

(incorrectly) as expressing an “antiprofessional” view of doctoral training.<sup>2</sup> My argument seemed to contradict the common wisdom that pressed upon new PhDs and their advisors as they approached the season of applying for jobs. To them, the obvious response to a buyer’s market was to improve the quality of the product, to make it more attractive. In addition to having a completed dissertation that looked like a book, candidates were advised to have publications, to be able to demonstrate their professional activity with conference presentations, and to have a record of excellence in teaching. From this perspective, the notion that graduate students might be professionalized too early or too much was counterintuitive, even absurd; a job candidate needed *more professional achievement* in order to stand out from the mass of candidates.<sup>3</sup>

From the vantage of the system as a whole, the common wisdom resulted in unintended consequences. Every demand upon individual job candidates was a demand upon graduate education as a whole. Unfortunately, ramping up the professionalization of graduate students did nothing to increase the number of jobs, only to intensify the competition for those jobs. The result was untold anguish, generations of young people who worked very hard to achieve a goal that from the beginning was only marginally within their grasp, who lost years of their lives and years of earning power and who had to reinvent themselves professionally when the academic job did not materialize. This is the situation we inherited from the collapse of the job market and live with today, a permanent crisis.

And yet, looking back on graduate education of earlier decades, from the 1960s and before, it is indisputable that the system that emerged in the 1970s was fairer than its predecessor. The process of admission to graduate school was democratized with the creation of new and larger graduate programs. The “old boy” network was dismantled, and students encountered a job market that was a more level playing field, where merit would suppos-

2. A sampling: Cary Nelson, “No Wine before Its Time: The Panic over Early Professionalization,” *Profession* (2000): 157–63; Gregg Lambert, “What [Does] Do [Woman] Graduate Students Want? John Guillory and That Obscure Object of English Desire,” *Minnesota Review* 52–53 (2001): 249–62; Paul Eisenstein and Ken Petri, “Working through Professional Fantasy: Changing the Myths We Live By,” *Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association* 31 (1998): 45–64; Jeffrey Williams, “Career Choices,” *Works and Days* 41–42 (2003): 283–300.

3. The question of what actually succeeds in the job market is more complex than is implied by the list of professional achievements above. Walter Broughton and William Conlogue, “What Search Committees Want,” *Profession* (2001): 39–51, conducted a survey of hiring committees and found that the desire most often expressed is for a “fit” between the candidate and the department. What goes into the notion of “fit” is not obvious but probably involves desiderata very specific to individual departments.

reproduce itself indefinitely. This is what I meant by the “system of graduate education.”

Certain externalities drove the cyclical operation of this system—the defunding of higher education by the states, the growth of administration and ongoing “corporatization” of the university, and a redirection of resources toward competition between schools—but these externalities came to mesh like a smooth set of gears with the internal tendency of graduate education itself. The growth of the doctoral student population provided desirable graduate teaching for many faculty, even while the surplus labor pool of PhDs fed the ranks of “casualized” faculty. At the same time, doctoral students were driven to compete ever more fiercely in the zero-sum market. “Professionalization” became an increasingly prevalent agenda in graduate programs, with effects that far exceeded preparation for the job market.<sup>6</sup> The first of my two essays attempted to describe those effects, inasmuch as they transformed graduate education into what I will describe as a semiautonomous professional sphere. This was the phenomenon I called “preprofessionalism.”

In this chapter, I recover some hypotheses from my earlier work as a point of departure for exploring the structural determinations that resulted in the paralysis of the graduate system, its inability to move beyond its crisis. This paralysis, of course, is not restricted to literary study, which makes its remedy all the more difficult to imagine. The concept of “permanent crisis” names the situation with seeming accuracy—but this is not altogether helpful. If we are to understand why the disparity between the numbers of job applicants and the number of jobs has become a permanent dysfunction, we need a theory of how professional fields *should* reproduce themselves. If the reproduction of the professoriate is *not* the purpose of doctoral education, then we should have a notion of an alternative purpose. Many scholars have been working on this problem and have proposed many reasonable and practical courses of action to ameliorate the situation. Still, it is my impression that very little has changed in how we manage graduate education since the time in which I first addressed this subject. I do not mean here to slight the efforts that go by the name of “alt-ac” or “public humanities” or any number of such measures. What I mean is that the basic structure and components of graduate education are for the most part the same as they

