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TWILIGHT OF THE HUMANISTS

A review of Frank Donoghue, *The Last Professors: The Corporate University and the Fate of the Humanities*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2008. 172 pages. \$22.00. ISBN: 978-0-8232-2860-7.

Judging from the glut of books with the word “last” in their titles, apparently not only the Christian Evangelicals are obsessed with the End Times. Some of the more recent and well known include Russell Jacoby’s *The Last Intellectuals*¹, Francis Fukuyama’s *The End of History and the Last Man*², Elizabeth Gilbert’s *The Last American Man*, Walker Percy’s *The Last Gentleman*³, and William Bennett’s two-volume history of the United States, *The Last Best Hope*⁴. Perhaps the blame can be laid at the feet of Fenimore Cooper’s *The Last of the Mohicans*.

Frank Donoghue’s *The Last Professors: The Corporate University and the Fate of the Humanities* is an alarmist little book that is at its most hysterical on the first page of its preface: “Professors . . . [a]s we know them—autonomous, tenured, afforded the time to research and write as well as teach—. . . are now disappearing from the landscape of higher education. The university is evolving in ways that make their continued existence unnecessary, even undesirable.” Promising to paint “an unremittingly bleak picture of what the future holds in store for humanities professors,” Donoghue goes on to assert that “professors of the humanities have already lost the power to rescue themselves.”

The reader who continues into the heart of the book will find, at the end of chapter two, what seems like a reconsideration of that dismal pronouncement: “Whether professors, as we know them, survive its [the academic research culture’s] likely demise remains for now uncertain.” If, in the preface, professors

¹ Jacoby, Russell. 2000. *The last intellectuals: American culture in the age of academe: with a new introduction by the author*. New York: BasicBooks.

² Fukuyama, Francis. 2006. *The end of history and the last man*. New York: Free Press.

³ Percy, Walker. 1966. *The last gentleman*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

⁴ Bennett, William J. 2006. *America: the last best hope*. Nashville, Tenn: Nelson Current.

are “disappearing” and are past the point of rescue, then we may be relieved to learn in chapter two that their survival is now merely “uncertain” rather than firmly settled. But this kind of lurching between predictions of imminent disaster and qualified concessions to more sober assessment occurs too often in this book.

Take, for example, Donoghue’s discussion of tenure. In the preface we are told that the practice of tenure is becoming “increasingly rare.” This startling claim is quietly modified in chapter two, when Donoghue explains that as a result of the expansion of adjunct faculty lines since the 1970s, “the proportion of tenure-track jobs [has] steadily declined.” In raw numbers, in other words, tenure-line positions may be as numerous as ever, or even more numerous, but as a percentage of all teaching lines in higher education, tenure-track lines have declined. In chapter three, however, Donoghue returns to the bold claim laid out in his preface: it is a “fact that [tenure] is slowly but surely disappearing.” On the next page, he slides back into percentages: given the steady growth of adjunct instructors, “tenured and tenure-track professors currently constitute only 35 percent of college teaching personnel and . . . this number is steadily falling.” But once again, the fact that the percentage of college teaching positions held by tenure-line faculty is falling does not necessarily mean that the actual number of those positions is falling. It might mean that, but it might not, and Donoghue never provides the numbers that would answer the question. One final example of Donoghue’s over-excited response to statistics: “If the current trends continue,” he writes, “tenure is likely to disappear almost altogether in the foreseeable future.” At first glance this looks like a solidly data-driven prediction, but at second glance, that’s a very big “if.” The current trends are a function of the growth of two-year and online, for-profit institutions in recent years (such schools have grown more vigorously than have traditional four-year colleges), but that growth is unlikely to continue indefinitely at that vigorous pace. Yet even if it does continue, only the *percentage* of tenure-line teaching jobs will shrink, not the total number of such jobs. Indeed, Donoghue concedes that “one cannot point to a systematic, gradualist administrative strategy to replace tenured faculty with adjuncts.” One cannot point to such a strategy because it does not exist.

