"Lepers in the Acropolis": Liberalism, Capitalism, and the Crisis in Academic Labor
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While ordinarily book reviewers strive to press against, if not transcend, the limits of the moment in which they write, I strive for topicality and pinpoint the moment of my writing for reasons that will, I trust, become clear in the course of this essay. I write in the days immediately following the 1997 Modern Language Association (MLA) Convention, where the Executive Council presented—and the Delegate Assembly, unfortunately, approved—the report of the Committee on Professional Employment (CPE), an ad hoc committee charged with the task of analyzing, and offering solutions to, the jobs crisis in the humanities. The Delegate Assembly listserver has been hopping with eager suggestions about letter-writing campaigns and strategies for pressuring legislators; the latest issue of Academe, the AAUP journal, features “Part-Time Appointments and the Future of the Academy.” Laborers in the groves of academe, it would seem, are finally confronting the crisis that currently faces the
least enfranchised among them and threatens to unseat those occupying the precarious perch called tenure.

But can the academy, through a series of measures either mild or draconian, significantly alter its slide into proletarianization? I shall argue here that it cannot: the academic jobs crisis is embedded in the contradictions of a profit-directed and competitive global economic system that requires such harsh rationalization; and while this trend must be fought, the crisis it signals is essentially not soluble—and here I use a phrase that will surely reveal my political stance—“under capitalism.” Two recent books by Cary Nelson—*Manifesto of a Tenured Radical*, a compilation of his own essays about the “culture wars” and now the “job wars,” and *Will Teach for Food: Academic Labor in Crisis*, an anthology addressing the Yale strike in particular and the jobs crisis more generally—ably document and analyze many features of the current attack on higher education. Even as they purport to take up the cause of working-class students and those who aspire to teach them, however, these books exhibit considerable blindness to the class function that higher education has always served, and continues to serve, in the United States—with or without the presumably enlightening impact of the “new knowledges” of the past couple of decades. Nelson’s two volumes thus alert us to the inadequacy of liberal homilies about universities and suggest the necessity for going beyond the limits of reformism—piecemeal or otherwise—as we devise strategies for addressing the current crisis.

The facts are stark. At least 45 percent of all faculty in higher education are part-timers, as compared with 34 percent in 1980 and 22 percent in 1970. In community colleges, 65 percent of all classes are taught by non-tenure-track faculty. While the salaries of tenured faculty have stagnated, the gap between them and the marginalized mass has widened, with tenure-track faculty on average earning close to $12,000 for teaching a course for which a teaching assistant is paid slightly over $2,500 and a part-timer often as little as $1,500. Although Ph.D. candidates in English now often take eight to ten years to complete their degrees and pile up tens of thousands of dollars in debt, the number of tenure-track jobs shrinks steadily. Linda Ray Pratt, past president of the AAUP and chair of an AAUP committee on the status of non-tenure-track faculty, estimates that “if
things continue unchecked, about 90 percent of the English Ph.D.’s on the market in the next few years will not find a tenure-track job” (Will Teach 265).

As the essays in the first half of Manifesto remind us, Nelson comes to the jobs wars of the 1990s as a veteran of the culture wars of the 1980s: his proud claim to be a “tenured radical” is a swipe at Roger Kimball’s neoconservative diatribe about the presumed ruination of the academy by unreconstructed 1960s leftists. A fine scholar who has done yeoman’s work in reconfiguring U.S. modernism to include not only women and people of color but also leftist writers “disappeared” by anticommunism, Nelson perspicaciously notes that “debates over political correctness have made cutting university budgets a great deal easier. A delegitimated university is easier to defund” (Manifesto 108). The devilish wit informing his potshots at conservative cultural warriors like William Bennett, Lynne Cheney, and Dinesh D’Souza becomes more harshly satirical as, in the second half of Manifesto, Nelson contemplates the ethical bankruptcy of a profession that “eats its young.” The Yale faculty who blackball their striking TAs teach only a third of the undergraduate courses, “delivering their wisdom like pigeons roosting high above in the ivy” (200). Job-seekers who persist in thrusting themselves on the job market year after year are viewed as “damaged goods” by prospective purchasers of their labor (159)—or, in a striking metaphor, “lepers in the acropolis—a distraction, a betrayal, a burden, a mirror that offers us an image of ourselves we do not want to see” (174). Nelson unabashedly names names, detailing the strike-breaking activities of a gaggle of Yale professors, from traditional literature scholars such as Annabel Patterson, Margaret Homans, and Peter Brooks to would-be progressives such as postcolonial critic Sara Suleri, women’s history scholar Nancy Cott, and slavery historian David Brion Davis. Yale professor David Bromwich, reacting to Nelson’s support of the graduate student union (GESO), looks “like a vampire bat suddenly exposed to a shaft of sunlight” (141). Repudiating the ideology of professionalism that would bind him to conspiratorial silence, Nelson narrates specific examples of reprehensible institutional behavior, such as a UC-Santa Cruz English Department job search calling upon hundreds of graduate students to spend thousands of dollars xeroxing and express-mailing writing samples that
the hiring committee never even read. Nelson cuts through the self-justifying language of bureaucracy, reminding us that every budgetary act carries moral—or immoral—consequences. He castigates administrators obsessed with the bottom line, but he reserves his most thundering *j'accuse* for idiot *savant* tenured academics determined to engage in the narcissistic reproduction of themselves by maintaining Ph.D. programs even when these programs’ graduates face disappearing opportunities for tenure-track employment.

