correspondents at large

Dude, Where's My Job?

WALTER BENN MICHAELS

THE QUESTION OF WHAT OCCUPY WALL STREET WANTS HAS BEEN A HARD ONE TO ANSWER—DESPITE OR BECAUSE OF *ADBUSTER*'S FOUNDing call for "one" "simple" and "uncomplicated" "demand." This is partly because the *Adbuster* candidate, "Democracy without Corporatocracy," was a little vague and partly because the many specific demands that followed it—from reinstating Glass-Steagall to reforming campaign finance to establishing an "Office of the Citizen"—didn't really capture the radical spirit of the movement. What emerged as most characteristic of OWS was something like a critique of the very idea of demands: we refuse to make any because we refuse to acknowledge that anyone has the authority to accede to them, or we will make only demands that cannot be met. But this strategy, not unlike the mechanism of occupation itself, has obvious limitations: going someplace just because you're not supposed to be there and asking for something only as long as you can't possibly get it doesn't look like a recipe for changing the world.

Nonetheless, because of Occupy Wall Street, the world has begun to change, and it did so the minute OWS adopted the slogan "We are the 99%." Economic inequality has been increasing for over half a century; in 1962 the bottom 80% of American households had 19.1% of the country's wealth; by 2007 that number had dropped to 15.0%. But it took the housing crisis—when the loss became not only relative (the share went down to 12.8%) but also absolute (between 1983 and 2009 the net worth of the bottom 80% dropped from $65,300 to $62,900)—for redistribution (upward) to begin to look like a problem (Allegretto 5–6). And it took OWS to make redistribution (downward) begin to look like a solution. To bring the point a little closer to home, it has taken "We are the 99%" to help us professors get a clearer take on the fact that when it comes to class difference, even though we have understood our universities to be part of the solution, they are in fact part of the problem.

For one thing, just as the top 10% have become disproportionately richer since 1971, so, according to *The American Freshman:*

WALTER BENN MICHAELS, professor of English at the University of Illinois, Chicago, is at work on a book about political economy and aesthetic autonomy, titled "The Beauty of a Social Problem." Parts of it have recently appeared in *Aperture*, the *Brooklyn Rail*, *Twentieth-Century Literature*, and *Nonsite.org*.

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Forty-Year Trends, have our students: in 1971 their median household income was 46% above the national median; by 2007 it was 60% above (Pryor, Hurtado, Saenz, Santos, and Korn 24). Peter Sacks observes that in the past forty years "not only has social class been a generally more intractable problem of equal educational opportunity than gender or race, but America's higher education system has also become more dangerously stratified by class" (211). Which describes the situation nicely except insofar as it implies that class stratification has been a bug in the education system when really (as Bob Meister's remark that "the percentage of the population targeted by public universities" has been "the top 20% of wage-earners" suggests) it is more usefully understood as a feature. Indeed, economic inequality is the business we're in. It's only because we exclude lots of students that we can plausibly sell the students we admit on the economic advantages of having a college degree since if everybody had one, those advantages would disappear. It's economically advantageous to go to Harvard only because hardly anyone goes to Harvard.

Of course, there are other forms of inequality, and, as Sacks reminds us, we've been more successful with gender and race than with class.[1] It isn't hard to see why: some of the very commitments (e.g., to efficient markets) that have increased inequality have also increased diversity. Antidiscrimination has been a hallmark of neoclassical economics ever since Gary Becker's first book, *The Economics of Discrimination*, argued that in competitive markets capitalists couldn't afford any prejudices. It's all very well to want to surround yourself with, for example, white males, but limiting your labor force in this way (in effect, creating a union of white guys) raises the price of labor—good for the white guys but not for their employer. Which is why, as Becker puts it, "discrimination *harms W* capitalists and benefits *W* workers" (22). Or, more important, why the more competitive the market, the greater the need for the cheapest possible labor. *W* (and even *B* or *A*) capitalists who get their restaurants staffed by unskilled Mexicans in Chicago or their legal documents reviewed by highly skilled Indians in New Delhi totally understand the virtues of not discriminating.

The idea here is not, of course, that higher education's commitment to antidiscrimination is merely economic; on the contrary, in my experience, nothing is more heartfelt than the ethical enthusiasm your average professor or administrator feels for diversity. The idea, rather, is that the success of diversity has been a function of the complete compatibility of its ethics and its economics. There is no contradiction between the fact that the University of Michigan has been the flag bearer for affirmative action ever since Lee Bollinger's days as dean of its Law School and the fact that in the same year (2003) that *Grutter v. Bollinger* was decided, more of Michigan's entering freshmen "came from families earning at least $200,000 a year than came from the entire bottom half of the income distribution" (Leonhardt). And five years after the victory in *Grutter* (at a time when the median family income in Michigan was $59,618) the (public!) university was reporting that 16.9% of its freshmen came from families earning above $250,000 and 73.1% from families earning above $75,000 (*University*).

