Professorial Autonomy, Casualisation, and Wage Theft in Australian Universities

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THE RECEPTION OF JOHN GUILLORY'S *PROFESSING CRITICISM* (2022) HAS BEEN MARKED by conversations regarding the crisis of precarity at universities and the disjuncture between the working conditions of the 'tenured' professoriate and of the large and growing number of insecurely employed academics. This is in some ways surprising, given that only one of the book's chapters deals directly with 'The Permanent Crisis of Graduate Education', and even this is only a supplement to the primary investigation into the formation and deformation of English literary studies as a discipline and profession. Guillory's handling of the jobs crisis in that chapter has a complex relationship with the book's central argument about the importance of delineating literary criticism and political or social critique as distinct operations, and the attempt to find an internal rationale for the discipline. Even if, as Sarah Brouillette has argued in her critical review of the text, Guillory himself attempts to 'separate the material situation from the problem of justification' (Brouillette), reception of the book has refused this compartmentalising. This is no doubt related to the fact that Guillory's book was released in the midst of a dramatic uptick in worker organisation on university campuses—including the historic wave of graduate student strikes across the University of California system, and major strike and marking boycott actions in the United Kingdom. Australian campuses have been a part of this global phenomenon, and our reflections on Guillory here are informed by our own experiences as National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) delegates at the

University of Melbourne since 2018. In this article, we explore some of the historical and conceptual issues Guillory raises throughout the book, in particular the notion of autonomy, in relation to the Australian context and reflect on the successes and importance of our union work both within and beyond the terms of Guillory's analysis.

Part of what frustrates many of Guillory's readers is the combination of his apparent pessimism about the state of the humanities broadly conceived and his cool, sociological tone, which sometimes reads as condescension. As Evan Kindley has written in the *New York Review of Books*:

> From the point of view of a contingent academic reading a book by a tenured scholar who is in the latter stages of a celebrated career, I find this resigned presentation of the probable continued contraction of the discipline somewhat maddening. Guillory's … tragic realism can feel complacent: it's always easier to give up on something after you and your generation have exhausted its resources yourself. (Kindley)

When Guillory muses about the psychology of students not put off by professorial warnings about the state of the academic job market (264-5), when he expresses bemusement as to why graduate students might resent advice to teach in high schools (a job for which they are not qualified) (261-2; cf. Bérubé 84-6), or when he positions labour unions as akin to reading groups and student-run conferences (272), we indeed bristle.

Much of the book circulates around the problem of disciplinary desire—the desire for relevance, the desire for a readership, the desire for an engaged student audience, the desire to effect change in the world. For Guillory, several of these desires are displaced onto a desire for autonomy. Autonomy is a principal value for Guillory. He explains that 'professions are distanced from the sphere of political action by the very institutional structures sustaining the relative autonomy of these professions in society' and that the high degree of autonomy afforded to most humanities disciplines necessarily distances scholars in those disciplines from the arena of social and political efficacy (58). Interestingly, Guillory also notes that '[t]his kind of autonomy can be experienced at once as a privilege and as a source of disempowerment' (58). The discipline's desire for political intervention, as well as problems like students' desire to 'see themselves' in the curriculum, come into view as threats to scholarly autonomy. But as Jeffrey Herlihy-Mera has demonstrated in his powerful critique in the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, this normative vision of autonomy is not born out in reality for wide swathes of university workers (Herlihy-Mera). We would argue that Guillory overestimates the degree of autonomy enjoyed by the literary studies professoriate in the age of the neoliberal university, and that crucially, his feeling

of autonomy produces a sense of disempowerment that manifests as resignation. This is what we understand, through our experience as unionists, as a critical misrecognition of the real conditions and possibility for scholarly reproduction.

In Australia, neoliberalism entered our universities through a sweeping set of state reforms in the period 1987-1989 that positioned Higher Education as an instrument for the modernisation of 'human capital'. The Dawkins reforms, named for the then education minister John Dawkins, affected all levels of knowledge production, from the culture of academic self-governance, that would be 'streamlined' to match the hierarchical structure of corporate businesses, to the marketisation of research by putting Universities in competition for limited funding, to incentive-driven influence over the kinds of courses Universities offered, and even the new freedom to manage academics as employees under industrial law (Dawkins 103; Barnes 151; Macintyre, Brett and Croucher 13-4, 195). Importantly for our discussion, the swift and uncompromising nature of the Dawkins reforms placed the desire for scholarly autonomy amongst academics under immediate strain.

