



The Unofficial University: Precarity and the Academic Profession

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ABSTRACT *This essay challenges the prevailing consensus that the current deprivations of the labor of the American university, primarily precarity and its associated ills, are the result of the neoliberal orthodoxy that dominated the late twentieth century. It offers an exploration of the influence of the nineteenth century German university on the formation of the then nascent U.S. system of higher education. Through this excavation it is shown that along with the foundational principle of *wissenschaft* as the indissoluble unity of teaching and research came the two-tier employment system of stable employment for some and precarious work lives for many. Understood as the “unofficial university” this analysis suggests that contingency is not a neoliberal virus imported from outside the university but instead a systemic employment feature present at its founding. The essay concludes by exploring the implications of this reassessment of neoliberalism for the burgeoning field of Critical University Studies as it reimagines the university for the twenty-first century as a locus for increasing social justice.*

KEYWORDS academic labor; unofficial university; critical university studies; precarity; privatdozent

The academic job market has become more and more competitive. PhD graduates are finding it increasingly difficult to land tenure-track academic positions. Candidates are often expected to have several publications in leading journals, putting lots of pressure on them during their training period. Many PhD graduates are unemployed or underemployed (National Science Foundation, 2012; Chapter 3). Reports even state there are PhD graduates on food stamps (Nichols, 2013). (Larson et al., 2014, p. 745)

The story of learned men [sic] in the universities at present tells of the many broken existences and forces burned out before their time. (Eulenburg, 1908, p. 149)

A better piece of mechanism than any other nation has yet created. (Flexner, 1967, p. 289)

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The transformation of academic labor that can be said to have begun some 50 years ago seems perhaps to have approached its nadir. Estimates of this transformation are notoriously unreliable, as even campus hiring authorities seem not to have a clear sense of their instructional staffs. As Cross and Oldenberg (2009) demonstrate there is no consensus as to the number of or contractual status of non-tenure track faculty (NTT). In spite of this variability and unreliability a rough consensus maintains that, at present, as many as 75% of all higher education classrooms are staffed by faculty holding irregular, NTT positions (Fure-Slocum, 2024, p. 3). This mix of tenure track (TT) and NTT faculty represents the culmination of a refashioning of labor on college campuses (and beyond) that began in the 1970s only to be dramatically accelerated by the economic downturn and anemic recovery of 2008 (Angulo, 2018). The result has been a wholesale inversion of the ratio between TT and NTT faculty culminating in NTT faculty now constituting a “precarious new faculty majority” (Murray, 2019, p. 235) with all that the notion of precariousness implies in the higher education context: substandard, even penurious wages and benefits; unstable work lives; increased vulnerability of family and personal lives; mounting pressure on all strata of faculty as the presence of underpaid faculty erodes their bargaining power; economic stagnation; the undermining of traditions of shared governance; and declines in student learning outcomes at a time when affordability and access to higher education is becoming both more important and more out of reach for millions. As Thorkelson (2015) puts it, “it would not, however, be controversial to suggest that the precaritization of academic labor has been one of the most significant developments in recent decades” (p. 213). The present employment relations of universities and their faculty constitutes what can only be described as a “wicked problem” (Murray, 2019, p. 235).

Outwardly, this transformation evokes the parable of a frog being boiled alive. Yet, a transformation of this magnitude has certainly not gone unnoticed as warnings about the pernicious impacts of the *adjunctification* of higher education have been sounded for several decades. Initially framed as the “job crisis” or “crisis in academic labor,” a rich set of incisive analyses called attention to the dramatic shift in employment practices then refashioning the higher education labor market. In titles such as *Will Teach for Food: Academic Labor in Crisis* (Nelson, 1997) and *Chalk Lines: The Politics of Work in the Managed University* (Martin, 1998), the ill-named process “corporatization” was identified as the primary driver of these structural transformations. In their contribution to this literature Johnson et al. (2003) argue:

What is new about today’s university is not only that [it] serves the corporation – for it has always done that – but that it emulates it ... Universities now see the potential for profit; they import managerial techniques from corporations; they use new technologies by which administrators assume more control over professors’ labor; they “temp” their workforce. (p. 13)

In the ensuing years, as universities continued to “temp” their workforce the crisis literature was subsumed under the sign of Critical University Studies (CUS). As part of the effort to intervene in this process there have been various efforts to name alternatives to the corporatized, marketized, or managerial university. Reflecting to some degree Bill Readings’ (1996) formulation of living in the “ruins” of the university these alternatives include Rolfe’s (2013) “university of dissensus,” Yang’s (2017) “third university,” and perhaps most prominently, wordily, and evocatively Moten and Harney’s (2004) “downlow lowdown maroon community of the university, the Undercommons of Enlightenment” (p. 102). This rather robust, interdisciplinary tradition of scholarly and activist interventions is now well into its third wave (Petrina & Ross, 2014) though, it should be noted, with very little to show for it as the practices it decries have, if anything, only gotten steadily worse.