Nelson is the first and most vocal tenured faculty member to get up on the stepladder and sound his barbaric yawp about the increasing gap between the haves and the have-nots in the academy; we should all be grateful for his boldness and honesty. Yet even though Nelson is routinely featured as the left in the debate over academic labor, his outrage is fueled less by a radical’s impatience with an inverted social order than by a liberal’s sense of betrayal. Nelson may call himself a red diaper baby, recommend a pedagogy “put[ing] the left at the center,” and occasionally quote Marx and Mao. But he describes himself as a “politicized Saussur(ean)” (*Manifesto* 46) and castigates Marxism (at least in its pre-poststructuralist phase) for its “fantasmatic claims to scientificity” (21–22). Indeed, just about the only time he mentions capitalism he calls it an “ideology” (7)—hardly the assertion of a leftist engaged in systemic critique. Nelson in fact takes pains to locate himself midway between left and right, centristically priding himself on “negotiati[ing] a principled passage through issues the press usually treats as politically given and dichotomous” (6). Moreover, he recommends that, in order to address the “overproduction” of Ph.D.’s, graduate programs in all but the most elite universities be closed—thus effectively taking the point of view of capital, embracing a paradigm of supply and demand, and advocating voluntary downsizing as a “solution” to the superexploitation of adjunct and part-time labor. The very strength of Nelson’s stance—namely, his projection of a righteous moral outrage—is thus also its cardinal weakness, in that ethical commentary substitutes for structural analysis: the wretched future of work facing most graduate students and adjunct faculty is not just compounded by, but primarily rooted in, short-sightedness, irrationality, arrogance, and greed. Nelson’s indignation at the be-nighted behavior of a large segment of the professoriate precludes
the category of false consciousness, for it fails to recognize the extent to which tenure—which may be effectively done away with ten years from now—creates illusions of security and privilege that function to prevent much-needed alliances among professors, adjuncts, and graduate students. Nelson ends up displacing much of his anger from its appropriate target—namely, those state legislatures and boards of trustees that, acting in the interests of ruling elites, have set in place the austerity measures to which the professoriate, however inadequately, then responds.

