

# Chapter 21. After Adjuncting: Questioning Academia's "Big Club"

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"It's a big club . . . and you ain't in it!"

– George Carlin

When learning of this project, I was caught between conflicting impulses. I could write a semi-autobiographical narrative about my career trajectory in the academic precariat<sup>1</sup> and about how I escaped—or I could dive more deeply into the disaster American academia has become. The former might make good "quit lit," as it's now called. The latter, though, would prove more useful.

The impoverishment of the "New Faculty Majority" hasn't happened in a vacuum, after all. A latent anti-intellectualism has long permeated American society from top to bottom. I'm not referring to religious fundamentalists or some such group nowhere near the societal locus of power. Efforts to socially engineer obedient workers and compliant consumers via public schooling and mass media go back a very long time.<sup>2</sup> Once, generations ago, the damage was minimal. The centralization of the American political economy that came about after the Second World War did much to change this.<sup>3</sup> Then came globalization, and the prevailing ideology driving capitalism—neoliberalism—evolved to support both.<sup>4</sup>

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1. The term precariat has gained currency, as it refers to a core phenomenon of 21st century neoliberal political economy. Adjunct faculty members are just one species of precariat. For a definitive account, see Guy Standing's *The Precariat: A Dangerous New Class*.

2. The reader unfamiliar with the true history of the shaping of primary and secondary education in the US and wanting a quick overview might consult Paolo Lionni's *The Leipzig Connection*. The most comprehensive treatment I have seen, though, is John Taylor Gatto's *The Underground History of American Education: A Schoolteacher's Intimate Investigation into the Problem of Modern Schooling*. Gatto spent 30 years boots-on-the-ground in New York City's toughest schools, winning a New York State Teacher of the Year award in 1990. Then he quit and embarked on an independent research mission that included following money trails and investigating the role of foundations such as The Rockefeller Foundation using very deep pockets to shape the modern public school paradigm. I have no doubt he knows what he is talking about; if he is not an "expert," no one is.

3. To get a sense of how long this process has been underway, see C. Wright Mills' *The Power Elite*.

4. For a good accounting of the rise of neoliberal ideology, see Philip Mirowski and Dieter Plehwe's edited collection, *The Road from Mont Pèlerin: The Making of the Neoliberal Thought Collective*.

One consequence was the erosion of upward mobility as we moved toward a deindustrialized, techno-feudalist global marketplace of “gigs” instead of stable, reliable, long-term employment. Aspiring professors were just one casualty of these long-term trends. Atop this system is a small ruling class of neo-feudal plutocrats, having gained far more wealth from investments and passive income than real, productive work; next come their top administrators and technocrat enforcers; and finally is a protective encirclement of well-financed upper-echelon media, tenured-class academics, and think tank-based skills.

Below all these is the new peasantry, or serfdom. That would be *us*. We were never invited into the “big club.” We tilled the academic soil of the “gig economy” plantation that stands at the end-road of deindustrialization and the neoliberal business model. Adjunct pay may be as little as \$2,500 per course, which means earning under \$20,000 per year after taxes. Earning this little may mean going into debt to pay utilities or suffering the stress of choosing to go hungry so one’s children can eat the ramen noodles—especially for those without parental support or a spouse with a real salary. All while praying for no health or car emergencies.

On the other hand, college and university administrations—academia’s techno-feudalist enforcers—have seen their numbers swell and their pay explode over the past three decades. Few adjuncts are positioned to expose and challenge this abusive system, for despite efforts at adjunct unionization that are sometimes assisted by organizations, such as the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), there is no established (i.e., properly funded) powerbase from which adjuncts can operate and draw on resources where necessary.

I am one of those who graduated with his doctorate in philosophy and high hopes, given three publications in refereed journals (another forthcoming) and presentations at national meetings. These were properly specialized, carefully footnoted, calculated efforts to push the right buttons. I knew I faced stiff competition for tenure-track academic employment, but basically I trusted the system.

My hopes were gradually dashed by a multiyear job search as I moved from institution to institution to institution (six in all in ten years). Because of the onerous process of writing position-specific cover letters, getting three letters of recommendation, and assembling any other requested materials—a job in itself often occupying over 40 hours per week—while teaching as many as four classes—I’d set aside scholarly projects, in many cases indefinitely. Finally, I left university teaching to seek other opportunities. I had already withdrawn applications for part-time teaching positions due to what I considered insultingly low pay.

I then discovered another harsh truth about the neoliberal/proto-techno-feudal era we are being pulled into. It’s not “nicer” outside academia than it is inside, unless you can retrain and retool in a hurry as some kind of entrepreneur. The gig economy is ubiquitous. Moreover, despite my earning an additional professional degree (in public health promotion and education), more than one nonacademic job interview ended with the subtext OVERQUALIFIED.

“Why would someone with your education want to work here?”