This essay suggests a reason for that failure as well as participating in the effort to name and identify alternatives to what Steffen (2020) labels the professional model that has now been subsumed under the dictates of academic capitalism. First, following the work of Kaufman-Osborn (2023) it begins by recognizing, in contrast to the crisis literature and CUS more broadly, that the university has not been corporatized as it has been, almost from its inception, a form of corporation. Initially constructed as a “member” corporation wherein stakeholders, especially faculty, had rights to self-determination it became in the colonial period a “property” corporation governed from above by unaccountable boards of non-members. It follows from this observation that the academic labor market is not in any sense in a state of crisis: it is functioning in the tasks assigned to it almost exactly as intended. That is, “a dominant American industry functions, largely successfully, with a part-time, contingent, temporary, workforce” (Discenna, 2007, p. 468). Next, through an excavation and recovery of an older, perhaps primordial conceptualization of academic labor, “the unofficial Universität” or *unofficial university* (Eulenburg, 1908, p. 5), the essay posits that the two-tier or ring and core model has been a part of university life for almost as long as it has been a corporation. The unofficial university was an appellation given to the marginalized caste of academic laborers who toiled in the late nineteenth to early twentieth century German university. The term denotes the contributions of a category of workers, frequently (though not exclusively) classified as *privatdozenten*, who staffed the classrooms of German universities at cut-rate (and often no-rate) prices during a period of rapid growth and democratization (Jarusch, 1978). At its peak, the unofficial university made up approximately 75% of the faculty of German universities (Busch, 1963, p. 319) constituting a precarious faculty majority that “survived with difficulty on fees from their students and whatever outside income they could put together” (Chickering, 1993, p. 73). The *privatdozenten* of the unofficial university were, like their counterparts the contingents or adjuncts of contemporary American institutions, the “serfs of academe” (Petersen, 2020, p. 42).

This excavation of the unofficial university therefore functions as a reminder and warning for CUS broadly conceived. In most accounts, neoliberalism is identified as a novel challenge to more just or at least less exploitative university labor practices, as when Lawless (2018) argues, “the conditions of academic labor are shifting under neoliberal ideologies. Higher education, which was once largely a not-for-profit model of education, is becoming increasingly corporatized, privatized, and anti-intellectual” (p. 85). However, an understanding of the German unofficial university comprised of a *privatdozenten* suggests that the “ring and core” model of employment wherein “a small core of permanent employees [is] surrounded by a wide ring of contingent workers” (Miller, 2016, p. 3) is not, in any respect, an imported business practice but instead indigenous to the university itself where at its founding “a core of full professors surrounded by a larger circle of *privatdozenten*” (Busch, 1963, p. 339) expanded the reach of university as an institution. As CUS moves forward it is time to reckon with the unofficial university there at the birth of the university as a system. Otherwise, “we are left with a world littered by centuries of accumulated economic, social, and cultural debris, in which the power of these heaps, accretions, and wrecks has increasing hold on the present and future” (Savage, 2021, p. 22).

This argument concerning the centrality of the unofficial university to our understanding of academic labor is pursued in the following steps. First, the migration, appropriation and transformation of the German model of higher education to the United States and beyond is explored with an eye to documenting how it came to insinuate itself as the hegemonic construct of academic professionalism. This section demonstrates that along with such innovations as the merger of research and teaching as the *sin qua non* of academic work, the ring and core model of employment was well known and indeed celebrated by reformers of the twentieth century American university. Next, the structural similarities between the *privatdozenten* of the unofficial university are elaborated, detailing the degree to which the American experience of academic contingency mirrors and reproduces its early twentieth century forebear. This comparison highlights the extent to which academic freedom as the lodestar of the university as a system of knowledge production and dissemination was purchased by the marginalization of minoritized people. The essay then moves on to identify key differences between the German model and its American offspring, differences that expand the size of the unofficial university and render it and even more important resource for our understanding of academic labor. Finally, the implications of the unofficial university and the resistances to it by some of its members are explored for their contributions to understanding academic labor, critical university studies, and cognitive labor more broadly. That is, if CUS is to proceed as an intervention into the dystopic contemporary state of academic labor then it may be well past time to abandon notions like neoliberalism, marketization, and corporatization and to grapple with what may properly be referred to as the *academitization* of our work, economy, and culture.

