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Recommended Citation
Bauder, H. (2006) "The Segmentation of Academic Labour." ACME—An International Journal of Critical Geographies 4(2): 227–238.

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The Segmentation of Academic Labour: A Canadian Example

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Abstract

Academia increasingly faces pressures of corporatization and flexibilization. Of particular concern is the segmentation of academic labour into stable tenured or tenure-track professors and "flexible" sessional and adjunct faculty. In this paper, I review evidence of the segmentation of the Canadian academic labour market, examine the conditions that permit segmentation to exist, discuss why academic geographers in both segments comply with a segmented labour market and, finally, propose potential strategies to address the issue of segmentation.

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[2] Editor's note: This manuscript was submitted prior to the author joining the journal's editorial team — Lawrence Berg

Introduction

Famously comparing the educational institution (*Lehrfabrik*) to a sausage factory (*Wurstfabrik*), Karl Marx (2001 [1867], 532) states that teachers, similar to workers in a meat-processing plant, are value-producing labour with the purpose of enriching the institution. A few years ago, Neil Smith (2000) applied Marx' comparison to a contemporary academic context. Since then, it has become increasingly apparent that European and North American factories of higher education follow a trend marked by the "casualization of academic labour (Shelton et al., 2001, 434)" and the intensification of competitive workplace practices that mirror developments in the private sector. A decade ago, Jane Willis (1996) observed that academic geographers work to the point where their bodies are not able to physically regenerate themselves from stress and fatigue. The effect of intensifying competition is that academics squeeze the "substance" out of their lives.

In Canada, academic labour has been depreciating over the previous decades. For example, faculty salaries declined relative to total expenditures of universities, from more than 31 percent in the late 1970s to roughly 19 percent in 2004 (CAUT, 2006, 4). In addition, the faculty-student ratio at Canadian universities has changed. While in the 1992-1993 academic year there were on average only 18.8 full-time students for every full-time faculty member, eleven years later there were 23.7 (CAUT, 2006, 51).

A complementary and equally worrying trend is the deepening segmentation of the academic labour market (Mullens, 2001). Again, the writing has been on the wall for some time now. Geographers across "Anglo-America" have long reported a division between "tenured faculty" and "nontenured staff (Castree, 2000, 966)," or between permanent staff and fixed-term contracts (Shelton, et al., 2001). Roughly "43% of American faculty are part-time. Of the 57% who are full-time, about 28% are limited-term contract (CAUT, 2005, no pages)." The Canadian Association of University Teachers suggests that the "trends are similar" at Canadian universities (CAUT, 2005, no pages).

Although Canadian data on part-time, sessional and non-tenure track faculty are limited, the available data fragments support the above observation. A Statistics Canada analysis of the Part-Time Universities and Colleges Academic Staff Survey revealed that "the number of part-time faculty in Canada increased 10%—from 25,700 in 1990-1991 to 28,200 in 1997-1998," faster than the number of full-time faculty (Omiecinski, 2003, 10). The social sciences had a disproportionately high share of part-time faculty, compared to other fields of study. Of all part-time faculty at universities and colleges, 35 percent worked in the social sciences, while

only 31 percent of all full-time faculty worked in the social sciences. Eighty-eight percent of part-time faculty were hired for teaching only (Omiecinski, 2003).[3]

Some universities publish their own statistics on contractual faculty labour. At Carlton University, for example, sessional lecturers taught 33.1 percent and lecturers and instructors another 16.4 percent of all sections offered in the undergraduate arts and social sciences curriculum in 2003/2004. Together, these two groups taught 52.2 percent of all students. Three years earlier, during the 2000/2001 academic year, sessional lecturers taught 25.1 percent, and lecturers and instructors 11.6 percent, of the undergraduate arts and social sciences courses, accounting together for 41.7 percent of the students (Carleton University, 2005). If Carleton University represents a general trend, the casualization of university teaching is advancing rapidly.