The answer, “*Even smart people need to eat, pay rent, and put gas in their vehicles,*” didn’t seem to suffice. After drawing unemployment for six months, I lowered my head and removed those advanced degrees from my resume. I then wrote obituaries for a couple of years, ghostwrote a couple of books (work I had to keep secret but which paid *well*), and wrote a technical report for a cancer research group supported by money from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

Writing was clearly my superpower and still is. I returned to academia when the technical writing gig ended (the CDC pulled the plug) and because I saw no other options: you can be the best writer around, but if you can’t sell it in a marketplace hostile to anything written above a seventh-grade level, you’re screwed.

What I discovered when I returned to academia was that while I’d been away, the adjunct zone had more than doubled in size. I stepped back in. Thus began seven years of freeway-flying sometimes hundreds of miles per week: I worked at four *more* institutions beyond the six I had previously worked for in four cities/communities overall, working on six campuses total during that period.

By this time, I’d made uneasy peace with my status as an outsider—someone who would not only never be invited into the big club but who had also started to look askance at it. Having studied the authors and subjects I had studied, I realized that a solid case could be made that academia had been seriously off course for a very long time and that the adjunct zone was only one manifestation of a system rife with corruption.

What/who had I studied? Philosophers in my own area, such as Thomas S. Kuhn and Paul Feyerabend, who in different ways stressed the social embeddedness of knowledge and, in the latter’s case, forcefully questioned the “scientific” (not *scientific*) methodology that permeates Western institutions, including higher education, like water fills a sponge.

In other areas, my reading ran the gamut from neoconservative Straussians like Allan Bloom to left-leaning thinkers like Russell Jacoby, Cary Nelson, Noam Chomsky, Richard Rorty, and Robert Frodeman and Adam Briggie. These authors—and others too numerous to cite individually—collectively threw cold water on the idea of academia as a “safe space” for the pursuit of truth, and for reasons quite different from those currently being bandied about. The problems *are* structural, in addition to just plain awful ideas floating around, and come down to perverse incentives driving adjunctification and administrative bloat.<sup>5</sup> Were there space here, we could delve into the causes of excessive inequality more broadly, the corruption of a financial system designed to benefit billionaires, the decomposition of American politics (both parties) that birthed Trumpism, and more.

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5. For an up-to-date account, see Jason Brennan and Phillip Magness’ *Cracks in the Ivory Tower: The Moral Mess of Higher Education*. It should be noted that the authors are not sympathetic to adjuncts’ plight.

For my part, back around the turn of the millennium, I began to take more chances with my work, developing and defending theses that were interdisciplinary instead of specialized, thus sometimes venturing outside the narrow, paradigmatic boxes academic philosophy supplied.

One result was a couple of heavily footnoted pieces that were rejected by journal after journal. The rejections often came without referees' comments—although one came from someone who had outlined the paper, clearly showing that they'd read it and understood it but recommended its rejection anyway. They did not supply a reason for their decision to reject.

Philosophy supposedly trades on arguments, evaluations of their cogency, and their ability to contribute usefully to ongoing conversations. Really significant contributions often began new conversations. Absent sound assessments from others that my material was lacking, I came to a realization that made those hopes I mentioned previously seem naïve and the life I'd been leading shallow and inauthentic.

Survival in academia was not about making sound arguments at all. It was more about not pissing off the local big club: tenured faculty and administration. I'd left temporary positions in the past with a distinct sense of having become a threat to superiors. Teaching was similar: in my experience, philosophy adjuncts were typically assessed on their ability to entertain students for an hour (or two or three) by cross-pollinating Socrates and Seinfeld.

"Unexciting in the classroom" came back on one of my evaluations by a senior faculty member. The truth: *academia is not a meritocracy*, and it probably never was, neither in scholarship nor in teaching. Meritocracy is, by and large, a myth. There are Horatio Alger stories out there, of course. But the drama surrounding such narratives is a dead giveaway of their outlier status.

Many of the dominant tendencies of the past century—and the present one—are more the products of intellectual inbreeding and in-house political sympathies than advancing insight. *Novelty* has become an end in itself. What "succeeds" is what has the institutional capability to bully alternative points of view off stage. Or, to use a trendy recent term, to *cancel* them.

This stage was set years ago when humanities and liberal arts departments kept churning out Ph.D.s with no end in sight after the job market collapsed in the 1970s. A "buyers' market" creates an environment in which conformists are hired and dissidents are weeded out. A few of us who defended unorthodoxies learned (sometimes the hard way) to keep our heads down if we wanted academic employment. We tried to avoid rocking boats on campus.

The internet did much to break up the consensus-reality narratives that had dominated before, especially about how "our democracy" really functions. Its new platforms exposed how major media and academia are controlled endeavors designed to turn out a certain kind of scholar, voter, and consumer: one who believes and does what he/she is told and does not question the consensus or the authority of "the experts."