6. The turn of the professoriate to professionalization was remarked as a desideratum by Don Cameron Allen in *The Ph.D. in English and American Literature* (New York: Holt, Rhinehart, and Winston, 1968): “We should, consequently, stop thinking of the Ph.D. in American and English Literature as a person with a cultural degree. They are as professional professionals as physicians, engineers, and public accountants” (104).

ing, while upper-level and graduate teaching is ceded to ladder faculty. The underlying determinant in the comparative valuation of the disciplines is the relation between teaching and research. Those disciplines more closely identified with the teaching function are at a disadvantage, which has been impossible thus far to overcome.

One result of this legacy is that humanities disciplines have welcomed opportunities to assert their identity as research professions by distancing themselves from lower-division teaching. The growth of the contingent faculty has an upside for the tenure-line professoriate in relief from this teaching, an arrangement that risks moral hazard. Ultimately, the relegation of contingent faculty to the first two years of the undergraduate curriculum has been a devil's bargain for humanities faculty, because it undermines the PhD as a credential. The university administration discounts the value of the PhD whenever it offers postdoctoral job seekers terms of contingent or adjunct employment. These terms make no distinction between MAs and PhDs, thus reducing the higher credential to the lower. Arguably, the MA too is devalued by these terms of employment, which fall below what can reasonably be demanded for university teachers. These terms of employment have only successfully been upgraded by means of collective bargaining. Yet this highly trained professoriate has to bargain from the baseline of an absurdly minimal valuation of the credential.

The devaluation of credentials in the humanities is evident in the weakened position of humanities departments, which have lost the right to make tenure-track appointments that would cover lower-division teaching.<sup>20</sup> Teaching in the lower division falls to the level of "essential services," which in our society are poorly compensated. The tenure-line humanities faculty is compensated on the assumption of parity with other disciplines, because it is a research faculty. At the same time, it cannot simply disown the lower division, in relation to which it expresses an ambivalent sense of responsibility. In this way, the ladder faculty slips into a tacit relation of exploitation to the contingent corps. Often the adjunct or part-time sector of this corps is hired and fired without the collective participation of the tenure-line faculty, further derogating the disciplinary work that is essential to the mission of the humanities and of the university.

The status of humanities departments is not wholly determined by its relation to lower-division teaching, and it continues to define the job descriptions of tenure-track hires, though not their number. These appoint-

20. The English department is a somewhat exceptional case in the arrangement I describe, because its responsibilities for lower-division courses are usually greater than other departments.

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as opposed to the professional and technical fields, is openly questioned by political operatives on the right and repudiated by large sectors of the public. The humanities survive precariously in this environment, but even the sciences struggle in comparison to the business, professional, and technical schools that deliver reliable income streams in the form both of enrollments (consider the undergraduate business degree!) and of donor contributions.<sup>21</sup> Given the true scope of the problem, the intransigence of the employment crisis in literature departments is not surprising, even before we factor in the weaker inherited position of humanities disciplines in relation to the sciences. I present this situation in its daunting complexity not in order to discourage the literary professoriate from attempting to address the employment issue, much less to excuse inaction. The point is rather to have an accurate picture of the problem in its true dimensions.

The causes and occasions of the repudiation of expertise are too complex to follow up here in detail. This social problem has a long timeline as well as a broad effect in our society.<sup>22</sup> I want to look more closely now at the concept of *credentials*, with reference specifically to the PhD. Once this credential is awarded, no one can take it away (unless there has been fraud in its acquisition), but neither can anyone guarantee that it will result in professional employment. Like all credentials, the PhD is a reservoir of *credit*, of belief in its value, even though this value cannot be expressed precisely in the way that currency announces its value on its face. Professions have always understood that the value of the credential is established in part because it is difficult to acquire and that this fact establishes a baseline for assessing the credential's value. Indeed, professions sometimes make the credential more difficult to acquire than the tasks that are later performed with it.