Statistics for the discipline of geography are difficult to obtain. Of the 2005 members of the Canadian Association of Geographers (CAG) that are employed at Canadian Universities, only 7.6 percent are non-tenured or non-tenure-track instructors, lecturers or contractual employees.[4] The remaining 92.4 percent are in stable positions. These statistics, however, understate the size of non-tenured faculty in Canadian geography departments.[5]

Published data illustrate that the segmentation of the academic labour market is gendered (Jacobs, 2004). Statistics Canada data show that women constituted 42 percent of the part-time academic workforce, but only 26 percent of the full-time academic workforce in 1997-1998 (Omiecinski, 2003, 11-12). More recent data for 2003-2004 collected by CAUT indicate that across all disciplines, only 18.1 percent of full professors are female. For non-tenured and non-tenure-track faculty ("Other") this percentage soars to 54.2 percent (CAUT, 2006, 15). This uneven gender distribution also exists in geography, where women constitute only 6.8 percent of all full geography professors but 37 percent of the non-tenure track faculty (CAUT, 2006, 15). These gender inequities in academic geography

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[3] In disciplines like law or medicine, significant numbers of part-time and sessional faculty are full-time practitioners (Mullens, 2001). In the social sciences, outside of applied fields like business or social work, the number of part-time and sessional faculty who are practitioners is likely to be much lower.

[4] I thank Valerie Shoffey and the Association of Canadian Geographers for making the data on the faculty status of CAG members available.

[5] First, membership in the CAG is probably biased towards tenure and tenure-track academics. Second, only about half of the non-student CAG members provided information on their current position and rank. Many temporary and part-time faculty may have opted not to reveal their rank. Third, students were not included in the statistics but may de-facto serve as non-permanent, flexible labour.

have received considerable attention (e.g. Berg, 2002; Hall et al. 2002; Kobayashi, 2002; Yasmeen, 2002). This literature shows that women find it more difficult to enter stable, tenured positions than men, and these difficulties may have remained over the last decade (Berg, 2002; Yasmeen, 2002).

Segmentation of Academic Labour

Academia is increasingly driven by economic forces, as evidenced by the corporatization of universities (Mitchell, 1999; Smith, 2000) or the rising competition between disciplines for resources (Sidaway, 1997; Harman, 2003). However, we see little evidence that the academic labour market is driven by a mysterious invisible hand of the market, which supposedly rewards workers based on meritocratic principles.

Labour market segmentation theory suggests that the labour market is divided into distinct segments (e.g. Reich et al., 1973; Gordon et al., 1982). Workers in the primary segment capture the "good jobs" with stability, high wages and benefits, while workers in the secondary segment obtain either the "bad jobs" with little job security, low wages and few benefits, or they are unemployed. Karl Marx (2001 [1867], 502) famously referred to the workers in such employment relationships as a "reserve army" of labour. The workers in the secondary segment of the labour market absorb the shock of fluctuations in the general demand for labour. In other words, the availability of a pool of "flexible" workers, who can easily be hired and fired, permits the relative stability of the primary segment, in which workers will keep their jobs when demand of labour temporarily declines. From this perspective, it could be argued that the stability of tenured faculty positions is functionally dependent on the existence of a sufficient number of flexible sessional and adjunct faculty. Without this flexible academic labour force, the stability of a segment of tenured professors would be threatened.

What is new in the contemporary development is that the secondary labour market of part-time and temporary workers is often growing beyond the size necessary to fill temporary and seasonal labour needs. Labour market geographers have examined this trend in a variety of contexts (Peck, 2001; Peck and Theodore, 2001; Bauder, 2006b). Increasingly, temporary and part-time positions are being created where tenured and tenure-stream positions should exist. Segmentation no longer serves to stabilize the positions of tenured faculty; rather, the secondary segment threatens to replace the primary segment. Segmentation becomes a strategy of reducing wages and labour standards in the *entire* academic labour market.

For this strategy to work, a series of conditions must be fulfilled. First, the academic labour market must be a *separate* labour market (Peck, 1996). It must be

difficult for academics to cross-over into other occupations; otherwise, highly-skilled and educated academics would simply seek stable and well-paying employment elsewhere.

Indeed, academia seems to operate according to its own principles of labour regulation. On the one hand, qualification requirements are extremely high: usually an earned doctorate, or at least doctoral candidacy. Because the participants in the academic labour market had to demonstrate their commitment to the occupation by investing time, effort and money into a lengthy Ph.D. program, they are unlikely to turn their backs easily on these investments and work in a different occupation.