The Migration of an Ideal

The hegemony of the German model within the system of American higher education has attained the status of taken for granted knowledge. In spite of the wide range of institutional types and associated missions in higher education the fact that the PhD serves as a credential for employment generally testifies to the dominance of the German model (Childress, 2019). The traditional narrative of how Germany came to have such an outsized influence on American higher education suggests that “the earliest American colleges were simply boys finishing schools after the Cambridge model, where sons of the ruling class were taught by sons of the ruling class to become gentlemen” (Calder, 1998, p. 97). Due in large part to the recent history of conflict between the U.S. and Great Britain, Germany became an attractive alternative of Americans seeking educational advancement. As Levine (2021) documents, “growth in American higher education depended critically on Germany. By the end of the nineteenth century nearly ten thousand Americans had traveled to Germany to study in the universities” (p. 6). A degree from a German university was regarded as an important credential and German became the predominant secondary language for Americans and a necessary “prerequisite for doctoral studies” (King, 1998, p. 104). The exposure to German higher education proved transformative for a moribund culture of higher education in the United States. As Haskell (1996) summarizes:

The Victorian reformers whom we now remember as architects of the modern American university ... drew inspiration from ancient precedents of faculty self-governance in England and from the full-bodied traditions of academic freedom that many of them had seen at first hand during their own student days in Germany. (pp. 43-44)

The innovators and architects influenced by their experience in Germany included, most notably, Daniel Gilman at Johns Hopkins, Andrew White of Cornell, and Henry Tappan of the University of Michigan (Röhrs, 1995, p. 83). Thus, McClelland (1980) argues, “of all the universities in Western society, those of Germany have probably had the greatest significance in modern times” (p. 2).

Calder (1998) posits that there were four key principles of the German model that were appropriated to varying degrees to the U.S. context. These four principles included the independence of the university from the state, the principle of academic freedom, the relevance of education, and the indissoluble unity of research and teaching (p. 97). And while these four principles are inextricably linked, it is the unity of research and teaching that was both transformative in regards to the labor of the professoriate and foundational for the remaining principles. Rooted in the concept of *wissenschaft* the unity of research and teaching was understood to lend credibility to the enterprise of higher education by professionalizing its practitioners. Frequently translated simply as science, it can also be rendered as letters as in the common phrase

“*Reich der Wissenschaft*” or “republic of letters” (McClelland, 1980, p. 157). Understood in this way both humanists and scientists saw “the introduction of higher standards of teaching and research in the German universities” (p. 157). *Wissenschaft* heralded the disinterested pursuit of knowledge which facilitated increasing specialization and with it the relative autonomy of disciplinary scholarship freed by the norms of academic freedom from either state interference of other utilitarian imperatives. In short, the German universities “were the first to fuse teaching with research functions and thereby create the very model of the modern university” (McClelland, 1980, p. 2).

However, while the fusion of research and teaching was largely understood to have brought about a renewed sense of professionalization for the professoriate, and with it a sense of independence, it is also clear that the two functions always existed in an uneasy tension. Increased specialization was understood to have produced increased fragmentation of knowledge that threatened the more traditional idea of *bildung* or the education of the whole person (Bayer, 2017). More problematic was that research and teaching were not always compatible activities. There were the, by now, familiar complaints of exceptional scholars whose instructional prowess often proved wanting:

I have heard von Treitschke’s Politik a few times, and it was so painful for me to see and hear that I gave up and used the hour hearing Breslau on 17th and 18th century history. I think v. Treitschke must have grown much worse since you heard him, as now he cannot hear his own voice, runs all sentences together, has no inflection according to sense, but his talk is most distressing sobbing. (Ticknor, 1876, as quoted in Röhrs, 1995, p. 90)

Similar complaints could be found throughout Germany. As McClelland (1980) notes: “many of these voyagers into the unknown were as notoriously bad lecturers as they were famously strong inspirers of the young” (p. 174).

And yet the larger problem was tied to the success of the German model. In part due to the increased professionalization of the professoriate under the auspices of *wissenschaft* demand for higher education rapidly increased (Eulenburg, 1908). Increased demand meant increased pressure on faculty to deliver instruction which, in turn, led to less time for research. In order to maintain the indissoluble unity of teaching and research for some, the two functions were effectively divided and a second class of worker, the *privatdozenten*, were given increased responsibility for staffing classrooms. In language that could be culled directly from contemporary CUS analyses, Chickering (1993) notes: “ministries of culture responded to the growth of university enrollments by entrusting an increasing share of the curriculum to them [the *privatdozenten*]” (p. 73). In fact, among the “philosophical” faculty, that is those not in law, medicine, or theology, the *ordinarien* (TT) had already ceased to constitute the majority of the faculty after the 1870s and had sunk to 43% of the staff by 1905 (McClelland, 1980, p. 260). The core and ring model had by this time become thoroughly entrenched in the German university.