During initial consultation, the professoriate was largely united in understanding the Dawkins reforms as an attack on academic freedom—wrapped up at the time in the discourse of 'collegiality', which relied upon full funding, and guarantees for self-elected governance by the professoriate (Barnes 150).[1] Responding to this position directly in the 1988 white paper on education, the Government didn't necessarily disagree: '[The government] reaffirms its view that our Higher Education institutions should not be isolated from the major changes occurring in Australian society and the economy. Rather they should be one of the prime agents in the process of change' (5). The message: universities, like the factory floors of wartime economies, were to be requisitioned to transform the labour market— the age of entitlement for the ivory tower was over, and with it, the traditional structural context of autonomy. In the government's own words, the 'strengths of tradition' would need to be balanced 'against the broader goals and aspirations we set for ourselves as a society' (6). Importantly, Dawkins achieved success in the public arena by merging marketisation with ideals of democratisation and mass participation—opening the doors of the ivory tower to everyday Australians, and creating the 'clever country' (Considine and Marginson 28). The white paper explicitly cast the nation's aspirations in terms of 'a fair and free society' wherein '[a]ll Australians expect and deserve an equal chance to succeed in life' (6). Citing persistent issues around diversity and inclusion for people from low socio-economic backgrounds, people with disabilities, people from rural and regional areas, Indigenous people, migrants, and women in Australian higher education

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[1] Previous attempts at reform of Australian universities, including the Murray Committee (1957), and the Martin Committee (1964), still acknowledged the importance of scholarly autonomy and self-governance. See Considine and Marginson, and Barnes (152).

institutions (20), Dawkins leveraged equity concerns to reframe the desire for institutional autonomy as a reactionary value, pitted against the needs of common Australians. In one interesting passage, an apparent acknowledgement of the importance of institutions able to engage in social critique is shaded with an implied recasting of universities and academics as snobbish and withholding: 'We do not want a higher education system that fails to analyse and, where necessary, criticise the society in which it operates, *or one that chooses not to spread knowledge among those with fewer opportunities*' (7, emphasis added).

Dawkins placed unions in an unusual position. In elevating managerial prerogative to the top of the leadership matrix unions were uniquely empowered to represent the professoriate in disputes with a new managerial class, under the industrial relations system and through enterprise bargaining. But the discourse which erupted in tertiary management journals after Dawkins was far more likely to identify the encroachment of unionism as an enemy to the culture of the professoriate than an ally—in particular on the question of autonomy. More than Guillory's claim that professionals refuse the 'status insult' of class politics as part of a broader strategy of elevating their labour above any market (254), then Vice-Chancellor of the University of Melbourne David Pennington argued in 1991 that unions represented a 'paradigm' of institutional reproduction wholly counterposed to the 'collegial governance' practices cherished by the professoriate (Pennington 8). 'Collegiality and external industrial processes based on unionism are alternative, and mutually exclusive, models' —primarily, because collegiality takes expertise as the unit of hierarchy and peer-review as the model of reasoned discourse, whereas unions practise participatory democracy and adversarial tactics with management as a growth strategy (Pennington 8).

Pennington's anxiety about the weakening of scholarly autonomy is distinguished from Guillory's treatment of autonomy with respect to the 'crisis of the humanities' by his emphasis on the power structures of particular institutions—'their internal forms of governance' (Pennington 8-11). Following Max Weber's founding definition of 'collegiality' as the ideal mode of governance for maintaining autonomy (271-82),[2] Pennington, like other 'collegiates', believed that 'meaningful scholarly autonomy' was contingent upon the specific institutional context in which they worked (Barnes 150). As Pennington writes, '[a] university should be self-governing if it is to pursue knowledge and education

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[2] Both in *Economy and Society* and in 'Science as Vocation' Weber is not hopeful for the future of collegial governance. Importantly, it's in the latter that he predicts the American 'State-Capitalist' university model superseding the collegial German model (though he never uses that name), fundamentally altering the 'spirit'—'both in essence and appearance the old *constitution* of the university has become fiction' (Weber 3-4). This is not just in the terrain of governance, but the 'quasi proletarian' situation of the American teaching assistant, which 'separates the worker from the means of production'—a separation that Weber suggests has implications also for the integrity of the role of Professor (Weber 4).

for their own sake' (Pennington 9). This principle grounds Pennington's anxiety around unions. The unique position unions hold under industrial relations represents a counter-expertise, displacing the professoriate by moving questions of governance from the model of peer-review into the foreign terrain of tribunals, disputes and legalisms (Pennington 16). Academic casuals, unionising in recent years, would form a different conclusion—but more on that later.

