy,” in *The Cold War and the University: Toward an Intellectual History of the Post-War Years*, ed. Richard Lewinton et al. (New York: New Press, 1997).

14. See, for example, Heather Steffen, “Intellectual Proletarians in the Twentieth Century,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, November 28, 2010, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/intellectual-proletarians-in-the-20th-century/>. I too have described contingent academics as “proletarianized” in “The System of Graduate Education,” and my reservation applies to that use as well. I have generally preferred the term “contingent” to “adjunct,” partly in order to temper the rhetoric attached to the latter term, but also because the composition of the adjunct professoriate is extremely heterogenous, a fact that complicates devising measures to address casualization. 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://www.chronicle.com/article/the-adjunct-problem-is-a-data-problem>.

15. See Ehrenberg et al., *Educating Scholars*: “The employment experience of those who leave graduate school departs substantially from the stereotype of the unemployed or taxi-driving graduate-school dropout. Three years after leaving school, their employment rate topped 96 percent, and most had professional or managerial jobs” (18). See also Merisi Nerad, Rebecca Aanerud, and Joseph Cerny, “So You Want to Become a Professor: Lessons from the PhDs—Ten Years Later Study,” in *Paths to the Professoriate: Strategies for Enriching the Preparation of Future Faculty*, ed. Donald H. Wulff and Ann E. Austin (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004); and Merisi Nerad and Joseph Cerny, “From Rumors to Facts: Career Outcomes of English Ph.D.s—Results from the Ph.D.s Ten Years Later Study” (1999), cited in Cassuto and Weisbuch, *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.<sup>16</sup> 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.<sup>17</sup> 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

The “Ten Years Later” survey found that job satisfaction among those who left academia was actually higher than among those who got academic jobs.

16. It seems to me morally imperative to acknowledge the difference between the conditions of precarity inflicted upon the adjunct professoriate and upon the many millions of people who work for less than a living wage in the United States and have little means to improve the conditions of their labor.

17. See Tom Nichols, *The Death of Expertise: The Campaign against Established Knowledge and Why It Matters* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

present themselves as professionals.<sup>18</sup> 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.<sup>19</sup> The orientation of these two cadres diverges: the upper administration operates more like the managers of a business enterprise—hence the notion of “corporatization.” Rather than privatize 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-

18. For the earlier history of the rise of managerial elites in business enterprise, see Alfred Chandler, *The Visible Hand: The Managerial Revolution in American Business* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1977); and Adolf A. Berle and Gardiner C. Means, *The Modern Corporation and Private Property* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1968).

19. See Benjamin Ginsberg, *The Fall of the Faculty: The Rise of the All-Administrative University and Why It Matters* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

aching is ceded to ladder faculty. The relative valuation of the disciplines is arch. Those disciplines more closely are at a disadvantage, which has been

manities disciplines have welcomed research professions by distancing. The growth of the contingent professoriate in relief from this teaching hazard. Ultimately, the relegation of the undergraduate curriculum to faculty, because it undermines the administration discounts the value of al job seekers terms of contingent or ke no distinction between MAs and ntial to the lower. Arguably, the MA employment, which fall below what can y teachers. These terms of employment by means of collective bargaining has to bargain from the baseline of redential.

the humanities is evident in the weak- nents, which have lost the right to : would cover lower-division teach- lls to the level of "essential services," ensated. The tenure-line humanities tion of parity with other disciplines, same time, it cannot simply disown ch it expresses an ambivalent sense er faculty slips into a tacit relation of Often the adjunct or part-time sector ut the collective participation of the g the disciplinary work that is essen- nd of the university.

ents is not wholly determined by its nd it continues to define the job de- gh not their number. These appoint-

hat exceptional case in the arrangement I er-division courses are usually greater than

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 offing. 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,

technical fields, is openly questioned by repudiated by large sectors of the public in this environment, but even the business, professional, and technical streams in the form both of enrollment (business degree!) and of donor contribution problem, the intransigence of the humanities is not surprising, even before the reduction of humanities disciplines in relation to its daunting complexity not dissuade from attempting to address the problem. The point is rather to recognize its true dimensions.

Repudiation of expertise are too common a social problem has a long timeline. I want to look more closely now, specifically to the PhD. Once we take it away (unless there has been no one guarantee that it will result in credentials, the PhD is a reservoir of value this value cannot be expressed precisely its value on its face. Professions of the credential is established in the fact that this fact establishes a baseline. Indeed, professions sometimes make more than the tasks that are later per-

educational credentials: the limited ones. This condition obtains for all

core and the rise of "business, engineering" Steven Brint, "The Rise of the 'Practical' *Changing American University* (Stanford, 1996). I take away from Hofstadter's fact does not in itself protect a society from the American educational creed itself needs further founded primarily upon a passion for the learning and culture for their own sakes, but the "benefits of education" (305). One imitation defined exclusively by credentialism is.