Similarly, both the privatdozenten and American contingent faced similar problems related to how their respective universities categorized and named their employment. Thus far this essay has primarily adopted the term privatdozent as this, like its American counterpart *adjunct* is the most common coinage. However, it is by no means the sole name given to faculty lacking permanent or stable appointments. As identified by Eulenburg (1908) there is an entire panoply of employment relations and associated nomenclature outside of the traditional *ordinarien* that is largely dependent on different regional and often institutional practices (pp. 3-4). Thus, the term *nichtordinarien* (NO) or even *extraordinarien* (EO) is a somewhat more accurate way of representing the distinction between faculty with stable contractual relationships and those with more unstable, tenuous, or precarious work relations, and therefore, work lives. This practice serves much the same role in the contemporary American system. According to a study of NTT faculty conducted by Cross and Goldenberg (2009) of 10 institutions, the authors identified a partial list of titles that included over 20 separate names for NTT faculty. These names refer to varying contractual relationships though in all cases these relationships are more precarious than their TT counterparts. The effect of these varied naming practices is, in both instances, to obscure the degree to which universities make use of and are reliant on precarious labor. The sheer diversity of titles and associated practices makes it difficult for scholars to study the issue, for the precarious themselves to make common cause with one another, and perhaps not surprisingly “most university leaders have only the vaguest idea of how many NTT instructors they employ” (Cross & Goldenberg, 2009, p. 35).

Finally, it should be noted that not all privatdozents (PD), *nichtordinarien* (NO) or *extraordinarien* (EO) were necessarily downtrodden members of an academic proletariat. Again, much like their counterparts in the contemporary American university, individuals were drawn to the university for a variety of reasons, some having nothing to do with hopes of an academic career. The ranks of the privatdozenten were often populated with professionals from other fields using the imprimatur of the university to advance non-academic career goals and ambitions. In large part, such individuals were consistent with the goals of offering courses that were deemed to be too specialized to be serviced by the *ordinarien*. Ideally, such relationships benefit both parties, providing crucial expertise to the universities while fostering relationships between the university and the professions. In effect, however, it also meant that universities were able to take advantage of a labor force that was being supported by other institutions or, as the case may be, families. This form of labor, wherein the university is facilitated in offering substandard compensation due to the wages being supplemented, or in many cases replaced, by families or other institutions amounts to an enormous, largely unaccounted subsidy to the bottom line of the university. The next section of this paper details some of these subsidies.

In any event, at the very moment that the German university reached its peak influence and American reformers such as Gilman, Tappan, and White were busy remaking their institutions according to the models that they so admired,

the faculty of those institutions were quickly being transformed into precarious workers. Further, the privatdozenten system was clearly understood by U.S. education reformers. Abraham Flexner, one of the most outspoken champions of the German model of higher education clearly and pointedly praised the privatdozenten system. Flexner, the founder of Princeton University's Institute for Advanced Research, has had an enormous influence on American higher education, perhaps especially medical education (Markel, 2010). As Iwabuchi (2004) asserts, "an examination of Flexner's ideal for the university and professional schools allows us to understand the evolution of higher education in the United States" (pp. 140-141). In 1929, following his success in reforming and professionalizing medical education in the U.S., he undertook a review of universities in the U.S., Great Britain, and Germany. Flexner's (1967) work, *Universities, American, English, German*, not only lauded the superiority of the German model, due to its fusion of research and teaching, but also for its use of the privatdozenten that served "as the very heart of the university" (p. 316) as well as, perhaps paradoxically, a "guarantee of both freedom and scholarship" (pp. 287-288).

Flexner's claims regarding the superiority of the privatdozenten is predicated on the idea that "freedom from economic considerations, a freedom which involved obligations of a purely scientific nature seemed to him to be the most effective precondition for the realization of truth" (Röhrs, 1995, p. 112). The example of philosopher Ernst Cassirer is perhaps illustrative. As part of a minoritized population Cassirer was only able to participate in academic life as a privatdozent at the University of Berlin (Lipton, 1978). However, as a member of a prominent family with the resources to support him as an unpaid privatdozent he was still capable of producing a prodigious amount of scholarship (Matherne, 2021). His sojourn at Berlin, which lasted 13 years must, by any measure, be deemed productive. Among other achievements he had published a definitive intellectual biography of Immanuel Kant, served as a general editor of a multivolume collection of Kant's work and was the lead editor of the highly influential *Kantstudien*. And yet, the work for which Cassirer is best remembered, primarily his monumental *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* (2021), was not produced until Cassirer took up a regular position at the newly formed University of Hamburg. This increased productivity and originality is frequently attributed to Cassirer's exposure to the Warburg library but it should not be missed that it also coincided with his assumption of a regular position with the stability and resources of stable employment.