Now (I'm writing this at the beginning of March 2012) the Supreme Court has just agreed to review a new affirmative action case, and Bollinger, while acknowledging that "in this era of economic insecurity" some people think any commitment to diversity should be focused on "family income" rather than race, is saying what every academic I've ever discussed this with says: "Of course, we want both." But after twenty years of fighting like a cornered raccoon on behalf of the one and completely ignoring the other, what exactly does he think "of course" means? How much worse does economic inequality (which began its spectacular ascent in the United States in

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1979, the year after the first landmark diversity decision, in *Bakke*) have to get before "we want both" sounds hollow not only to the people who hear it but to the people who say it?

The argument here is not that the commitment to diversity has caused the increase in economic inequality. (It would be closer to the truth to say that the commitment to efficient markets has caused them both.) It's that diversity and antidiscrimination have done and can do nothing whatsoever to mitigate economic inequality and thus that OWS's focus on economic inequality (because it has nothing to do with discrimination and everything to do with redistribution) presents challenges to the university that no amount of piety about any kind of diversity—racial or even economic—can meet. Why? Well, one obvious reason is that if we wanted the unrich to stop being such a (vastly) underrepresented minority in our universities, we'd have to throw most of our current students out. From this standpoint, the most effective version of an occupy movement on campuses like Michigan's would be one in which the students stopped occupying it and made way for not the 99% but the 75% who have been systematically denied admission. In addition to solving all diversity problems, this would undo the link between being born wealthy and earning a degree from an elite college. But, of course, it wouldn't really solve the inequality problem, since someone would still be excluded. And furthermore, even if we managed to expand higher education, make all universities as good as the best ones, and admit everyone to them, it still wouldn't do enough good—as we can see just by looking at how our inequality actually works.

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the fastest-growing job category in the United States (by percentage) is "personal care aides." In 2010 there were about 861,000 of them; by 2020 that number will rise to a little more than 1,500,000. Their median annual wage is $19,640. The second-fastest-growing category is "home health aides," anticipated to go from 1,017,000 to 1,723,000; their wages are $20,560 (Lockard and Wolf 100).[2] More generally, of the 163,537,100 jobs expected to exist in 2020, only about 20% will require a BA (106). So even if we made and kept the promise of higher education for all, we wouldn't be doing much to minimize inequality. We'd be making sure that badly paid personal care aides had college degrees, but we wouldn't be making them less badly paid.[3] The nice way to put this is to say we'd be increasing equality of opportunity. The less nice way is to say we'd be asking them to endorse their own immiseration. If you're changing bedpans for $10 an hour because you never had the chance to go to college, it's not your fault. But if you did go to college and you're still changing bedpans, you have no one to blame but yourself.

The point of equality of opportunity from this standpoint is not to produce equality but to legitimate inequality, to make sure that even if the (very many) losers feel sad they won't feel cheated. But why shouldn't they? Don't our students feel cheated when the BAs they worked for leave them with nothing but debt? Don't our graduate students feel cheated when they end up off the tenure track and earning, if they're lucky, $5,000 a course?[4] Critics on the right have disparaged Occupy Wall Street for being dominated by "spoiled white suburban youths who were told that if they went to college they would get a high-paying job" (Rodan). But that's exactly what gives OWS its bite—the fact that many of the people who have been the beneficiaries of the rising inequality of the past forty years have now begun to be its victims. We shouldn't criticize their "Dude, where's my job?" sense of entitlement; we should expand it—to all the people who didn't go to college as well as the ones who did, to everybody working for $20,000 a year, regardless of what degrees they do or don't have.

And we should also recognize that in a world where most jobs don't require a college education, the more plausible path to equality

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(even and especially if your PhD is in English) is not another degree but, as John Marsh argues in *Class Dismissed*, a union card. For years we've scraped by saying (mainly true) things like English majors make good lawyers. But when there are twice as many new lawyers as there are new jobs for lawyers, that defense begins to look a little beside the point (Shaer). Our goal should not be a world where the monetary value of a degree in literature can be maximized. It should instead be one where it has no monetary value at all, where the profits of health insurance companies (currently at a record high [Abelson]) are down because personal care aides are unionized and their wages are up and where the virtue of that nineteenth-century poetry class is not that it sharpens you up for first-year torts but that it gives you something to think about ("Lilac and star and bird, twined with the chant of my soul") while you're taking care of the old people. Whether Whitman on death can console them or amuse you is, of course, an open question. The value of a job that pays a living wage while you look for the answer is not.

Notes

1. If we net out economic inequality, black students today are more likely to attend college than whites are (it's called the net black advantage), and if there is any worry about the numbers of women in college, it's that they are disproportionately high.

2. The good news for the third category, "biomedical engineers," is that their median wage is $81,540. The bad news is that in 2020 there will be only 25,400 of them, not even one for every hundred "aides" (100).

3. And even if, on the Goldin and Katz model, increasing the number of college graduates decreased the wage premium commanded by workers whose jobs really do require a college degree, the gains in equality would be achieved just by lowering the wages of the better-paid workers, not by raising the wages of the worst-paid ones. That's why the organizers of the Free Higher Education movement insist on the "wrong-headedness of the human capital argument" and emphasize instead the value of "intellectual autonomy" (Reed).

4. Take a look at the pay-per-course figures for English on *Adjunct Project*, where anything over $5,000 is a very good number and somewhere between $2,000 and $4,000 a more common one.

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