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.<sup>23</sup> 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.<sup>24</sup> 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 exaction 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 regard, for example, teaching in the native to their *professional* aspiration—age of secondary school teachers. Rais- siderable delicacy.<sup>25</sup> As we know from memory, the demand for the PhD re- s still receive dozens or hundreds of ap- occasions pride but also bewilderment. hose mortgages that led to the financial of the demand? There is a puzzling con- tent demand for the credential and its

phenomenon of “credentialism” in this e most general sense to the increasing edentials in society. In a narrower con- enomenon of “credential inflation,” the on of credentials and their falling value. xury commodities that are in high de- ple come to possess them. Demand ex- ie commodities; rarity is the other part. hat the BA became subject to “ creden- llowing World War II. Over the course enrollment among those of college age opulation in 1900 to nearly 50 percent vel at the fact that the jobs for which a cient now require a college degree, but mber of students entering universities ne decades after World War II, the pro- e of the credential in the job market, its Collins, in *The Credential Society*, writes a the later twentieth century. This cri- demand for college degrees, especially redentials as their best chance for up- come striking results of the crisis, most

*ment of English: Theory, Jobs, and the Future* : University Press, 1998): “In my experience, ach in secondary schools has been a little like ‘ement” (84).

*Society: An Historical Sociology of Education and* rsity Press, 2019), 191. See also the important l the Future of Universities,” in *The Future of*

conspicuously the fact that the implications of credential inflation were different for men and women. College enrollment for men declined, but women more than made up for this decline. Today, women are the majority of undergraduates. In the last several decades, the university has exploded with many new degrees and certificate programs, evidence perhaps of how urgently credentials are being sought that might function like the BA once did, as an indicator of *distinction*.<sup>27</sup> Yet the demand for the BA itself remains strong, despite the manifest decline in the credential’s value.

This fact alerts us to the curious dialectic between access to creden- tials and the value of credentials, their tendency to move simultaneously in opposite directions. This complication makes intervening into the sys- tem’s operation very difficult, though it helps us to understand why the professoriate eventually rejected attempts to resolve the job market crisis by reducing the size of graduate classes. Whether or not the professoriate understood the consequences of this decision, it chose the risk of creden- tial inflation in preference to limiting access. In this choice, the professo- riate acted to reinforce a long-standing historical tendency, which can be described as the *democratization* of the educational system. This unidirec- tionality of the system contrasts with higher education in Europe, which always has, and still does, restrict access to higher degrees with a sequence of examinations. Given the tendency of democratization, we might won- der if there is a terminus at some point in the future. Can we imagine a society in which everyone has a BA? What would the credential mean in that event? As the Dodo says in *Alice in Wonderland*, “Everybody has won,

*the City of Intellect: The Changing American University*, ed. Stephen Brint (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), 23–46. Steven Brint, *In an Age of Experts: The Chang- ing Role of Professionals in Politics and Public Life* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), 42, remarks on the “glut” of “college-educated labor” beginning in 1969 that resulted in falling pay, especially for those with humanities and social science de- grees. The failure of the wage premium for BAs presaged a decline in the wage premium of the PhD, but mainly for those who were not hired to the tenure-track. It is difficult not to see the compensation of tenure-line faculty as sustained in part by a transfer of sav- ings from the hiring of contingent faculty. The complication here would be explaining compensation for faculty in the four-year colleges, where there is little or less reliance on contingent faculty. On the always tricky finances of universities, see the studies by Christopher Newfield, *The Great Mistake: How We Wrecked Public Universities and How We Can Fix Them* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016), and *Unmaking the Public University: The Forty Year Assault on the Middle Class* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008). Newfield’s account of how money is transferred from humani- ties disciplines to other sectors of the university is relevant here.

27. On the subject of degree proliferation, see John Marx and Mark Garrett Cooper, “Curricular Innovation and the Degree-Program Explosion,” *Profession 2020*, <https://profession.mla.org/curricular-innovation-and-the-degree-program-explosion/>.

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.<sup>28</sup> 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

28. When I was an assistant professor at Yale in the 1980s, there were still "dollar-a-year" men on the faculty, professors who were too wealthy to bother taking a salary.