Moreover, Flexner's championing of the unofficial university constituted of precarious privatdozenten was in no way uninformed. Flexner's report describing the superiority of the German university is finely attuned to not only the tremendous difficulties of the privatdozenten but also of the unofficial university's central importance to the model itself or, perhaps more precisely, how contingency and precariousness are necessary components for *wissenschaft*. Flexner (1967) describes in some detail the process through which faculty became privatdozenten describing it as "unsalaried license to

teach ... offer a lecture course or two, and in any one of a variety of ways attach himself [sic] to a laboratory, a clinic, or a library, in order that he might continue his productive work" (p. 288). The unofficial university was, in his words, "a nursery" (p. 288) but a nursery that provided "years [of] hard sledding ... poverty, hardship, excessive and premature productivity" (p. 288; p. 316). At the same time, Flexner (1967) posits:

German 'Wissenschaft' had been recruited from the voluntary and numerous body of Privatdozenten, devoted to teaching and the increase of knowledge, and living partly on fees, partly on their own resources, partly otherwise. The Privatdozent represented, to my thinking, the sheerest and purest form of the academic type. (pp. 315-316)

And, perhaps most importantly, it was a type upon which the "progress *and the financial welfare of the university* depended" (Flexner, 1967, p. 287; emphasis added).

The Unofficial University and the Uses and Experiences of Precariousness

It is rare, and perhaps even a bit jarring, to hear such a full-throated defense of the adjunctification of academic labor. In the U.S., university administrators are typically more circumspect in acknowledging the crucial importance of contingent labor, seeming to prefer to deny the presence of NTT faculty or to regard it as an unfortunate but inescapable fact of academic life (Discenna, 2018). In spite of Flexner's enthusiasm, a similar ambivalence was common in early twentieth century Germany. According to Busch (1963) while the privatdozenten had been referred to as the "power and life of the university" it was also called the "secret of the university" (p. 320). This ambivalence speaks to both the importance of the privatdozenten to the functioning of the German university as well as the uses to which these faculty were put in the context of German higher education. The system of privatdozenten was, as described earlier, dependent upon minoritized populations though in this case, as Flexner (1967) suggests, sometimes minorities with resources and willing to trade those resources for the cache of university position, even one as low on the ladder as the privatdozent. Arendt (1968), for example, indicated that Walter Benjamin's father was willing to support him if he took up such a position and that such support was a common practice. In this sense, the German university was not only dependent on the unofficial university to provide (steeply) discounted labor but was also effectively subsidized by wealthy minorities denied the rights of full cultural citizenship (see Discenna, 2016, for contemporary examples of this kind of subsidization). Indeed, part of Flexner's enthusiasm for the unofficial university was that such faculty were able to work with "freedom from economic considerations" (Röhrs, 1995, p. 112).

Not only did the privatdozenten constitute, in the words of Wilhelm Heinrich Riehl, Germany's "intellectual proletariat" (Riehl, 1850, as cited in Busch, 1963, p. 327) it was a proletariat composed primarily of people minoritized by German society. As Levine (2015) summarizes: "although Jews were overrepresented in the university in the academic year 1911-1912, they were disproportionately overrepresented in impermanent non-ordinarius positions" (p. 183). In regards to the employment prospects for Jewish scholars, Max Weber (1946) is perhaps even more succinct when he asserts, "if he is a Jew, of course one says *lasciate ogni speranza* (abandon all hope)" (p. 134). And while "this contradictory economic situation, in which scholars remained privately supported for an unofficial state position, came to define a characteristically German-Jewish predicament" (Levine, 2015, p. 183), it was not exclusively a problem for this population. In many instances, scholars were relegated to the unofficial university due to their, usually leftist, political affiliations (see Hopwood, 1997; McClelland, 1980, p. 267). In other words, in addition to challenging the novelty of neoliberalism as an explanatory mechanism for the depredations currently facing higher education, the unofficial university blurs the lines that CUS has drawn between "the university as a public good in danger of becoming 'ruined' and 'unmade,'" and "the introduction of voices from the interdisciplines [as] a reminder that the university had always been ruining and unmaking the lifeways and worlds of Black, Indigenous, and other minoritized people" (Singh, 2021, p. 186).