Almost all college administrators agree that the vigorous growth of adjunct faculty since the early 1970s is a problem for higher education. Not only are adjuncts scandalously underpaid, but their proliferation has allowed colleges not to create the additional tenure lines that enrollment growth would otherwise require. Apart from administrators at some online, for-profit institutions, nobody argues that adjunct faculty are better than tenure-line faculty, and nobody defends the proliferation of course sections taught by adjunct faculty. But tenure lines are expensive, and adjuncts are inexpensive, and those sections have to be staffed, and nobody has figured out a way to staff them with tenure-line positions that doesn’t break the budget. Moreover, humanities faculty exacerbate the problem by producing an oversupply of Ph.D.’s and ABD’s, creating a vast pool of unemployed or under-employed humanities scholars willing to work in non-tenure-line positions for scandalously low wages.

Donoghue's discussion of tenure is further muddled by his argument that, far from serving to protect academic freedom or politically unpopular, radical lines of research, the tenure system in fact promotes conformity in scholarship, teaching, and university citizenship. He may have a point; after all, most tenure-and-promotion committees are made up of faculty who, like human beings generally, tend to respond positively to other people whom they see as sharing their values, work habits, and outlooks. Donoghue concedes that most of the recent assaults on tenure have come from the political right wing, and he judges those assaults wrong-headed, so why he adds his own assault from the left to his larger argument lamenting "the erosion of tenure" is somewhat puzzling.

For Donoghue is clearly a man of the left. As his subtitle suggests, he sees the traditional values of the liberal arts (more specifically, the values of the humanities) as under relentless attack from a "corporate" world unremittingly hostile to those values. In his first chapter he summarizes a century of such hostility, grounded in the conviction that the study of the humanities is "useless to success in business" and increasingly insisting (in the voices of college Board members and politicians) that colleges operate like businesses, i.e., with an emphasis on efficiency, productivity, usefulness, and competitive achievement. Parts of this argument are persuasive. The recent Spellings Commission Report, for example, with its clumsy, ill-informed insistence that colleges find ways to standardize and measure their productivity against one another, is simply boneheaded, and the current frenzy over "outcomes assessment" and "value-added" metrics, while perhaps well intentioned, is at best a distraction from the real work of a college. To the extent that "learning outcomes," assessment rubrics, textbook selection, and syllabi are determined administratively rather than by faculty, Donoghue's warnings are valid. But most tenured or tenure-line faculty control such decisions themselves, if not individually, then as part of a group of other faculty, and when Donoghue ominously intones, "Over the next two generations, I believe, the process of corporate reorientation will be nearly completed," he opens himself to the danger faced by all apocalypticists: namely, when the prophesied date arrives, the prophesied event does not appear.

When Donoghue compares the liberal arts at the beginning of the twenty-first century with Classics at the beginning of the twentieth, he identifies what at first seems to be a real problem, but the solution he proposes is simply wacky. Like the Classics, the humanities provide very little "instrumental value." Humanities courses provide no readily marketable skill, and they rarely change students' lives or start important social or political movements. Even when they do change students' lives, such change is a contingent result, rather than the kind of result an instructor can aim for and expect to attain with regularity. George Steiner pointed out long ago, in *Bluebeard's Castle*⁵, that Nazis can be liberally educated yet still become Nazis, and in our own day, we must acknowledge that neoconservatives are as well read and articulate as anyone else. We cannot show

⁵ Steiner, George. 1971. *In Bluebeard's castle; some notes towards the redefinition of culture*. The T.S. Eliot memorial lectures, 1970. New Haven: Yale University Press.

that humanities students are more economically productive, or better-informed citizens, or sharper in their moral perceptions, or more free from prejudice, than other students are. And we must admit that skills like critical thinking, analyzing an argument, or constructing an argument can be learned across the curriculum; the humanities hold no privileged stake in them.

Our students have known this for years. Donoghue reminds us that traditional liberal arts majors have been in the minority since 1970, and that most students today approach college with pragmatic aims. Today almost nobody majors in Classics, and Donoghue warns us that the same will hold true for all of the humanities disciplines within the next few years. But his solution, as I mentioned above, is wacky; as humanists, he says, we must collectively question the intrinsic good of efficiency, productivity, and profitability. He doesn't come out and say it, but one wonders if he thinks we ought to champion the inefficient, the unproductive, and the unprofitable. As he sees it, the chances of salvaging the humanities are exceedingly slim: "Our only hope might be to persuade students to look more skeptically upon the promises of college as job training." And he adds, with what I assume is a straight face, "This will be a tough sell."