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 inability 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

notive, which I have also noted, the desire to use graduate seminars as vehicles for research, not just for one's work. This is not an insignificant detail, but it has limited a field of dissemination. Given this, it is hardly surprising that the professoriate is discredited, and graduate school as a means of propping up the system is essential.

The cost of increasing access, a price that might be paid in the future for payment. The graduate student must arrive at the job market for years to come. At the professoriate by surprise in the 1970s, with PhDs that was increasingly difficult to retrain. When the timeline for confronting the consequences ends out for six to ten years, these decisions they are less subject to rational planning. In the sciences in our decentralized system of higher education, like adjustments of a systemic nature, local decisions are reactive and chaotic.

It is time to step back from the site of local decision-making and to look at the job market at the upper end of the hierarchy. The most conspicuous feature of this market is the lack of competitors for the highest positions than the market. A state of disequilibrium has been justified by a lack of alternatives. To describe the actual operation of the system is to refer here to the concept of "meritocracy," the system that justifies the American educational system as "equality of opportunity" as its foundational principle for fair outcomes. When the university opened its doors to so many young people, its aim was to provide equal opportunity. (I set to one side here the mass education, the cultivation of an educated citizenry, supposedly blind to all difference, whether defined by race, class, or ancestry, etc. The history of college and university reveals how far this ideal is from the reality. It has come under severe critique by two scholars, Robert K. Merton, in *Meritocracy Trap*, and Michael Sandel, in *The Tyranny of Merit*. Scholars perched at the top of the educational hierarchy are perceived as such.<sup>29</sup> The argument of these books is

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*.<sup>30</sup> 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

2019), and Michael Sandel, *The Tyranny of Merit: What's Become of the Common Good?* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2020).

30. Michael Young, *The Rise of the Meritocracy* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1958; reprint, London: Routledge, 2017).

*Meritocracy Trap: How America's Foundational Myth Became a Class, and Devours the Elite* (New York: Penguin,

educational experience when there is actual equality of opportunity. The reality of our meritocratic system is that some children begin to compete for admission to "good" schools from the very first schools they attend and never stop competing thereafter. My concern is with the system at its upper end, but my larger point is worth reiterating: the job crisis in the humanities is enmeshed in the contradictions that afflict the educational system as a whole. Democratization of education and the acquisition of credentials presuppose conflicting principles. The conflict of these principles is always on the point of becoming a "crisis" in the oldest sense of the term, a moment in the narrative of an individual's life suspended between better or worse outcomes. In the trajectory that aims at the job of college professor, these moments are (1) admission to a college or university, (2) admission to graduate school, and (3) application for a tenure-track position. Very rigorous procedures of judgment are exercised at these portals of entry, the purpose of which is both to deny access (to some) and to grant it (to others). Great numbers of students stand on the near side of these portals; only a fraction will be admitted to the far side.

The ineluctable fact of the necessity for judgment is troubling for those who want to affirm the nobler purpose of education as an agency of access, of democratization. The professoriate typically oscillates between the two principles of merit and access, depending on where it stands in relation to the portal of access. On the near side, professors want to make the best case for as many of their students as possible. The temptation on this near side of judgment is to inflate the performance of students, a pressure that is hard to resist. The result is "grade inflation," which is nothing other than credentials inflation writ small. On the far side of judgment, admissions committees try to discern the reality behind inflated credentials, not always an easy task. What is the meaning of this game? We are looking here directly at the contradiction between access and merit, the collision of opposing values. The same ritual is repeated for students applying to graduate school and for candidates approaching the job market. For students doing graduate course work, grades are inflated so as to position them advantageously for the market. On the other side of the portal, inside hiring committees, faculty members try to penetrate the illusory equality of candidates, their seemingly uniform excellence. For the candidates, paradoxically, the effort of their teachers to multiply access by inflating credentials creates an additional burden: they must work very hard to overcome the illusory equality of grades, as well as the seeming uniformity of their teachers' letters of recommendation. Their task is to demonstrate merit, which is only minimally certified by a slate of perfect grades or enthusiastic recommendations. Merit means distinction, not uniformity.