The equivalent in the contemporary American context is undoubtedly the experience of women contingents. Again, reliable statistics are often difficult to obtain but Thorkelson (2015) suggests that female faculty make up over 60% of contingents in higher education and, more specifically, white women between the ages of 36 and 65 (p. 214). In both cases, the early German and the contemporary U.S., it is clear that the labor of the unofficial university falls largely to populations for whom social and institutional prejudice constitutes a barrier to their full participation in the official university constituted of stable and permanent work.

However, the more likely cause of the ambivalence described by Busch (1963) is that the early twentieth century German university made use of privatdozenten in the same way that the American system makes use of contingents, that is to provide deeply discounted instruction to a growing student body. The precarious work lives of these faculty were necessary to provide the kind of instruction that American universities make use of adjuncts for: "introductory courses and in areas too specialized to justify establishing new chairs" (Chickering, 1993, p. 73). McClelland (1980) is more specific, describing the privatdozenten workload as consisting primarily of "the foundation courses for the disciplines" (p. 261). And Levine (2015) adds that the privatdozenten were "lecturers who were burdened with heavier course loads and time consuming introductory courses" (p. 183). The privatdozenten then, occupied much the same territory as the American contingent: teaching heavy course loads of introductory material in exchange for little to no financial

support for their efforts. The ambivalence can also be attributed to the fact that the privatdozent frequently performed better than their ordinarien counterparts described earlier. McClelland (1980) suggests that “they enjoyed youthfulness, a fresh outlook, and very often a high reputation for stimulating and specialized courses. In a student world where bigness had begun to cut a trench between student and professor, the PDs offered accessibility and a certain intimacy” (p. 265). American contingents, likewise, have been reputed, though this is contested, to offer better instruction than TT faculty (see Figlio et al., 2013).

The privatdozenten, like their contingent counterparts in contemporary American higher education experienced work lives that were steeped in precarity. Flexner (1967), even while lauding the system, acknowledged its difficulties. In imagery reminiscent of the “freeway flyer” of the U.S. (Drew, 2006) he describes the privatdozent as the “wandering” of the university instructor” (Flexner, 1967, p. 287). In addition to the peripatetic work lives these faculty experienced, their positions were entirely unstructured and open-ended. As noted above, Cassirer’s term as a privatdozent went on for 13 years. The open-ended nature of such appointments was exacerbated by an ever-present desire for more stable employment that rarely came to fruition. The art historian Erwin Panofsky, for example, claimed “that there was never really anything fixed in [the University of] Hamburg, rather only ‘half promised’” (Panofsky, 1929, as cited in Levine, 2015, p. 129). The result of this precariousness was precisely that of its modern day equivalent:

The system had an inherent tendency towards social injustice. He [sic] who had a private income and did not have to worry about his subsistence, had a much better chance to do scientific work than the starveling who had to earn his living by regular employment. The poverty of the privatdozenten became an almost unquestioned tradition. (Busch, 1963, p. 326)

Finally, this unquestioned tradition of poverty was not accepted passively by those relegated to its conditions. The protests against this “tendency towards social injustice” gave rise to movements among the privatdozenten to ameliorate or perhaps even to rectify the worst of the depredations they endured. Again, if CUS finds its home in “successive waves of student and student-worker organizing” (Singh, 2021, p. 182) over the conditions of labor and role of the university in society then the unofficial university should be acknowledged as an activist forebear. In academic conferences, the privatdozenten protested their treatment on the grounds of the cherished value of academic freedom. And following the report by Eulenburg, groups of *nichtordinarien* formed a society to advance the cause of the unofficial university (Samuel & Thomas, 1949, p. 124).

In short, the unofficial university of the early twentieth century in Germany bears all the hallmarks of contemporary American higher education under neoliberalism. While declaiming an indissoluble marriage of teaching and research organized under the notion of *wissenschaft*, the German model of higher education had, in effect, effected a separation of these functions by

shunting the teaching function onto the backs of poorly paid minoritized populations. The purported spiritual unity of research and teaching which was then becoming established as the very definition of academic professionalism was more akin to what Braverman (1974) describes as the deskilling of labor wherein a job is disaggregated and its various parts distributed to varying strata of workers so that management can assert control and drive down wages. Moreover, the effects of this disaggregation had recognizable consequences in the form of substandard, often poverty level wages for some as well as precarious and usually peripatetic work lives. The fact that the *privatdozenten* apparently offered high quality instruction in subjects that were considered essential by students and ministries of education under this system helps to explain how “the German idea of the university had, as a philosophical driving force, already attained considerable influence” (Röhrs, 1995, p. 104) over the developing system of American higher education.