If he's right, and we aren't able to make that sale, then what does the future hold? He seems a bit unsure. In the preface he predicts two kinds of universities in our future: (1) for-profit institutions like the University of Phoenix ("the only growth sector in higher education"), and (2) a dwindling number of elite institutions still devoted to the liberal arts ideal. A bit later in the book, however, he seems to change his mind and asserts that two-year colleges will become the "new standard post-secondary-education vehicle." The for-profit university fits his anti-corporatist model best, and he wants very badly to believe that the "astonishing rise to prominence of the for-profit universities is the single most important recent development in American higher education." But, finally, he can't believe it, and neither should we. Later in his book he concedes that a wave of scandals has rocked the for-profit universities, and that the graduation rate at the University of Phoenix is an embarrassing 16%. So he simply shifts his argument: rather than replacing traditional universities, the "real legacy of this industry [for-profit higher education] . . . is its lasting and widespread influence on traditional universities," i.e., traditional universities will increasingly operate like businesses, treating faculty as employees, treating students as customers or consumers, and seeking efficiencies in things like online course delivery. Online learning lends itself to "course management software packages," which push responsibility for course content away from individual faculty and toward the department, or the academic division, or even the institution. Of course it's easier to take such responsibility away from adjunct or non-tenure-line faculty. But administrators are only going to want to take such responsibility away from their faculty if they don't trust their faculty to make good decisions, and that lack of trust is likely only if the faculty are overwhelmingly adjunct or non-tenure-line. Donoghue has shown us what we already know: traditional American universities have hired more adjunct and non-tenure-line faculty over the past forty years. But he has not shown us that they have done this because they have been persuaded corporatization of the faculty and curriculum will offer students

a better education. They have done this because the price of a college education has grown at an alarming rate over the same period of time, and to replace all of those adjunct and non-tenure-line faculty with tenure-line faculty would be very expensive, and would push the cost of a college education even higher.

The final version of Donoghue's prediction for the future of higher education is much less alarming than the one he lays out in his preface. The final version is threefold: (1) at the bottom of the hierarchy are the community colleges, which Donoghue predicts will be increasingly for-profit institutions that serve as "proving-grounds for the business community;" (2) in the middle will be the non-elite schools such as Eastern Illinois or Central Florida, which will be pushed toward operating on a corporate model and educating their students for jobs; (3) at the top will be the elite "prestige marker" schools such as Princeton or Swarthmore, which will continue to function as they do today. To my eye, this vision of the future looks an awful lot like the present. I'm skeptical of Donoghue's claim that for-profit two-year colleges will displace the state-subsidized schools that exist today, but otherwise his tripartite model simply describes the present landscape of higher education. As for his corporatization argument, colleges will work to become more efficient and productive simply because they can no longer raise their prices at the rates at which they have been raising them. If Donoghue is right about the business culture's dangerous fetishization of efficiency and productivity, he is wrong to turn them into bogeymen. There is nothing intrinsically wrong with being efficient or productive.

As for his darker pronouncements regarding the extinction of the professoriate and the demise of the humanities, such sky-is-falling, eleventh-hour sensationalism is difficult to take seriously. Classics departments had a difficult time persuading people that a reading knowledge of Latin or Greek was crucial to leading a good and rewarding life, but most people—including employers and prospective employees—don't need to be persuaded that effective writing skills are important to such a life, and many continue to believe that a liberal arts education affords the strongest available grounding in how to read, how to write, and how to think across a range of disciplines about a wide variety of subjects. If things were as dark as Donoghue thinks they are, the for-profits would be in a much stronger position now than they were, say, ten years ago, and we would see far more administrators calling seriously for revisions in the tenure system and the abolition of humanities curricula. Things are not entirely sunny in the weather of higher education, but the sky isn't about to come crashing down on us any time soon.

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