



Chapter 5. Tenure for the Contingent?

To gain a deeper insight into the hierarchy of faculty and the role of class consciousness in the divide between TT and NTT faculty, we can look at Michael Bérubé and Jennifer Ruth's book, *The Humanities, Higher Education, and Academic Freedom*, in which they propose granting tenure for all teachers in higher education with Ph.D.s. We shall see that this well-intentioned book unintentionally offers an example of the problematic perspective that many tenured professors hold in relation to their contingent colleagues.

In the third chapter, titled, "From Professionalism to Patronage," the authors begin by providing a long list of the reasons internal to higher education for the growing use of NTT faculty:

Adjunct hiring has enabled us to do many things we want to do and don't want to give up doing: (1) Hire people with higher courseloads to meet student demand without undertaking the hard work of time-intensive searches. (2) Hire people with higher courseloads without asking whether this should prompt us to build a teaching-intensive tenure track or rethink our conventional jobs bundling teaching, research, and service. (3) Hire spouses not as spousal hires but into non-tenure-track positions since they are easier to secure. (4) Hire people for curricular areas we find alluring without committing to those areas in perpetuity. (5) Grow niche programs on all-adjunct labor to boost our overall student-credit-hour numbers so that we have more capital to ask for tenure lines. (6) Hire adjuncts to give full-time faculty course releases for research and other projects. (7) Add new sections at the last minute when all the others fill up so that our students have the classes they need to graduate. (8) Hire our graduate students in the hope that teaching experience will make them attractive for full-time jobs elsewhere. (9) Continue to run the full gamut of courses during budget crunches that we hope are short-term but that invariably become long-term. Some of these motivations are more understandable than others. All of them have made the world in which we now live. (66-67)

Here we find a focus on the inner dynamics that result in TT faculty unintentionally and intentionally profiting from the exploitation of a lower class of workers who do not have the same compensation or rights. Since it is so easy and efficient to hire NTT faculty at the last minute, tenured professors are incentivized to look the other way as their departments deal with budget cuts and enrollment fluctuations (Nealon). Of course, there is also the need to hire spouses and reduce course loads so professors can focus more on research (Waltman et al.), but as Bérubé and Ruth suggest in this passage, these issues are not being directly confronted.

In the book, Ruth focuses on a time when she was chair of her program and tried to do the right thing, but she constantly encountered the resistance of the contingent faculty. In the following passage, she articulates her argument that contingent faculty cannot be as focused on the best interests of students as TT faculty because they are always so concerned about losing their jobs:

Finally, this faculty member blurted, “Look, I am not on the tenure track and all I teach is film. You reduce the film courses students take and I may be out of a job!” The professor in my office asked, “Should we be thinking about our own employment when we decide on curriculum or strictly what we believe to be in the best interests of our students?” Obviously, the latter. We’re not here to ensure our own futures but to help students prepare for theirs. Tenured faculty have the ability to make disinterested decisions to this end that other faculty, through no fault of their own, simply don’t. This matters in university politics. It matters a lot and it matters often. (74)

The first obvious prejudice re-circulated in this passage is the notion that faculty seeking to protect their own jobs are undermining a concern for students. This argument has been used in the anti-union school choice movement, which often argues that it is tenure that blocks a concern for students. Here, we are told that contingent faculty cannot be as student focused as their tenured colleagues because contingent faculty ultimately only care about keeping their jobs.

To help explain how tenure supposedly turns self-interested people into disinterested professionals, Bérubé and Ruth make the following statement:

The tenure system acknowledges human nature—namely, the fact that people usually won’t act against their own interests, regardless of the larger context. It takes this into account by enabling faculty to deliberate and research and teach and grade without anxiety over the next paycheck warping the outcome of these activities. We don’t have to vote on curricular matters to gratify our supervisors, we don’t have to deliver lab results that satisfy pharmaceutical companies, we don’t have to teach only the subjects our students find entertaining, and we don’t have to please them when we submit their grades. (74)

The problem with this passage is that it should be clear that a lot of research done by tenured professors has been shown to be corrupted by the influence of money and the quest for prestige. Also, anyone who has been in a faculty meeting should know that there is rarely an absence of self-interest or an absence of the desire to gratify supervisors. Even full professors want a merit increase or a better teaching schedule or a better parking space. As I have argued throughout this book, if we want faculty members to be more effective, then we have to treat them fairly and justly. For example, by insisting on transparent and objective hiring and review practices, we can enhance workplace democracy for everyone.

Instead of directly confronting the real level of exploitation and prejudice in the academic labor system, the authors suggest the following:

TT faculty, at least at poorly funded state schools like mine, tend not to see themselves as the worthy elite but as the downtrodden. This may come as a surprise to a public traumatized by the recession. Certainly, adjunct instructors might assume that TT faculty salaries, benefits, job security, and empowerment in shared governance would preclude this group from identifying with the Joads. (81)

While it may be true that a group of faculty at a non-elite institution identify themselves as the victims of the system, this does not mean that there is not an even greater class of exploited workers in academia. Moreover, after presenting a discourse of comparative victimhood, Bérubé and Ruth make the following argument:

Telling these [tenured] faculty members they should identify as labor is telling them something they like hearing. It reinforces their sense that they are overworked and underappreciated. It also acts as a kind of Get-out-of-Jail-Free card with regard to whatever guilt they may feel about the genuinely downtrodden in their midst. In short, and at the risk of sounding cynical, we are in danger of embracing the identity of labor so that we absolve ourselves of responsibility for having poorly managed our affairs and generated our own underclass. (82)

According to this logic, telling professors that they should identify with labor and organize with labor unions will only have the result of making the faculty feel less guilty about their relative privileged status. Despite what Bérubé and Ruth claim, the reality is that many faculty do not want to identify themselves as workers or be unionized because they like to see themselves as elite professionals.