A further assumption inheres in educational credentials: the limited social need for credentialed occupations. This condition obtains for all

21. On the contraction of the liberal arts core and the rise of "business, engineering, computer science" and related subjects, see Steven Brint, "The Rise of the 'Practical Arts,'" in *The Future of the City of Intellect: The Changing American University* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), 232–35.

22. It is customary in this context to invoke Richard Hofstadter, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* (New York: Vintage Books, 1962). I take away from Hofstadter's famous treatise his observation that education does not in itself protect a society from anti-intellectualism: "Here no doubt the American educational creed itself needs further scrutiny. The belief in mass education was not founded primarily upon a passion for the development of mind, or upon pride in learning and culture for their own sakes, but rather upon the supposed political and economic benefits of education" (305). One implication of this observation is that mass education defined exclusively by credentialism will inevitably drive toward an inflationary crisis.

erature, to be sure, but they also want the life of the college professor. In my experience, they are disinclined to regard, for example, teaching in the secondary school system as an alternative to their *professional* aspiration—despite the fact that there is a shortage of secondary school teachers. Raising this option at all requires considerable delicacy.<sup>25</sup> As we know from every admissions season in living memory, the demand for the PhD remains very high. Doctoral programs still receive dozens or hundreds of applications for every class, a fact that occasions pride but also bewilderment. If the credential is such a risk, like those mortgages that led to the financial crash of 2008, what is the meaning of the demand? There is a puzzling contradiction here between the persistent demand for the credential and its falling value.

Social scientists speak of the phenomenon of “credentialism” in this context, by which they refer in the most general sense to the increasing importance and proliferation of credentials in society. In a narrower context, credentialism refers to the phenomenon of “credential inflation,” the correlation between the proliferation of credentials and their falling value. Credentials are like those kinds of luxury commodities that are in high demand but lose value the more people come to possess them. Demand explains only part of the price for these commodities; rarity is the other part.

There is considerable evidence that the BA became subject to “credentials inflation” in the half century following World War II. Over the course of the twentieth century, university enrollment among those of college age expanded from 4 percent of the population in 1900 to nearly 50 percent by the end of the century. We marvel at the fact that the jobs for which a high school diploma was once sufficient now require a college degree, but there is no mystery here: as the number of students entering universities and colleges rose spectacularly in the decades after World War II, the proliferation of BAs depressed the value of the credential in the job market, its vaunted “wage premium.” Randall Collins, in *The Credential Society*, writes of a “credential crisis” beginning in the later twentieth century. This crisis was driven in part by pent-up demand for college degrees, especially among minorities, who saw these credentials as their best chance for upward mobility.<sup>26</sup> Collins points to some striking results of the crisis, most

25. See Michael Bérubé, *The Employment of English: Theory, Jobs, and the Future of Literary Studies* (New York: New York University Press, 1998): “In my experience, suggesting to students that they might teach in secondary schools has been a little like nominating one’s colleagues for early retirement” (84).

26. Randall Collins, *The Credential Society: An Historical Sociology of Education and Stratification* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), 191. See also the important follow-up essay, “Credential Inflation and the Future of Universities,” in *The Future of*

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second, more self-interested motive, which I have also noted, the desire to teach graduate students, to use graduate seminars as vehicles for research, and in this way to create a public for one's work. This is not an insignificant desire, when scholarship has so limited a field of dissemination. Given this tangle of mixed motives, it is hardly surprising that the professoriate is disinclined to limit admission to graduate school as a means of propping up the value of the PhD as a credential.

Credentials inflation is the cost of increasing access, a price that might once have seemed deferred to the future for payment. The graduate students one admits today will not arrive at the job market for years to come. Perhaps this lag is what caught the professoriate by surprise in the 1970s, producing the overhang of new PhDs that was increasingly difficult to reduce with each passing year. When the timeline for confronting the consequences of one's decisions extends out for six to ten years, these decisions yield to shorter-term desires; they are less subject to rational planning. In the absence of governing agencies in our decentralized system of higher education that might undertake adjustments of a systemic nature, local decision-making is inevitably reactive and chaotic.