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.<sup>31</sup> 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 postdoc, 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 Weisbuch, *The New PhD*, 148, condemn the use of the MA as an "audition" for doctoral study; they point out that, as 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 Weisbuch argue for a rehabilitated terminal MA, which would have a broad spectrum of uses (284). 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 Carrey, "The Great Master's-Degree Swindle," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, August 5, 2021, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/the-great-masters-degree-swindle>.

bers tell a different story: we would see a very different number of doctoral students than today. Students would be relatively isolated from students in other settings, social media, or internet blogging to establish connection between students in far-flung institutions. The graduate student was highly variable, more or less distinguishing features of one's graduate program, one's student cohort, and above all, the interests of the teachers. By contrast, the reality of graduate education today is that the socialization of students constitutes a national and global culture. Students are connected with each other by all the traditional means but also by new associational forms, such as professional associations. These new forms have transformed the graduate students into a distinct *culture*, which is the subject of this essay as a "semiautonomous profes-

I attempted to describe this culture, though I did not at the time have a sense of the difference between the cultural life of graduate students, as this has been coming into common use. None of us could foresee the formative technology would be, both for socialization in graduate school in particular. I have no desire to see the technology itself, which is by many orders of magnitude more powerful than its effects to characterize as good or bad. I return to the questions raised by my earlier essays on graduate education with again a description of the culture of graduate education in the collapsed job market and the emergence of a new culture of graduate students.

Students are "preprofessional" in the simple sense of the term, as in pre-track jobs, whether or not the term "preprofessional" has any other sense. From our later vantage, the question of whether graduate students should or will engage in academic work whose purpose of their professors is moot. Most income-earning students know quite a lot about professional activity in

In my earlier essays, I was most struck by what I saw as the increasing socialization and politicization in graduate education. The "culture of professionalization" can be taken for granted for both the graduate student and the theme is discussed at length in chapters above, I have a sense of professionalization.

literary study and want to engage immediately in these activities.<sup>33</sup> In fact, undergraduates were becoming much more informed about the professional aspects of graduate study already by the early 2000s. One graduate student commentator on my earlier essay, Craig Ferhman, 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 process with the design of presenting themselves in this light.<sup>34</sup> Graduate school today, I suggest, involves a process of *continuous* professionalization. This continuity of focus on professional life creates what I will call a "culture of professionalization."<sup>35</sup> The graduate seminar is only one site of this cultural activity and perhaps not the most important one. Professionalization is different from "apprenticeship," a concept that graduate students have vehemently rejected in recent years, partly in the context of unionization, but more fundamentally, I suggest, because it does not capture their sense of themselves as *already* professionals. Unlike apprenticeship, professionalization is not a means to the end of the degree or even of employment; 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 graduate education since the 1970s and the collapse of the job market. Graduate education takes place under the sign of this collapse, the possibility or probability that the years a student spends in graduate study will not culminate in a tenure-track appointment. The professional life of the graduate student, 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 ecosystem of graduate study. This is currently anywhere from six to twelve years, but on average around nine. These are the 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 Mulrooney, "Acting like a Graduate Student," *Profession* 1999: 258–67.

35. This phrase is intended to invoke Burton Bledstein's *The Culture of Professionalism: The Middle Class and the Development of Higher Education in America* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1976).



crisis of the market that will determine whether it will indefinitely or will end. The satisfaction of students are for this reason a disincentive, even though the longer students take to obtain tenure-track employment.<sup>36</sup>

Graduate student is shaped in many ways by its temporal precipice. I suspect that the force of its cultural force if graduate students; it might even lapse into a version of the same. Graduate students must hold two versions of their temporary careers, first that of getting the job, and second, that gradually all there is to "my" career in literary studies are suppositional, of course. They are of graduate study, not from assumption. A larger point I want to make is this: that of the job market, generations of graduate students, a semiautonomous profession into and eventually leave this profession, and rewarding enough, to survive the conditions. By virtue of the graduate population of graduate study, and the ease of coming to a semiautonomous professional sphere through workshops and reading groups and the drawing of students from different schools, the institution is another site of this collective contingent form of academic labor is reported from neighboring populations of students are made possible to some extent by the technology, but the technology is

In chapter, I want to consider briefly what the literary professional sphere means, what it is, and if prematurely broaching my hypothesis that this sphere of intellectual activity is

Others: "Students who finish their degrees in the market, and are no more likely to get tenure-track positions. However, PhDs in the humanities (unlike those in the sciences) are more likely to be employed after seven years: those who finished in the sciences are faster completers to obtain tenure-track

transinstitutional, that it escapes the control of the graduate faculty of any one institution; hence my qualifier, "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

effective this has been for students. Progress toward the degree is still often halted at this stage. I come away from my very brief overview of the components of graduate school life with the impression that among the array of sociable activities, the graduate seminar has declined in importance. Giving conference papers and participating in reading workshops are more important. Publishing articles falls somewhere in between—crucial for the job market but not as difficult or alienating a labor as the dissertation. Finally, let us recall that conferences and publication were conspicuously absent from graduate education before the 1970s. At that time, graduate study centered around the dyad of dissertation advisor and advisee, a relationship that could be generative but that had no exit if it failed.