Nelson’s insistence upon viewing structural issues in ethical terms is intimately related to his stubborn adherence to various discourses that—as I shall argue more fully below—shore up the very system of exploitation that he detests. In arguing that higher education will be irreparably harmed by its search for the cheapest labor, he invokes the national interest: “quality will decline and we will no longer compete . . . effectively [in the global environment]” (Manifesto 8). In celebrating the canon-busting movement of the past twenty years, he invokes the rhetoric of patriotism: canon revision is “a triumph of democracy” (191), and “multiracial intellectual work” is “something the country desperately needs” (96). Above all, despite the mass of evidence he cites to the contrary, Nelson evinces an abiding faith in the university as a neutral site of enlightenment and seconds the impassioned plea of a Yale graduate student: “We have a right to ask for this university to be the thing that we believe it should be” (Will Teach 26). Nelson thus sees a schizophrenic break between the university’s presumed production of emancipatory knowledges on the one hand and its exploitative behavior as an employer on the other: “democracy is fulfilled in scholarship and betrayed in the workplace” (Manifesto 3). And although he exhibits a profound antipathy to the effects of “corporatization” upon higher education, his very use of the term implies the existence of a golden age in which universities did not serve the interests of ruling elites. Nelson’s reformist agenda—set forth in a twelve-step program at the end of Manifesto—is thus limited from the outset by the ideological assumptions, voiced as nostalgia, that guide it. If only we could get back to the good old days—with curriculum expanded, needless to say, and faculty and student body diversified—the job wars would end, and peace and prosperity would return to the groves of academe.
The essays gathered in *Will Teach for Food* ably supplement Nelson’s commentary on the current crisis in academic labor. Part I, “A Yale Strike Dossier,” begins with John Wilhelm’s “A Short History of Unionization at Yale,” which places the current efforts of the Graduate Employees and Students Organization (GESO) to organize graduate students within the context of much longer-term labor struggles at Yale. Corey Robin and Michelle Stephen’s “Against the Grain: Organizing TAs at Yale,” describes graduate students’ disillusionment with their intellectual experiences at Yale and details both positive and negative responses to GESO’s efforts. Kathy Newman’s deft analysis of changing representations of graduate students in popular culture—“Poor, Hungry, and Desperate? or, Privileged, Histrionic, and Demanding? In Search of the True Meaning of ‘Ph.D.’”—hypothesizes that the unionization movement has ruptured received cultural stereotypes of graduate students. Michael Bérubé’s “The Blessed of the Earth,” taking off on Peter Brooks’s patronizing moniker for the Yale strikers, offers a detailed account of the abject behavior of the Yale faculty and a spirited critique of the MLA Executive Council’s toadyism to the Yale administration, as well as of 1995 MLA President Sander Gilman’s accession to two-tier job placement for Ph.D.’s. Andrew Ross’s “The Labor behind the Cult of Work” criticizes the “mystification of labor” that allows professors and graduate students alike to embrace a “psychology of denial” about the nature of exploitation in the academic setting. The graduate student movement, Ross urges, should “aim for an expansive, utopian union with a broad intellectual role to play on and off campus” (140, 142). Robin D. G. Kelley’s “The Proletariat Goes to College” stresses the parallels between graduate students and other campus workers, describes campus worker–student alliance organizing of the late 1960s and early 1970s—in which I myself incidentally was involved—and reminds us of the key role historically played by black and Hispanic campus workers, often women, in campus organizing. If current campus unionization activities can “embrace a far-reaching civil rights agenda and the struggle against class-based racism,” Kelley opines, they may contain “the seeds of a new political vision” (151). Although the essays on Yale are preponderantly weighted toward faculty authorship—and the too-brief pieces by Richard Wolff on the Yale Corporation’s economic strategy and
Duncan Kennedy on unionization and the law could usefully have been replaced with more accounts by lecturers, part-timers, and graduate students—what clearly emerges is that class conflict has entered the ivory tower. Certain parts of the story are obviously particular to elite Yale. Although the university was crying broke to rationalize its refusal to raise TA wages, for example, its stock and bond holdings rose by between $500 million and $1 billion in 1995 alone, its endowment reached almost $4 billion, and, according to Nelson and Bérubé, it claimed its reinvested profits as operating expenses—a practice that would have put any ordinary business or individual corporation in jeopardy with the IRS. Yet the Yale situation mirrors, albeit in distorted fashion, broader social patterns; in particular, the division between have and have-nots so avidly defended by the vast majority of tenured Yale faculty replicates the two-tier wage structure not only imposed upon Yale’s cafeteria and clerical employees but increasingly practiced throughout the national economy.