Once again, it will be helpful to step back from the site of local decision-making to look at a systemic aspect of the job market at the upper end of the hierarchy. We know that the most conspicuous feature of this market is the fact that there are many more competitors for the highest positions than there are positions. This constitutive disequilibrium has been justified by a notion that does not so much describe the actual operation of the system as its reflection in ideology. I refer here to the concept of "meritocracy," the complex of ideas and assumptions that justifies the American educational system by positing "equality of opportunity" as its foundational principle and "merit" as the guarantor of fair outcomes. When the university opened its doors in the twentieth century to so many young people, its aim was to bring them to this starting line of equal opportunity. (I set to one side here the other principal reason for mass education, the cultivation of an educated citizenry.) Meritocracy is supposedly blind to all difference, whether defined by wealth, race, gender, religion, ancestry, etc. The history of college and university admissions, however, reveals how far this ideal is from the reality.

Meritocracy has recently come under severe critique by two scholars, Daniel Markovits, in *The Meritocracy Trap*, and Michael Sandel, in *The Tyranny of Merit*, both eminent scholars perched at the top of the educational system, Yale and Harvard, respectively.<sup>29</sup> The argument of these books is

29. Daniel Markovits, *The Meritocracy Trap: How America's Foundational Myth Feeds Inequality, Dismantles the Middle Class, and Devours the Elite* (New York: Penguin,

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period before the 1970s, numbers tell a different story: we would see a very much smaller aggregate number of doctoral students than today. Students in one graduate program would be relatively isolated from students in others. There was no email, texting, social media, or internet blogging to establish lines of communication between students in far-flung institutions. The experience of being a graduate student was highly variable, more or less determined by the distinguishing features of one's graduate program, the chance constitution of one's student cohort, and above all, the interests and idiosyncrasies of one's teachers. By contrast, the reality of graduate education today is that the population of students constitutes a national and even international corps. Students are connected with each other by all the technical means just enumerated but also by new associational forms, such as the graduate student conference. These new forms have transformed the aggregate population of graduate students into a distinct *culture*, which I described at the beginning of this essay as a "semiautonomous professional sphere."

In "Preprofessionalism," I attempted to describe this culture, though with limited success.<sup>32</sup> I did not at the time have a sense of the difference technology would make in the cultural life of graduate students, as this technology was only just coming into common use. None of us could foresee in the 1990s how transformative the technology would be, both for social life generally and for graduate school in particular. I have no desire to celebrate or lament the technology itself, which is by many orders too complex and too diverse in its effects to characterize as good or bad. I return here to some of the questions raised by my earlier essays on graduate education in order to attempt again a description of the culture of graduate education in the wake of the collapsed job market and the emergence of a transinstitutional corps of graduate students.

The members of this corps are "preprofessional" in the simple sense of not yet being hired to tenure-track jobs, whether or not the term "preprofessionalism" still applies in any other sense. From our later vantage, the question of whether or not graduate students should or will engage in activities that are identical to those of their professors is moot. Most incoming doctoral students already know quite a lot about professional activity in

32. At the time I composed my earlier essays, I was most struck by what I saw as the mutual intensification of professionalization and politicization in graduate education. Today, it seems to me that "politicization" can be taken for granted for both the graduate corps and the professoriate. As this theme is discussed at length in chapters above, I have focused in this chapter on the issue of professionalization.