From the perspective of the faculty, the seminar remains the central practice of graduate education, at least equal to, and possibly greater in importance than directing the doctoral thesis. Seminars involve far more time than dissertation advising. The divergence between the experience here of students and faculty is important, but it is difficult to determine the degree of its importance. My sense is that this divergence is a measure of the "semiautonomy" of the graduate sphere. Students are advised well or badly by their professors, but with conferences, workshops, and publication, students are much more in their own social space than in seminars, much more dependent on their peers for affirmation and intellectual exchange. Their interactions with their peers are the condition, and indeed the point, of these alternative forms of exchange. At its most complex and interinstitutional, this collaborative realm of activity functions as a niche public sphere. Although these associational forms are often supported by department funds, their organization seldom requires direction or even much involvement on the part of the faculty.

Professors are often asked to give plenary lectures at graduate student conferences, but this site of participation again looks different from the faculty point of view. For the professors, the graduate student corps functions as a public *for* the professoriate. This is also their role in the seminar, as the scene of a kind of beta testing for faculty research. In lectures and seminars, graduate students are a *first public* for professors, in advance of publication. Students also disseminate recent faculty research, in which they are keenly interested. Their engagement with new work is wider than that of the faculty, who are comparatively more specialized and who are likely to read more narrowly in their fields. The conditions of intellectual work for faculty are cluttered with tasks that constrain reading that ventures too far from subjects of research. Much of this reading, of course, is work by graduate students themselves: seminar papers, dissertation chapters, essays for submission to journals. I need not detail how much other reading

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 attuned 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 professionalization; 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 underneath the enthusiasm for professional practices and rituals is genuine intellectuality. The question I would like to raise here is whether the culture of professionalization 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 unqualified *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 dissertations tends to be overly monitored, with one eye on the market. I would like to think that the devastation of the job market

ursue whatever most interests them, whether responsive to the perceived demands of the market. I mention in chapter 2 above, but I want to advance this position. There are two ways to relate to the job: to give up to its Sauron-like surveillance or to ignore it. In the latter case, better dissertations would result, I think. And in any case, I do not expect that my students will be taken seriously. What I want to propose more is the temporary career of graduate students to whom they have after graduate school, if circumstances permit, a tenure-track job. I argued in another venue (at the University of Chicago) that graduate students need to be apprised of alternatives to the career of college professor at the University of Chicago.<sup>37</sup> Only such honesty and transparency, at the beginning of the first semester, has any chance of preventing the bitterness of disappointed expectations, so vividly depicted in Christine Smallwood's recent novel, *Life of the Mind*, which offers a powerfully disillusioned account of the graduate student companion, adjunct teaching. Its protagonist struggles mightily to sustain "the life of the mind" but then loses hope for her success.<sup>38</sup>

LA paper that the best way to accomplish this is to tell the students to as many alumni of the system as possible to ask them about their careers after graduate school. We know, we know, did not get tenure-track jobs but are now employed in nonacademic work; many are now employed in nonacademic work and return to tell us what they got from graduate school. Many of these former students do not return to graduate school, whatever the benefit of their working life. But to the graduate schools they have disappeared from the face of the earth. This is a waste, the loss of considerable talent.<sup>39</sup>

to maintain a relation to literary study with-

published essay, see Leonard Cassuto and Robert Weis-

*Life of the Mind* (London: Hogarth, 2021).

students are unknown to us is not to deny that many are in other fields. But to the literary professoriate, they are like the *arch*, whose fine spirit "spent itself in channels which

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.<sup>40</sup> 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.<sup>41</sup> 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/chroniclereview/2021-08-30](https://chronicle.com/newsletter/chroniclereview/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—is 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 semiautonomous 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.

## Evaluating Scholarship in the Humanities

It is my personal opinion that Mr Wittgenstein's thesis is a work of genius; but, be 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.<sup>1</sup> 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 2002, Stephen Greenblatt delivered a warning about the possibly dire consequences of this development for the future promotion or tenure of younger scholars.<sup>2</sup> 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 Alvin B. Kernan, 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 Veysey, "The Plural, Organized World of the Humanities," in Oleson and Voss, *The Organization of Knowledge in Modern America, 1860–1920*. 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.

2. Stephen Greenblatt. "A Special Letter." May 28, 2002, April 27, 2005, [http://www.mla.org/scholarly\\_pub](http://www.mla.org/scholarly_pub). See also MLA Ad Hoc Committee on the Future of Scholarly