Part II, “Academic Workers Face the New Millennium,” contains more general analyses of the crisis in academic labor. Daniel Czitrom’s “Reeling in the Years: Looking Back on the TAA” details the author’s experiences organizing among teaching assistants at the University of Wisconsin in the late 1960s and early 1970s; a crucial effect of the unionization movement, Czitrom notes, was that it “offer[ed] alternatives to the political dead end of individualism” and introduced participants to “the radical critique of American education and society” (227, 222). Stephen Watt’s “On Apprentices and Company Towns” demonstrates the fallacy of the Yale administration’s stipulation that TAs are “apprentices” rather than “employees” by detailing the status of apprentices in the skilled trades. A closer analogy from the life of labor, he argues, is between the university and the company town, where employees are knowingly paid less than a subsistence wage and kept in debt. James D. Sullivan’s heavily ironic “The Scarlet L: Gender and Status in Academe” directs attention to the disproportionate assignment of non-tenure-track lectureships to women—a sexist hiring pattern not only differentially exploiting female academic labor but also resulting, ironically, in the virtual exclusion of “overqualified” male faculty spouses like himself who in fact would prefer to labor in the vineyards as lectur-
ers than not to teach at all. In “Disposable Faculty: Part-time Exploitation as Management Strategy,” Linda Ray Pratt points out that the widespread use of adjunct labor is a deliberate management strategy. In “Alchemy in the Academy: Moving Part-time Faculty from Piecework to Parity,” Karen Thompson, speaking from her experience as a long-term part-timer, proposes making “flexibility” less beneficial to academic employers by demanding that part-time faculty be paid according to a standard of equal pay for equal work in relation to tenure-track faculty. Ellen Schrecker, in “Will Technology Make Academic Freedom Obsolete?”, explores the threat to academic freedom posed by computer and video technology, which, through “long-distance learning,” threatens to do away with the traditional classroom for large numbers of college students. Alone among the contributors to Will Teach for Food, Schrecker seems to appreciate the extent to which colleges and universities as we now know them may not simply be downsized, but actually disappear, as the search for the cheapest possible teaching labor is taken to its logical conclusion.

The most ambitious essay in Will Teach for Food is Stanley Aronowitz’s “Academic Unionism and the Future of Higher Education.” Examining the different roles played by the different branches of higher education—the “multiversity”—in the U.S. economy since World War II, Aronowitz points out their various functions as “knowledge factories.” The first-tier research campuses provide sites whereby the state socializes the costs of research for business; the second-tier universities and colleges transmit the knowledge produced in research universities and impart the Western intellectual and moral tradition to students; the community colleges provide technicians to business and industry and function ideologically to offer the promise of higher education for all (188–89). Implicit in this subordination of research to practical ends and this selling of American universities as sources of cultural capital was a threat to the humanities, which “as concept survive only in the first tier of elite universities” (194–96). Since the imposition of fiscal austerity in the later 1980s, however, there has occurred in these knowledge factories a “decisive power shift from faculty to administration,” with the “intellectual mission of the academic system now exist[ing] as ornament” (198). With the end of the moment of
mass public education and the increasing treatment of teachers as managers, graduate programs either shrink or become “experiments in mass postgraduate education” (201). The movement toward unionization in the academy, Aronowitz argues, evidences a necessary—if long overdue—recognition of the changed role of academic labor in this new “regime of educational disaccumulation” (208).

Even as most of the essays in Will Teach for Food effectively target separate features of the current socioeconomic system as the reason for the crisis in academic labor, as a group they remain confined within the limits of a liberal paradigm. Robin and Stephens, for example, may recognize that the “most far-reaching and significant result[]” of GESO activity has been the “transformation of those individuals who have protested and struggled” into organizers able to “challenge powerful elites”; nonetheless, they repudiate “partisan or alienating ideologies” (read: Marxism), seeing left ideas as antithetical—or irrelevant—to this process of transformation (78, 58). In addition, despite the evident exclusion of leftist perspectives from both the “revived” Sweeney-led “labor movement” and the recent university conferences (for example, at NYU and Columbia) celebrating the alliance of labor and the academy, Ross and Kelley persist in holding up these very limited reform movements as models for “utopian” change, even though they are in the hip pocket of the Democratic Party. Above all, many of the essays gathered in Will Teach for Food stumble on the same rock as does Nelson’s Manifesto—namely, a stubborn adherence to an idealized (that is, class-transcendent) conception of the academy. Schrecker, whose important work on McCarthyism makes her skeptical of “too much nostalgia about the traditional university,” still adheres stubbornly to the belief that the institution threatened by technological change “once saw its mission as the creation, production, and transmission of knowledge” (293). Post-Marxist Aronowitz, despite his cagey description of the historical role of the “multiversity” in moving the cogs of industry, studiously avoids the language of class analysis and finesse the ways in which the “Western intellectual and moral tradition” promoted in first- and second-tier colleges and universities has routinely served elite interests. Moreover, he neglects to analyze shifts in the university’s relation to capital—in particular, the
fiscal austerity of the 1980s—in the light of ruling-class policy changes. Aronowitz thus ends up advocating that faculty not only unionize but, at the same time, collaborate with administrators in various “restructuring” projects premised upon the dissolution of the welfare state and the acceptance of the bad new days (209). The “moralistic, ritualized, paranoid style” of protest must be abandoned, Aronowitz concludes, in favor of a “more nuanced, and ultimately strategic, effort to fight for a democratic university” (213). In the absence of class analysis, even the most astute examination of the crisis in higher education can turn into a call for sleeping with the enemy.