The Dawkins reforms not only severely curtailed the autonomy of the humanities in Australia. They also created the structural conditions for casualisation to flourish. Unlike the example of the American post-PhD market, which in Guillory's assessment falls into crisis through a confluence of environmental and internal factors, including oversupply of PhDs and shortfalls in student numbers, in Australia casualisation was intentionally built into the Dawkins reforms. By slashing state funding, Dawkins dropped Australian universities into a budgetary freefall—but in exchange universities were given new commercial freedoms. Importantly this included the freedom to profit from international student fees, to infinitely upscale teaching capacity, and in bringing Universities under the full jurisdiction of the industrial relations system, freedom to engage casual staff. The Dawkins White Paper justified organisational 'flexibility' as fundamental to management's capacity to respond to shifting business contexts—contexts which Dawkins created. But more than this, as a contingency of future funding, Universities would have to meet 'minimum targets for non-continuing employment', both for retiring professors, and casualising new roles (Dawkins 110).

In the following decades casual labour became pivotal to the business model, ensuring the capacity of universities to draw much needed revenue from a booming services market in teaching without having to shoulder high employment costs during seasonal fluctuations.[3] The link between insecure funding and insecure employment would become ironclad in Australian universities. The 'untold anguish' Guillory describes for post-PhDs 'who worked very hard to achieve a goal that from the beginning was only marginally within their grasp' tends to be processed by the Australian professoriate as a necessary evil, the harsh reality of academic reproduction under neoliberalism (248). This reluctant acceptance of the status quo is echoed in Guillory's own treatment of the jobs crisis.

Guillory's proposal—for 'departments to reconnect with former students and bring them into contact with graduate students currently in the system' so as to

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[3] For a discussion of how academic casuals were used as 'shock absorbers' to reduce liability from falling international student numbers during the Pandemic, see 'Accounting for Casuals in the Australian Public Sector Universities' by Australian accounting scholars Tom Smith and James Guthrie (Smith and Guthrie).

'enlarge, in small increments, the sphere of intellectuality' through public-ish, sociable engagement with literature (277)—is inflected by a hope for securing a domain of autonomy beyond the institutional space of the university. This would be to consolidate the 'semiautonomous professional sphere' of graduate student culture beyond and 'after' the institution and so 'model a literary and intellectual culture that no longer needs the career of college professor' (273). There is nothing inherently objectionable about Guillory's basic suggestion for a widened intellectual culture outside of universities, except that after a thirty-page discussion of the collapse of the job market, it seems like a refusal to treat academic literary studies as work. How exactly this zone of semi-autonomy is related to the autonomy afforded the professoriate within the institution, itself reliant of course on the systemic exploitation of precariously employed academics, is not actually broached. Guillory himself makes the claim that the jobs crisis demonstrates that 'the reproduction of the professoriate is *not* the purpose of doctoral education' today (250, emphasis in original). But the perverse corollary of the only proposal he proffers in response to this apparently 'permanent dysfunction' (250) is the notion of a form of literary study that would reproduce without the university, merely 'dispersed *amongst the professions*' (273, emphasis in original).

One might think that the structural conditions for academic casualisation in Australia described above would be cause for even more hand wringing and defeatism than the portrait of accidental oversupply painted by Guillory. However, the significant success of precarious union members in Australia in recent years proves the opposite. This success points to the importance of politicising the space of the university itself rather than looking for solutions outside of it.

Along with a small group of other casual and fixed-term employees at the University of Melbourne, mostly based in the Faculty of Arts, we led the first major and most successful campaign against wage theft in Australian higher education. Wage theft is when an employer does not pay a worker their correct wages or entitlements.[4] Beginning in 2018, our campaign led to the first major pay-out of unpaid casual wages in the sector—$14 million in January 2021. Since then, that figure has ballooned to $45 million, paid out to staff employed across the University. Further repayments, not yet publicly reported, were made to staff in our creative and performing arts faculty (Victorian College of the Arts) as recently as December 2023. What happened at the University of Melbourne sparked a wave of similar campaigns led by 'Casuals Networks' at campuses across the country. According to the National Tertiary Education Union's November 2023 report, $159 million in underpayments across Australian higher education have so far

[4] This use of this terminology in the context of Australian higher education was borrowed from the retail and hospitality sector, where migrant workers in particular led a series of agenda-setting campaigns—thanks to James C. Murphy for pointing this out.

been recovered (2). Windfalls for the NTEU itself came in the form of significant boosts in membership—at our branch, casual union membership increased by 500 percent and insecurely employed staff now make up over a third of the total membership. The union's wins unleashed a seemingly unending barrage of in-depth media reporting on the 'crisis' of wage theft and casualisation in the university sector, and triggered investigations by the Fair Work Ombudsman into conditions across the sector, as well as several government hearings.

The seed of the campaign was a clause in our enterprise agreement that required casual staff be paid for all hours worked (2.8.5.5, UoM enterprise agreement 2018, 51). Unlike tenured academics, casuals who are paid by the hour and contracted for work only in discrete periods through the academic year cannot simply absorb tasks into a larger self-managed workload. The initial target of our campaign was underpayment for assessment marking. There had been a long-standing practice of paying casual staff for marking according to a variety of set 'piece rates' (for example, 4000 words of assessment per hour) rather than for the actual time it took them to do the marking, an egregious but until-then normalised breach of the enterprise agreement.