On the other hand, academia serves as a symbolic economy, in which academic performance assumes a symbolic value that is worth little in other occupations (see: Smith, 2001; Johnston and Sidaway, 2004, 31). In this sense, academia demarcates a separate social field, in which not only skill requirements but also professional conventions and expectations differ from other occupations (Bourdieu, 1988). For example, a Ph.D. graduate in geography may be an expert in radical labour market theory, be able to write in a jargonistic style that captivates an academic audience and may boast a CV bursting with single-authored papers in peer-reviewed journals. Outside of academia, where skill requirements can include applying practical knowledge, writing for a general audience and demonstrating teamwork experience, this graduate is unlikely to succeed.[6] Graduate programs and early-career positions socialize geographers into academic practice "with little respect for non-academic pursuits (Yasmeen, 2002, 243)" (see also: Solem and Foote, 2005; Bauder, 2006a).[7]

The second condition is that the academic labour market must be internally segmented. The statistics I presented in the previous section indicate that this is in fact the case. Vulnerable groups tend to be over-represented in the secondary segment. The data presented above illustrate that women are indeed more likely to work in part-time academic employment than men. Social and cultural processes are also involved in allocating academics to one or the other segment (Peck, 1996, 24-40). In the contemporary context of Canadian geography, certain types of "social capital" – referring to social and professional networks and group membership, such as being part of a well-known research group – or "cultural

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[6] Bourdieu (1988) suggests, in the context of post-war French academic practice, that the valorization and devaluation of certain performances, conventions and achievements is a strategic process that serves the purpose of reproducing academia and protecting the interests and status of professors and high-ranking university administrators.

[7] In fields like law, medicine, business or social work, where more part-time and sessional faculty are practitioners, it may be easier to switch between academic and non-academic labour markets than in geography (Mullens, 2001).

capital," such as a degree from a prestigious university or publications in high-status journals, serve as distinguishing characteristics that provide access to the anticipated career path. Individuals lacking the "proper" social and cultural capital are more likely to be permanently relegated to temporary and part-time status.

Ironically, academic geographers control the supply of academic labour themselves, through the number of Ph.D. students they admit to their graduate programs. In the 2003-2004 academic year alone, 426 Ph.D. students were enrolled in Canadian geography programs, which compares to a total labour force of full-time professors of 531 (CAUT, 2006, 15, 31). By producing an over-supply of Ph.D. graduates, we create the conditions for the labour market to split into a stable tenure-stream segment and a segment of sessional and adjunct faculty (Roberts, 2000).

Neo-classical economists would counter that an over-supply of labour encourages competition and thus stimulates the productivity of academics. Indeed, evidence confirms that academia increasingly valorizes the competition principle (e.g. Willis, 1996; Smith, 2001). However, competition does not exist uniformly across the entire academic labour market (Bourdieu, 1988, 88). Rather – and this is the third condition – the competition principle applies only among the workers *within* a labour market segment, but not *between* segments. Temporary faculty compete with each other to hold on to part-time and temporary teaching positions, while tenure-stream faculty compete with each other for the next promotion or merit increase. The members of the two different segments are in separate labour markets and not in competition with each other.

Complacency

The geographical community has been – with the exception of occasional commentaries (e.g. Castree, 1999; 2000; Yasmeen, 2002) – relatively complacent with the segmentation of the academic labour market. Perhaps the division within the academic faculty it is not as obvious to academic geographers as I imply above. I can think of several ways in which geographers have created an image of unity of the profession, obscuring the existing segmentation of labour.

First, the geographic community makes concerted and continuous efforts to construct a disciplinary identity (e.g. Sack, 1997; Hanson, 1999; Thrift, 2002; Johnston and Sidaway, 2004), which enables geographers to collectively distinguish themselves from academics in other disciplines (e.g. Sidaway, 1997; Thrift, 2002; Johnston, 2004a; 2004b) and which suggests that geographers can together shape society (e.g. Blomley, 1994; Tickel, 1995; Castree, 2000; Castree

and Wright, 2005; Ward 2005). This geographical identity embraces full-time, sessional and adjunct faculty as well as students.[8] When geographers defend this collective identity against outside threats, they do not differentiate between themselves based on rank or labour market position.

Second, the sense that temporary and permanent faculty belong to the same community is reinforced by a shared academic habitus (Bourdieu, 1997; 1988; 2002). Academic geographers possess distinct skills, communicate with a unique geographical language, and embrace a common professional practice. For example, at conferences they apply spatio-technical lingo, present their research in particularly structured 20-minute powerpoint presentations, and even follow ritual conventions during dinners and receptions. Since they all have invested in these skills, language and social practice, they have a collective interest in maintaining it.