The consequences of insisting upon the university’s high moral mission come out most clearly in Barbara Ehrenreich’s commentary, which is worth quoting at length:

You could argue that the university’s function is not to challenge the larger society but to mirror it and reproduce it, to produce another generation of morally numb and indifferent leaders who can graduate and do the same thing in the larger world. You could say that, no matter how cruel and exploitative that larger world becomes, the university should continue to mirror it. You could argue that a university in a bandit economy must produce the bandit chieftains who will carry on the work of further enriching the already rich without conscience or remorse. Now, if the purpose of the university is simply to mirror and reflect what’s going on in the country, then Yale’s treatment of GESO and Locals 34 and 35 . . . is the right thing; it is teaching the right lesson. But I would have to say, as an outsider, as a person who can only look with envy at Yale’s scholarly and intellectual resources, that it is an appalling shame to use such resources in that way. Why should the knowledge, creativity, energy, and brilliance that this institution contains be used to further an economic trend that is grinding down the majority of our fellow citizens (white-collar as well as blue- and pink-collar), keeping them slaves to economic anxiety, day-to-day financial stress, unmet needs, and, in an increasing number of cases, genuine poverty? Wouldn’t it be more worthwhile for Yale to set an ethical example for the rest of the world by demonstrating what a community can look like if it’s based on reason, mutual respect, and commitment to honor each individual’s contribution, whether that contribution consists of grading papers, giving lectures, keyboarding exams, or cooking food in the dining halls?

(xi–xii)
Ehrenreich’s statement epitomizes the pitfalls of an ethical approach to questions of structural inequality. Her moral stance, like Nelson’s, arises from admirable egalitarian impulses. Yet it also rests upon an epistemologically reductionist stereotype of the Marxist approach to higher education’s social function: the view that universities reproduce ruling-class hegemony through the formation of consciousness and indeed agency becomes, in her rendering, the crudely reflectionist doctrine that universities simply “mirror . . . what’s going on in the country” and, without mediation, “produce the bandit chieftains who will carry on the work of further enriching the already rich without conscience or remorse.” Ehrenreich’s outrage is thus largely a function of her rejection of a materialist outlook and her denial of the class nature of the capitalist university. In asking whether the university might not be indeed part and parcel of the “bandit economy,” and doing the “right thing” in training its students to reproduce oppressive social relations, it is as if she has peered into the abyss. In crying out that Yale should “set an ethical example for the rest of the world,” it is as if she cannot accept the bottomless depths she saw and has pulled back to familiar terrain—only then to lament the impossibility of acting upon the “ought” that seems to her so self-evident, but which the Yale Corporation clearly does not hear. Like the Yale protester who quixotically affirms the “right” to demand that Yale “be the thing that we believe it should be,” Ehrenreich diverts her analysis from the principal “moral” issue—namely, whether a socioeconomic system that “grinds down” its workers and “keep[s] them slaves to economic anxiety” “ought” to be allowed to exist in the first place.

But while a stubborn liberal faith in the mission of the university contributes crucially to the myopia guiding many of the commentaries on the crisis in academic labor under discussion here, this faith is itself the product of larger historical determinations. For liberalism, with its penchant for construing problems in moralistic terms and offering piecemeal and technical solutions, never exists in isolation from other political tendencies. Indeed, at various times—such as the 1960s, as Czitron reminds us—it has been significantly on the defensive. Whether or not liberal ideas exercise dominance thus depends in large part upon the overall ideological configuration of a given place and moment. Although Nelson and others celebrate the
emancipatory effects of the canon-revision and theory movements of the past two decades and rue a perceived contradiction between the new scholarship and the backwardness of many of its practitioners, I would suggest that the new scholarship has not only failed to arm academics adequately to deal with the current crisis but has in fact contributed to their idiot savant stance. For while Nelson insists upon distinguishing the “happy-family multiculturalism” tolerated by Cheney from the tougher type that he practices, the primary legacy of the canon-busting movement has been, through a rhetoric of “inclusion,” “diversity,” and “contributions,” to strengthen U.S. capitalism by promoting transclass conceptions of nationalism and democracy. Those of us who have participated in this movement—and have retooled our own teaching and thinking in the process—should be under no illusions that, in the absence of anticapitalist critique, we have done anything to dispel our students’ illusions about the fundamentally oppressive nature of U.S. social relations or the role of universities in sustaining those relations. Indeed, we may have augmented those illusions by promoting an identity politics completely assimilable to patriotic “patchwork quilt” notions of U.S. civil society. That Nelson considers “multiracial intellectual work” to be “something the country desperately needs,” and that he faults academic downsizing for making it harder for U.S. workers to “compete . . . effectively in the global environment,” indicates the extent to which a presumably progressive multiculturalism—embodied in the “mission” of the “democratic university”—is assimilable to a consummately unoppositional nationalism.