The reverse side of this disidentification by tenured faculty is the claim that when contingent faculty do identify with their exploited status, they only end up showing how they are reliant on the kindness of individual administrators for their jobs, even in the context of unionized faculty. Bérubé and Ruth state, “Indeed, when contingent faculty call themselves the serfs, peasants, or helots of academe, they drive home a real point—that their initial and then continued existence at an institution is contingent on the pleasure of individuals with tenure, even when they are represented by a faculty union” (99). I believe the authors have this exactly backwards. For instance, the UC-AFT union has used the collective bargaining process and other forms of due process to try to stop the practice of basing academic decisions on individual favors and prejudices.

These professors also argue that the use of NTT faculty undermines shared governance and academic freedom because contingent faculty care only about protecting their own positions:

Furthermore, as I mentioned earlier, NTT involvement in governance can accelerate the erosion of tenure. Here’s how it has done so in my

department: (1) NTT involvement has made it virtually impossible to handle budget cuts in any way other than by canceling job searches that were replacements for retiring tenure-line faculty. Who would choose to not rehire someone with whom you have been involved in all kinds of departmental and university discussions and deliberations? So when a budget “crisis” erupts (which happens every year at my university, typically after we’ve received approval to replace retired tenured faculty but before we’ve begun a search), we cancel a search. It is much easier to cut a position to be held by some hypothetical future colleague than to cut a position held by someone you see on a regular basis. Over time, this means fewer tenure lines and more NTT lines. (2) NTT involvement creates various conflicts of interest, as it did in my department. Even discussing what areas in which to hire after someone has retired becomes complicated when an NTT faculty member has begun filling in by teaching this or that related subject. She may not have a terminal degree or expertise in the area but she, and the people who worry about her, may feel that her job will become more insecure if we hire people in certain areas. (92)

I find this passage to be a rationalization for denying shared governance rights to the majority of the faculty. First of all, it is simply wrong to say that NTT faculty are always rehired because no one wants to hurt the feelings of a colleague. The reality is that many contingent faculty are defined by the ease of replacing them. Furthermore, just because it is easier emotionally to retain a contingent faculty member during a budget crisis than to eliminate that position in order to retain a tenure line does not mean that NTT positions undermine tenure. Instead, as I have been arguing, secure NTT faculty jobs help to provide a middle ground between tenure and pure contingency. However, this liminal space is ignored by the binary logic of many tenured professors such as Bérubé and Ruth.

The next argument the authors make flies in the face of my experience teaching in two programs where almost all of the faculty running the program were off of the tenure track. They claim,

Academic committee work may be easily ridiculed as a professorial version of Dilbert, but it actually consists of professors articulating and negotiating the terms of their employment, their expertise, their research projects, their course assignments, and their engagements with students. What results from these negotiations cannot be chalked up to hierarchy; it is the outcome of genuinely shared governance. “Shared,” here, does not mean that the negotiations are without heat and conflict, of course. What it does mean is that nobody has recourse to an outside authority other than reality (think budgets not bosses) to resolve the conflicts that arise. This lends the discussions their (sometimes) exhilarating air of spontaneity and authenticity. Spontaneity and candor are destroyed and different concerns move to the fore. The orientation of

the room shifts almost palpably from a focus on the needs of the students, the institution, or the discipline to a focus on the needs of the faculty themselves. (112)

This passage is structured by a set of prejudices and stereotypes that ends up blaming the victims of labor exploitation instead of affirming that by denying contingent faculty academic freedom or shared governance rights or job stability, democracy for all faculty is undermined.

One possible reason for this discourse of blaming the victim is that often even the most supportive and progressive tenured professors do not want to admit their roles in the exploitation of their colleagues. It can be much more comforting to blame evil administrators or neoliberalism for the casualization of the academic labor force. However, as I argued in Chapter 1, the origins of the deprofessionalization of the faculty in part can be traced to the way many faculty in the sciences were motivated by governmental funds after World War II to focus on their research as a source of prestige and enhanced compensation. Since the faculty members who gained funding to increase their research activities needed people to teach their courses, they turned to graduate students and part-time faculty. None of this was well planned, but the result was that the professional status of professors was hollowed out from the inside. When faculty began focusing on their research and individual careers, a space was left open for administrators to take over many of the tasks that were once handled by TT faculty. In other words, the restructuring of the professoriate did not happen solely due to the external corporatization of the university; instead, internal actors were incentivized to focus their efforts on their research and individual careers. Although the policies and economics of neoliberalism have contributed to the downsizing of the faculty and the casualization of the labor force, it would be wrong to focus only on these external forces.

In the case of Bérubé and Ruth's text, we see many of the reasons why people do not like the new liberal professional class. A mode of smug self-idealization is coupled with a debasement of people who do not fit into the same class. In what Thomas Frank has called meritocratic narcissism, we see how some of the tenured elites buy into the myths surrounding their own excellence as they discount the suffering of the working class. This is similar to one reason why some have argued the Democrats have lost power, by giving up on focusing on organized labor and the working class and instead becoming the party of the professional elite (Frank).

In order to form a more progressive politics inside and outside of higher education, it is necessary to bridge the divide between workers and professional elites. As we are seeing in so many different areas of human labor, automation is making every job vulnerable, so it is in everyone's best interest to push for better job protections for all workers. The next chapter will seek to outline some ways contingent faculty can work together to overcome the creation of the new gig academy.