Third, the entire academic field accepts the competition principle. It may not be immediately apparent that faculty in different segments do not compete with each other. Temporary faculty can be persuaded to compete with each other in a race to the bottom, as long as the individual competitors believe that there is a realistic prospect to land a full-time job. Bourdieu (1988, 89) suggested in a related context that the competition principle works only if the pool of competitors is "small enough for them to reasonably aspire to the posts on offer … and yet still numerous enough for them not to have any absolute certainty, which would eliminate the expectation." Another way of expressing this idea is to describe time-limited teaching positions in geography as an "apprenticeship (Johnston and Sidaway, 2004)," after which a full-time job is supposed to follow, but often does not.

Opportunities For Action?

It is important to distinguish between the segmentation of labour and the division of labour (e.g. Sayer, 1995). The latter refers to the functional subdivision of work tasks, which is essential for delivering higher education and conducting sophisticated research. The division of labour between, say, Canada Research Chairs,[9] who spend much of their time with research; department chairs, who

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[8] Emanuel Wallerstein (1999, 1) illustrates the ideological character of academic disciplines when he says: "a discipline is an intellectual construct, a sort of heuristic device."

[9] In the year 2000, the Canadian government established a program to create 2000 research professorships, called Canada Research Chairs. It has since funded this program with $300 million annually.

pursue mostly administration; and teaching faculty, who devote more time to teaching, should not be associated with an unequal valuation of the work they perform.

The segmentation of labour, on the other hand, refers to the fact that some workers are valued less than others, and therefore receive lower wages, fewer benefits and less recognition, despite having similar qualifications. With the current growth of the secondary segment of part-time or permanently temporary labor, tenured faculty at North American institutions should be nervous about whether universities will abandon the tenure system in one or two decades. Similarly, sessional and adjunct faculty should also be concerned about their diminishing chances for upward mobility. Ph.D. students, in particular, should worry about their future career prospects.

Before developing counter-strategies for action, however, we need accurate and reliable data to assess the magnitude of the divide between part-time and permanent faculty in our community. If the picture that I painted above, based on available data fragments, is substantiated, then we need to design and implement strategies to demolish the barrier that cuts through our community and segments us into first- and second-class faculty.

In this case, permanent faculty should demonstrate their support for sessional and adjunct faculty who vote for unionization in order to achieve greater stability, higher wages and the proper recognition of their contributions. Academic geographers could also collectively explore potential avenues to change the conditions on the demand side of the academic labour market. For example, faculty associations and unions representing permanent faculty can pressure university administrations to convert part-time and temporary positions into full-time and permanent ones.

At the same time, we, tenured faculty, should begin thinking about how to better regulate the academic labour market. One mechanism to regulate labour supply is through our own Ph.D. programs, and the number of potential sessional and part-time faculty we produce. Often the acceptance of students into Ph.D. programs is not tied to the state of the labour market or the future employability of the students, but rather to the availability of research funds, personal ambition of the supervisor or his or her quest for professional and social reproduction (Bourdieu, 1988; Bauder, 2006a). In the worst-case scenario, Ph.D. students are themselves used as flexible labour, filling the gaps where instructors and research assistants are needed. While it may be difficult for tenured professors to make

accurate assessments of the future labour market conditions for academic geographers and coordinate Ph.D.-student intake with future demand, it would be highly problematic to neglect the fact that many incoming Ph.D. students will be looking for jobs a few years ahead. It should be scripted into academics' professional code of ethics to train Ph.D. students only if they have reasonable chances to obtain full-time and permanent positions.

Seeing academic geography as a segmented labour market, and not only as a unified community of scholars, should challenge the geographic community to reduce and eventually eliminate the economic inequalities between us. Responding to this challenge entails actively contesting the increasing neoliberalization of academia, and the 'flexible' and divisive labour practices that accompany this trend (Mitchell, 1999; Smith, 2000; Shelton et al., 2001). Compared to workers in other industries, academics still have considerable means to regulate their own labour market and to achieve this goal.

Acknowledgements

I thank Valerie Shoffey at the Canadian Association of Geographers and Vicky Smallman at the Canadian Association of University Teachers for their help with data acquisition. In addition, I thank Lawrence Berg and Karen Uchic for their advice, and Don Mitchell and three anonymous reviewers for their comments.

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