Moreover, a bedrock premise of postmodern theory—featured explicitly in early attacks on logocentricity, seeping into the premises of self-consciously political and historical criticism, and now permeating the ground water of even apparently nontheoretical cultural commentary—is that totalizing schemes of all kinds, but Marxism in particular, have for once and for all been discredited. The particular is the site of analysis and the local is the site of change; not class unity but alliance of disparate self-articulating groups is the premise of action; and not revolution but reform (or simply “subversion”) constitutes the horizon of the possible, which is itself construed not as a classless society but as “utopia.” Nelson may posit a disconnection between the meaning of recent scholarship and the
behavior of its practitioners, but I for one see no insurmountable con-
tradiction between the postcolonial theory and the strike-breaking prac-
tice of a Sara Suleri. Nelson may express consternation that
“we” have won the culture wars only to be beaten back in the jobs
wars. But in my view this “we”—like all “we’s”—requires scrutiny,
as does the notion of “winning.” For if a “we” wholly assimilable to
the ideological needs of U.S. capitalism won the culture wars only
by relegating Marxism almost completely to the margins, this was a
Pyrrhic victory. Indeed, we might wonder whether it was a victory
at all: pace the rantings of the radical right, might not the (presently)
secure hegemony in the academy of feminism, multiculturalism,
and postmodernism (as well as of recent movements from “post-” to
“trans-”) represent the broadest range of elite interests? Disarticu-
lating one “war” from the other, it seems to me, only encourages a
mechanical categorization of winners and losers. If a “we” articulat-
ing the needs of workers are to win some skirmishes in the jobs wars,
and in whatever other wars lie ahead, a major revision of para-
digms—to use the favored Maoist term, a “self-criticism”—is needed.
Clearly I do not have the space here to offer an analysis of the aca-
demic labor crisis from the standpoint of Marxist “totality.” But var-
ious lines of analysis—suggested in part by Nelson, Aronowitz, and
others but not fully pursued—seem particularly worth developing.
To begin with, it is crucial to view the current crisis in academic
labor in the U.S.—manifested in downsizing, cost-cutting, and other
strategies of “corporatization”—in the largest possible framework—
namely, the international capitalist economy. This requires under-
standing the impact upon universities of various developments
commonly entailed by that mantra term “globalization”: the devel-
opment of a world market in labor, resulting in increasing compe-
tition for jobs—both skilled and unskilled—between U.S. workers
and their counterparts overseas; consequent pressures on U.S. col-
lege students to view the humanities as a luxury and to pursue ca-
reers in business or technology, where they believe the grass is
greener; the increasing positioning of humanities departments as
“service” departments, simultaneously stressing the delivery of
writing skills (narrowly conceived) and undervaluing the labor of
the teachers providing those skills. In short, the increasing reliance
upon a “reserve army” of marginalized and grossly underpaid aca-
emic laborers—especially in the humanities—is inseparable from larger shifts in the global division of labor.

If we bring in globalization, however, two provisos are in order. First, to propose that the position of U.S. workers in the international labor market has shifted along with global movements of capital is not necessarily to endorse the argument (embraced by the Gingriches and Reichs alike) that the U.S. has simply to meet new “human capital” needs—that as soon as the U.S. working class is extensively retooled to work in high technology, we can all dance happily across that bridge into the twenty-first century. For even though the New York Times occasionally carries articles about the shortage of highly trained computer technicians, it also routinely reports on the latest tens of thousands laid off by AT&T and Kodak. Key-punch operations are exported from New York to Haiti; computer-related technology is the number one industry in India, which neoliberalism has effectively incorporated into global labor markets. The main effect of globalization on U.S. labor, then, has been to drive down its value; and its main effect on U.S. education has been to drive down the value of a college degree and to exacerbate the divisions among the various educational tiers Aronowitz describes. As early as 1973—when the postwar boom was coming to an end, and a future of intensified international competition and falling levels of profit was visible to those who make it their business to study these things—the Committee on Economic Development, at the bidding of the Trilateral Commission, came out with a report calling for a reorientation in the nation’s conception of higher education. The growth of universities in the postwar period had produced a “crisis in democracy,” concluded the CED Report. An overeducated working class was entertaining unrealistic expectations for advancement; it was necessary either to restrict access to higher education or to diminish the value of a college degree. The budget-cutting that has produced the shortage of academic jobs—or, more accurately, of tenure-track jobs—is thus inseparable from a deliberate government policy of decredentialization and wage reduction—presided over by Democrats and Republicans, liberals and conservatives alike, we should note—that has gained impetus over the past quarter-century of increased global competition.