Eventually I presented some of my findings in a book—for which I created my own “publishing collective” with a few close friends who supplied valuable assistance. I was sure no academic press would touch it (I did not try).<sup>6</sup> With that book in hand, I asked my department chair for a raise one last time. After I was turned down flat, I resigned and prepared to move overseas (a small inheritance helped), assisted by friends who were vacating also, one by one, an America in cultural and political-economic decline and becoming expats.

I became an entrepreneur of sorts, trading in ideas. I learned copywriting and copyediting and did more ghostwriting. I worked for a handful of clients, some of whom were native Spanish speakers needing help with English and some of whom needed help with other kinds of writing.

Since my departure (in 2012), things in academia have gotten worse.

It was clear all along: there are too few free minds in academia to make a difference. Someone with a *free mind* questions dominant narratives, especially those about how power really operates in this world, who has it, how it transcends abstract political economy, how we’re encouraged to believe lies, and what we can do about this.

We had high hopes for the internet, but with “Big Tech” censorship in place, that hope is now dwindling. I sometimes find myself looking back wistfully at what could have been . . . and I follow the latest tendencies. Do I see a massive brain drain from present-moment academia, or is it just sour grapes? I don’t think it’s sour grapes.

Philosophy has clearly suffered. Where are the present era’s Bertrand Russells, its Ludwig Wittgensteins, its Jean-Paul Sartres, or even its Thomas S. Kuhns and Paul Feyerabends and Richard Rortys? With rare exceptions, those purporting to replace them leave *much* to be desired. *Anyone* can produce automatic writing calling Trumpism nascent fascism. Would such authors try explaining how the American political system got into this mess? Which of “our” premises and narratives collapsed, and why?<sup>7</sup> That is going to take *work*.

For my part, I’ve survived. I’m still in a foreign country, living in a condo in a place where the cost of living is half of what it is in the US. I do not use heat during winter months, though. Nor do I jet off to conferences every year like I once did (thank God for Zoom). I earn income through ghostwriting, editing, and occasional English tutoring.

I have no employer and am not seeking one. Have we not learned, *employees are expendable*? And the larger the employer, the less relative importance you have and the more expendable you are. That’s the adjunct situation in a nutshell.

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6. The finished product appears as *Four Cardinal Errors: Reasons for the Decline of the American Republic*.

7. If you want to find answers to these questions, I’d begin with Rorty’s *Achieving Our Country*, as Rorty has been credited—correctly, in my view—with diagnosing *some* of the conditions that led to Donald Trump’s victory in 2016.

The employer pays starvation wages because of the systemic, built-in assumption that you have nowhere else to go. And because it *can*.

This is due to the still-ridiculously overcrowded and therefore hostile academic job market. There are no easy answers. Surely there is something to the claim that higher education has produced and is *still* producing too many Ph.D. degrees. This is because of perverse incentives: the more Ph.D.s a department graduates, the greater its prestige.

I wonder how many of those Ph.D.s still see academia as a refuge from that equally hostile gig economy out there filled with Uber drivers and Amazon worker bees?

Unraveling the conundrums the adjunct crisis points toward isn't possible in a piece of this brevity.<sup>8</sup> Arguably, academia is a microcosm in a world where wealth is concentrating, inequality is worsening, and basic freedoms—however understood—are diminishing: these are those proto-techno-feudalist developments I mentioned at the outset.

Those of us who put down our academic peasant's plows and walked away did not abandon our ability to think nor the will to use it. Thus, we can still ask pointed questions and make a few constructive suggestions. It is in this spirit that I offer this piece and the companion material available online.

The most constructive suggestion I have is that we need a new and bold network of philosophers—and folks in cognate areas who want into our “little club” (if you will). We've been misled and lied to, to an extent that we need to go *back to basics*, review what we should be doing, and do so in a *parallel environment* of our own design.<sup>9</sup> This can be done in the spirit of the free and open discourse my generation once championed, such as during the original civil rights movement, and directed also against the past and more recent destructive foreign wars of choice.

While present generations face multiple challenges and an admittedly much worse situation than mine encountered, I would invite its members to ask themselves the following: Do you really want to commit your abilities and lives to institutions that *daily* confess their indifference to your dedication? Is the recent pall of censorship and cancelation a direction you want to go in—or be dragged in? And finally, in a divided nation, how much of what we see and hear from both sides of the political aisle is *theater* (critical race theory advocates *and* obsessives, I'm talking to *you!*), distracting from the geopolitical and geo-economic realities I described in my second and third paragraphs of this chapter: *things we had better start paying attention to while we still can!*

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8. I expand on some of them in my Substack article “Stale Breadcrumbs from the Academic Dinner Table: Notes of an Ex-Adjunct.”

9. I elaborate on these points in chapter six of *What Should Philosophy Do? A Theory*.

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