Wissenschaft and the Unofficialdom of the American University

Under the auspices of *wissenschaft* the German model of the university became the foundation for American higher education. In turn, the foundation of that model was the unofficial university consisting of NTT *privatdozenten* and *nichtordinarien* faculty who provided cheap labor for the official university. And yet, even as the “German university took root in American higher education” (Röhrs, 1995, p. 78) it is important to recognize some of the significant differences between these two institutions. The German university system, with all of its regional and institutional variations, was never the large scale democratic structure, even given its deficiencies in this regard, that it has become in the U.S. However, in addition to differences in scale and attendant alterations in mission a more pronounced difference between the German template and its American model lies in some basic differences in organizational structure and the employment practices that result from it. Ben-David (1972) summarizes these differences:

In the United States, the professor is an employee of an organization. It is true that this is an organization created principally for the purveyance of his [sic] services, but still neither he nor the community of his peers *constitutes* the organization. The university is a legal corporation directed by a president who is responsible to a board. In Europe, on the other hand, the professor is, or was until one or two years ago, actually a government-paid private practitioner. To the extent that there was such a corporate body as the university, this was *constituted* by the assembly of the professors. (p. 21; emphasis added)

This distinction, between the university as constituted by self-governing private practitioners or employees of a corporate body, has profound implications for understanding the relationship between the official and the unofficial university.

The German model, with its grounding principle of academic freedom and goal of melding the teaching and research functions of the professorial role, was predicated on faculty self-governance and thereby a certain degree of power over the administration of institutions. The official university, therefore, was the TT ordinarien faculty and the unofficial was, in essence, managed by the official much as the U.S. Supreme Court imagined in its *Yeshiva* decision (see Schrecker, 2010). The official university of ordinarien managed and, effectively extracted surplus labor from the unofficial comprised of the privatdozenten. The American situation is somewhat more complex. In the American university the official university must be understood as stemming from its Presidency as overseen by its board and organized through its managerial apparatus of administration. Under these conditions the unofficial university can likewise be understood as the faculty inclusive of *both* its TT and NTT factions which has been, under the auspices of the corporate form, made subject not only to a ring and core model of employment but also to a division of labor which Braverman (1974) argues is the signal feature of industrial capitalism. Thus, principles like shared governance become more akin to, as Bousquet (2008) argues, Toyotist management practices which “established teams of area responsibility, which included managers and laborers working together in what was meant to be a quite earnest spirit of cooperation” (p. 101). Likewise, academic freedom as the right to speak without fear of reprisal on issues of concern to the conduct of the university broadly conceived, become narrowly defined as the right to maintain employment (Discenna, 2004).

The German model, in other words, contained within it a ready-made template through which the official American university could facilitate the deskilling of the professoriate. Under the managerial regime native to the corporate form, the faculty as a whole are subject to Braverman’s (1974) conception of the “division of labor” under industrial capitalism (pp. 77-84). The essence of the division of labor is, according to Braverman (1974), “the separation of hand and brain or conception and execution” (p. 125). He goes on to argue:

Insofar as the labor process may be disassociated, it may be separated into elements some of which are simpler than others and each of which is simpler than the whole. Translated into market terms, this means that the labor power capable of performing the process may be purchased more cheaply as disassociated elements than as a capacity integrated into a single worker. (Braverman, 1974, p. 81)

The ring (unofficial) and core (official) model of the German model had already broken, divided, and separated the work of the faculty into its component parts. In broadest outlines, the TT faculty have a mandate to conduct and produce research while the NTT are expected to teach, especially introductory courses or perhaps courses too specialized for the TT faculty. Moreover, on the basis of this division of labor, further divisions can be integrated into the core functions of the university (Ovetz, 2015).

In short, the unofficial university in the U.S. is constituted of both the TT and NTT faculty with consequences that will be immediately familiar. The constituent elements of *wissenschaft*, the indissoluble unity of research and teaching, are divided along the lines suggested by the unofficial university of the German model to the detriment of the profession as a whole. The TT faculty are relegated to performing scholarship under increased pressure to publish or perish, as the axiom goes. Such pressure almost inevitably leads to “prose that reads as though its authors had gone untainted by human contact for a good long while” (Drew, 2006, p. 68). This subset of the faculty is offered greater status, more stable salaries, benefits and job security with obvious implications regarding the relative importance of research in contrast with teaching. In contrast, the NTT faculty, like their ancestors the *privatdozenten* are left to eke out a living through overloaded teaching schedules often made up of the hardest to teach courses for the most vulnerable of students. In essence, the professoriate has always been proletarianized and the calls to “reprofessionalize” it while in service to the ideal of *wissenschaft* serves to obscure the fact that our understanding of professionalism is suffused with the division of labor and concomitant deskilling.