Second, in considerations of globalization it is crucial to view cap-
ital not as a Great Blob, “flexibly” oozing wherever the highest return on investment offers itself, but as instead internally riven, inevitably based in nation states pitted against one another in increasingly tense rivalry. The principal competition produced by globalization is not among workers but among corporations engaged in a free-for-all fight for profits, leading to overproduction and growing political and economic instability. The popular postmodernist view of multinational corporations as “transnational” octopi, ruthlessly exploiting the world’s workers but rendering global imperialist war obsolete, is a 1990s version of the Kautskyite denial of incipient global war against which Lenin polemicized as far back as 1916. The fact that Mitsubishi is intertwined with Chrysler does not mean that, when push comes to shove, the U.S. auto giant will not engage its counterpart in trade wars—or even military wars—to secure market dominance. Nor does the present military hegemony of the United States entail its financial supremacy. As William Greider has compellingly demonstrated, a long-term falling rate of profit and a shrinking share of the world’s markets are the principal developments in the U.S.’s international position over the past twenty-five years—even though the recent crises in various Asian economies, as well as the internal stagnation of Western European economies struggling to escape from their residual obligations to their safety nets, have temporarily made the U.S. economy look healthy by comparison. And while various IMF bailouts have given the impression that the rulers in the world’s most powerful economies are united in their efforts to punch out their upstart third-world rivals and squeeze maximum profits from the labor of the world’s ever-increasing proletariat, this development obscures the ongoing reality of inter-imperialist rivalry. In the world of international high finance—in our time as in Lenin’s—one day’s ally is the next day’s antagonist. Rather than facing a future in which the old metropoles band together to superexploit the periphery, we are facing a “new world disorder” characterized by spiraling capitalist competition and dissension and, sooner than we care to think, the threat of large-scale war. In a paradox more apparent than real, the postmodernist revulsion against totality when it comes to class analysis within the U.S. coexists with an embrace of supertotality when it comes to considerations of globalization—entailing, in both cases, an inability to
appreciate the role of exploitation in both establishing and destabilizing social relations.

What are the implications of this analysis of globalization for the situation of academic labor in the U.S.? Nelson and various contributors to Will Teach for Food view the current trend toward downsizing and proletarianization in the academy as remediable, if brutal, because they see "corporatization" as, finally, willed. The philistinism of Republican-dominated state legislatures bent upon defunding universities they view as hotbeds of feminism, multiculturalism, and relativistic deconstruction; the short-sightedness of campus administrators modeling their cost-cutting measures on those practiced in corporate America, and sacrificing the quality of higher education in the process; the greed of corporations unwilling to pay the tax bill that would make ample funds available to the public sector: these are, presumably, the root causes of the crisis in academic labor. But if we view the crisis in the context of increasing international competition and falling rates of profit, we reach quite a different conclusion—namely, that cutbacks in funding for higher education, like the shredding of the safety net and other attacks on the working class’s "social wage," are caused not primarily by stupidity or right-wing animus or greed (though these doubtless enter in) but by necessity. The Yale Corporation, it is true, no doubt possesses the funds to pay its campus workers, including graduate students, some multiples of what it pays them now. But the corporations that many of the Yale trustees help direct, and upon which they model their cost-cutting at Yale, do not enjoy this option—not if they are to remain internationally competitive. Nor do they have the option to pay the higher tax bill that would more generously fund the public sector—not if they are to remain internationally competitive.