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along the way. This career defers the crisis of the market that will determine whether professional life will continue indefinitely or will end. The satisfactions of professional life as a graduate student are for this reason a disincentive to finishing the degree—this, even though the longer students take to finish, the less likely they will find tenure-track employment.<sup>36</sup>

The temporary career of the graduate student is shaped in many ways by the nature of the job market, with its temporal precipice. I suspect that the career narrative would lose some of its cultural force if graduate students were assured of attaining a job; it might even lapse into a version of “apprenticeship,” for better or worse. Graduate students must hold two incompatible thoughts in mind during their temporary careers, first that “I” am the one who will succeed in getting the job, and second, that graduate school will very likely constitute all there is to “my” career in literary study. These contradictory thoughts are suppositional, of course. They are extrapolated from the *conditions* of graduate study, not from assumptions about individual students. The larger point I want to make is this: that when confronted with the precipice of the job market, generations of graduate students made a *world* out of the temporary career, a semiautonomous professional sphere. Students enter into and eventually leave this professional sphere, which is built out enough, and rewarding enough, to survive the coming and going of these generations. By virtue of the graduate population’s size, the years committed to graduate study, and the ease of communications between programs, this semiautonomous professional sphere evolved new institutional forms like workshops and reading groups and the student-organized conferences that draw students from different schools into collaborative relations. Unionization is another site of this collective consciousness, a site in which the contingent form of academic labor is resisted, usually with sympathetic support from neighboring populations of students. These collaborative actions are made possible to some extent by the transformation of communication technology, but the technology is not the cause.

In this concluding section of the chapter, I want to consider briefly what the emergence of the semiautonomous professional sphere means, what it might portend. Taking the risk here of prematurely broaching my hypothesis, I put some pressure on the fact that this sphere of intellectual activity is

36. See Ehrenberg et al., *Educating Scholars*: “Students who finish their degrees in five or six years do no better in the job market, and are no more likely to get tenure-track jobs, than those who finish in seven years. However, PhDs in the humanities (unlike good wine, apparently) do not improve after seven years: those who finished in more than seven years were less likely than faster completers to obtain tenure-track positions” (18).

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might liberate students to pursue whatever most interests them, whether or not their interest is responsive to the perceived demands of the market. I have touched on this question in chapter 2 above, but I want to advance it seriously here as a proposition. There are two ways to relate to the job market: to submit everything to its Sauron-like surveillance or to ignore it.

My suspicion is that in the latter case, better dissertations would result, but that is not my main point. And in any case, I do not expect that my recommendation will be taken seriously. What I want to propose more urgently is a way of relating the temporary career of graduate students to the lives they will most likely have after graduate school, if circumstances do not favor their getting a tenure-track job. I argued in another venue (at the MLA conference of 2020) that graduate students need to be apprised of market conditions and of alternatives to the career of college professor as soon as they arrive on campus.<sup>37</sup> Only such honesty and transparency, instated at the very beginning of the first semester, has any chance of preventing or mitigating the bitterness of disappointed expectations, so vividly represented in the protagonist of Christine Smallwood's recent novel, *The Life of the Mind*. The novel offers a powerfully disillusioned account of graduate school, and of its grim companion, adjunct teaching. Its protagonist, Dorothy, struggles mightily to sustain "the life of the mind" but the novel does not hold out much hope for her success.<sup>38</sup>

I argued further in my MLA paper that the best way to accomplish this goal is to introduce graduate students to as many alumni of the system as are willing and able to speak to them about their careers after graduate school. Many of these alumni, we know, did not get tenure-track jobs but escaped the trap of adjunct labor; many are now employed in nonacademic professions. Let us invite them to return and tell us what they got from their experience in graduate school. Many of these former students do not regret having spent time working on a doctorate, whatever the benefit of the credential in their later working life. But to the graduate schools they have left behind, it is as though they disappeared from the face of the earth once they entered new professions. This is a waste, the loss of considerable talent and passion to a diaspora.<sup>39</sup>

Can these former students maintain a relation to literary study with-

37. For a reprise of this unpublished essay, see Leonard Cassuto and Robert Weisbuch, *The New PhD*, 229–30.

38. Christine Smallwood, *The Life of the Mind* (London: Hogarth, 2021).

39. To say that these graduate students are unknown to us is not to deny that many have gone on to success in other fields. But to the literary professoriate, they are like Dorothea at the end of *Middlemarch*, whose fine spirit "spent itself in channels which had no great name on the earth."

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