Conclusion: Embracing and Resisting Unofficialdom

As should be clear from the preceding, the post-war Fordist/Keynesian expansion of the university with its promise of stable employment and democratic access to higher education was little more than an interregnum in the history of higher education. Indeed, as Resnikoff (2022) demonstrates stable employment as a means of achieving a more just and equitable society was never more than an interregnum in the larger economy as well. He argues that Fordist/Keynesian interregnum saw industrial labor unions provide a narrow property right to workers in the form of stable work and incomes in exchange for control over the workplace; “collective bargaining, this reasoning went, would give workers a species of property in their jobs” (p. 8). Therefore, as a means of achieving the goal of a more equitable and just distribution of resources “job holding served as the nation’s primary mechanism for distributing wealth” (Resnikoff, 2022, p. 24). For workers in higher education, tenure effectively served the same role in securing for (some) faculty a narrow property right to a job and thereby distributing wealth more equitably and justly. In the university setting Kaufman-Osborn (2023) suggests that “once appointed a professor becomes the holder of an office that, barring charges of sustained incompetence or serious misconduct adjudicated in a formal hearing, is granted to that master in perpetuity” (pp. 78-79).

As higher education returns to its German ancestry and its imposition of a ring and core employment model for its labor force it is past time to reflect on the role that standards of professionalism play in inculcating the denial of proletarianization. In fact, as neoliberalism “functions through dispossession,

by transforming into private property both public wealth and wealth held socially in common” (Hardt & Negri, 2009, p. 137) then it should be clear that the unofficial university was, as Flexner (1967) indicates, a kind of nursery. However, it was a nursery that brought forth as progeny the bifurcated labor force that we find throughout the contemporary economy. The German model was not only the nursery for the successes of the university as a whole, but also for a model of employment that requires the dispossession of a certain strata of the population. Indeed, if we take seriously Gerlinde Mautner’s (2010) claim that universities “because of their crucial role in knowledge creation and dissemination and the education of intellectual and social elites ... are invariably more implicated than other institutions in amplifying social trends and passing them on to future generations” (p. 72), then it is time to abandon the idea of corporatization and recognize that it is perhaps more useful to see the ravages of neoliberalism as the academization of work throughout the economy.

To resist the worst ravages of unofficialdom it is necessary first to embrace the unofficial university as the space of all those minoritized populations and perspectives not willingly embraced by the official university. Kaufman-Osborn (2023) suggests that governance of the university once again be structured as a member rather than property corporation and there is considerable merit to this argument. In the meanwhile the work of the university continues to be deskilled leading to the proletarianization of the higher education labor force. It is essential to take stock of this fact and its history to resist its worst effects on the basis of a shared proletarian identity as opposed to a professional one. An unofficial university of proletarianized labor constituted of TT and NTT faculty that embraces its proletarianization and adopts the tools that the proletariat has traditionally used to resist the worst ravages of working in Kaufman-Osborn’s (2023) property corporation is the strongest potential counterweight to the official university. The tools of collective bargaining and with it the creation of solidarity, coalition building, and resistance through strikes and other forms of collective action have been the most powerful weapons in the arsenal of workers for generations. The official university offers credentials, the unofficial university educates. In the official students are trained and in the unofficial they are taught and they learn. The official university produces research that is, in the words of the American Council on Learned Societies, “unread and unreadable” (as cited in Cheseboro, 1993, p. 374). The official university “can, of course, think and produce affects on demand, but only in a rote, mechanical way, limiting creativity and potential productivity” (Hardt & Negri, 2009, p. 147). The unofficial university is, in contrast, “a community of thought dedicated to dissensus; to raise questions of significance, importance and value to academic life and to resist all attempts to reduce them to a single ‘right’ answer” (Rolfe, 2013, p. 96). Furthermore, it is the official as the corporate form that is dependent on the unofficial since, as Fleming (2014) argues “the biopolitical workplace is now conspicuously reliant on those rich qualities of social labor that forever lie beyond capitalism’s

reach” (p. 42). The official and unofficial may overlap and intersect but it is the unofficial that, as the wellspring of the intellectual and creative energy of those who inhabit it, remains the driving force of the official. This reformulated version of the unofficial university then, as a name, serves the ends of social justice as it “identifies the grammars that oppress or underwrite relationships of domination and then reconstructs those grammars” (Frey et al., 1996, p. 112).

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