From the above considerations, two main trends emerge as possibilities for the future of employment in U.S. higher education. On the one hand, its institutions may remain recognizable—albeit with an expansion of vocational education in community colleges, a restriction of access to downsized four-year colleges, and, among teachers throughout the system, a hardening of divisions between the haves and have-nots along the tenure-line. The upside of this first scenario, from the point of view of capital, is that, for students and teachers alike, it retains some of the social-control functions served
by higher education—even if equal opportunity and class mobility appear increasingly as mirages on an ever-receding horizon. The downside, however, is that, even with the continued devaluation of tenured professors’ salaries that would surely accompany this trend, it would still carry a significant price tag.

On the other hand, the second scenario—which Schrecker foresees, and which Nelson too predicts in his grimmer moments—is that higher education would be cut back across the board, and that all but the most elite private and flagship public campuses would turn into sites for vocational training, dispensed by a “flexible” teaching staff—cyber, video, or corporeal—for whom the tenure system is a distant memory, and for whose students movement into the “middle class” has ceased to function even as myth. This scenario, epitomized in the nightmare vision of a “Drive-Through U,” has in fact been validated in recent prophetic pieces in the *New York Times* and *Business Week*—hardly organs specializing in idle vision-making—as well as in recent proposals by New York mayor Rudolph Giuliani that the city’s public community colleges institute entrance examinations that would effectively reduce enrollments by some 75 percent. The upside of this second strategy, from the perspective of capital, is that it enforces labor discipline, produces fewer workers with unfulfillable expectations of advancement, and shaves labor costs to a minimum; the downside is that sooner or later it is bound to produce a massive crisis of popular confidence and precipitate those upheavals from below that the *New York Times* euphemistically refers to—in other countries—as “social unrest.” Although the first scenario is, in the short run, perhaps more benign for those faculty who manage to hold on to tenured jobs, both scenarios are in the long run disastrous for the great majority of academic workers (not to mention students). Both are, moreover, compatible with an increasingly fascistic turn in U.S. society—in which, as in a dystopian work of science fiction, the elites breathe pure air in the ethereal realms while the policed masses labor like ants and scavenge their living in the urban rubble. Neither scenario rules out the other, however, either synchronically or diachronically; and although the drift of the MLA’s CPE report is that the profession should accommodate itself to the first in order to offset the second, there is clearly no guarantee that adopting such a strategy would do
anything other than buy a little time for the more privileged—or, more accurately, for the less underprivileged. In any event, both scenarios are, or ought to be, unacceptable to all who work or learn on college campuses—except for maybe a few Yale professors, the truly “blessed of the earth,” who go to their graves priding themselves in their membership in the Yale Corporation. And both scenarios indicate the woeful inadequacy of current dike-plugging proposals such as unionizing faculty and graduate students and converting part-time adjunct positions to full-time. We have—to alter the metaphor—descended much too far down the slippery slope for such reformist measures even to begin to address the crisis.

I opened by naming the 1998 MLA Convention as the historical occasion prompting these meditations. In closing, let me alter the tone of what has perhaps seemed an unremittingly dour commentary by noting that, despite the appearance of uninhibited power on the part of those who impose upon us one or another regime of austerity, they do so out of weakness rather than strength, constraint rather than choice. They can carry out their “regime of educational disaccumulation,” therefore, only so long as our weakness remains greater than theirs. But even as the CPE was offering its prescription for mass academic suicide at the 1998 MLA Convention, the Radical Caucus was—in its modest way—definitively moving leftward, determining that academics friendly to the left can no longer engage in self-censorship about radical—that is, revolutionary—solutions to the present crisis. For too long—as the books under review here indicate—the discourse of progressives and leftists has been limited to the domain of piecemeal liberal reformism, validated by the implicitly anticommunist premises of a willfully anti-totalizing postmodernism. Yet the clearly systemic nature of the attack upon academic laborers—and our students—is forcing, for many, the realization that the capitalist social order cannot deliver upon its promises to the vast majority of people. Of course there is much to debate about what has derailed various movements for classless societies in our century; the MLA Radical Caucus, hardly the center for world revolution, cannot pretend to be a primary agent for change. But it can and will provide a forum in which contemplation of what in the 1930s used to be called “the way out” will not be ruled out of court, and in which attempts to contest inequities in the here and now will
occur alongside debates about how best to move beyond unionization as the limit of utopia as we seek to plant “the seeds of a new political vision.”

I close this discussion, both time-bound and futuristic, on a note of immediacy: any reader interested in listening in on, or joining, this debate—and becoming part of its “we”—is invited to view the MLA Radical Caucus web site at http://chss2.montclair.edu/furrg/_radcaucus.toc.htm.

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