Wage theft was enabled by a mixture of forces. The first was a power imbalance that meant casual staff were hesitant to raise concerns, fearful that they might end up without a contract at all next semester if more senior academic staff came to regard them as difficult or ungrateful. The second was a widespread culture of ambivalence toward tools like enterprise agreements as somehow irrelevant or out-of-place in the University setting, sharpened by a resistance that couched downstream exploitation in terms of professional values of dedication, excellence, and 'collegial' identification. The success of the campaign relied upon a certain refusal of that professional identification in favour of a different collective identification. Unionised staff won the campaign because of their preparedness to take up militant tactics and 'direct action' protest, including occupying the office of our faculty Dean, and decisively, a protest targeting the Vice-Chancellor's personal (but University-owned) residence in 2020.

The wage theft campaign exposed that the widespread use of casual contracts had covered over the real cost of operating Australian universities. Until very recently, casual and short-term staff comprised as much as 70 percent of the workforce at the University of Melbourne, one of the highest ranked Universities in the country. [5] Guillory engages briefly with Marc Bousquet's argument that universities 'underproduce jobs' (Guillory 254), arriving at the bizarre rejoinder that '[n]o employer is obliged to create jobs for all those who might wish to have

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[5] Similarly high rates of casualisation are common across universities in the United Kingdom, including notably, 66 percent of staff at the University of Oxford (see Sinclair 'It's the Precarity, Stupid!').

them' (Guillory 255). In Australia universities have indeed been underproducing jobs, all the while producing plenty of *work* for an army of employees who might be engaged 'casually', semester upon semester, for five, or ten, or fifteen years. The wage theft campaign decisively shifted the discourse around the crisis of casualisation. Extremely high rates of casualisation are no longer just an unpleasant reality to be borne by early-career academics, but a liability for institutions that might face significant mandatory repayments, fines, and the loss of reputational prestige if they fail to properly manage this workforce and meet entitlements. At least at our university (and things are shifting very rapidly elsewhere across the sector), there is a sense that the era of the 'casual academic' is coming to a close. We've now entered what managers are calling 'The Age of Compliance'. Per the University of Melbourne's submission to the Senate Select Committee on Job Security, the University is now committed 'to addressing the issues of insecure employment and casualisation, and the Vice-Chancellor and Provost have both personally conveyed a conviction that this provides neither a sustainable nor a desirable model for the future of the University' (1). Over the last six months, our faculty has created hundreds of new ongoing academic appointments, in many cases converting long time casuals into secure jobs—and this amidst the so-called 'Crisis in the Humanities'. The point is not the benevolent production of jobs for all who 'wish' for one, but the securitisation of work already being done. Our own work area has more than doubled the number of ongoing positions—from 59 continuing academics in 2020 to 122 today. The union has just successfully negotiated a new enterprise agreement that will make secure jobs the norm at our university (and we took more action, including the longest Australian university strikes since the 1850s, to secure it).

In spite of these obvious and undeniable successes, there is still scepticism among more senior academics about the cultural risks of adversarial unionism and the fight for job security. As casuals play greater roles in unions on campus, and the power of university unions grows, so too does the anxiety amongst the professoriate that precariously employed staff, who have no 'proper' place in academic governance, are deploying the industrial armature of the union to play an outsized role in university life. One oft-cited objection is the risk to *collegiality*, no longer understood as a specific structure of governance, but as something far more nebulous, a structure of feeling, a boundary of identification, a zone of loss— but primarily, displaced desire for autonomy.

We obviously have no knowledge of where Guillory stands in relation to these debates, and we are by now far from Guillory's limited concern with the profession of literary studies and from his American context. But we would like to use this opportunity to underline that we clearly cannot take for granted that professional reproduction is seated in the university, and in its contemporary forms of governance. If this governance is now mediated by enterprise agreements, then

the proper terrain of political struggle within the institution is the building of power amongst organised workers, and the improvement of conditions through collective bargaining. Not unimportant among these conditions is academic freedom, something that has been successfully protected by union-negotiated enterprise agreements in Australian universities (and not merely as a negative freedom, as in freedom from coercion, but upheld as a positive promotion and protection of intellectual autonomy). Conversations about the history, definition, and ideal object of our disciplinary endeavours need not necessarily wait for or be subordinated to rigorous debates about the solution to the crisis of labour in the institution. Nevertheless, it seems important to us to affirm an essential position: if we care about disciplinary reproduction, then we also need to care about and struggle to uphold institutional reproduction.

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