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Lower Ed

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Lower Ed: The Troubling Rise of For-Profit Colleges in the New Economy, by Tressie McMillan Cottom, New York, NY, The New Press, 2017, 240 pp., \$26.95 (hardback), ISBNL: 978-1-62097-060-7

I read Lower ed with a former colleague mind, having had the pleasure of working together at the City University of New York. Jeanne is a black woman in her 40s, who is raising children in the city, working as an under-paid adjunct, and finishing her PhD online at what's widely known as a for-profit college. Jeanne is one of the brightest, most hard-working, and accomplished women I know (having previously had a successful creative career before returning to school) and, like many of the women described in Lower ed, she stands in contradiction to the narratives that attend for-profit colleges. Jeanne is no dupe. She has intentionally chosen to attend a for-profit college to complete her PhD, praising its flexibility and the community that has been afforded to her through online forums. While Jeanne is married to a man with an advanced degree, she will be the first woman in her family with a PhD and, to listen to Jeanne talk, this is not just a degree that she is earning. It is generations of support culminating in a significant achievement. Completing her PhD is also part of a necessary and strategic effort to position herself in the academic marketplace, knowing that, without the degree, few opportunities will avail themselves, despite Jeanne's years of teaching and administrative experience.

As McMillan Cottom so deftly captures in the book, Jeanne is like many individuals who find their way to a for-profit college in order to negotiate the new social contract of American life, which suggests that education is not only fundamental to social mobility, it is a necessary effort to ward off the encroaching precarity and insecurity of the contemporary labor market, even if one has to go deeply into debt for that education. Even for students like Jeanne, who deeply value what her PhD means in terms of racial and social justice, the degree speaks to a need to continually upgrade one's existing job skills. Years of teaching experience or self-employment in the creative economy are no longer enough to ensure one's financial future and for-profit colleges have successfully entered the gap left by the overall reduction in worker agency. Drawing on her experience as a recruiter at two different types of for-profit colleges, McMillan Cottom writes: we sold dreams – of mobility, stability, and status – to students at the Beauty College. At the Technical College, we sold insurance – policies against unemployment, career stagnation, and volatile job markets. The latter was actually the more privileged position. Those students largely had jobs (p100).

Together, dreams of mobility and the rather practical need for 'insurance' against unemployment or market fluctuation make, as McMillan Cottom argues, for-profit colleges a rational choice for many individuals. Lower ed debunks the myths that attend for-profit colleges, illustrating the financialized mechanisms that support their growth in the market, as well as deftly exploring how students (as consumers) make the choice to attend such schools.

Yet, the book is about much more than for-profit schools and it should be read as a blueprint for understanding two key issues. First, the book is an illustration of the limitations of personal solutions to public problems. While increasing numbers of individuals now feel realistic pressure to make the personal choice to seek a college degree, it is clear that endless schooling, re-tooling, and re-skilling, either through advanced degrees or through new modes of certification and 'badging', will not solve the larger social, economic, and political problems presented by a shrinking labor market, the proliferation of insecure and under-waged jobs, and the absence of a unionized workforce. While the language of 'access' and 'participation' is prevalent in both higher education administrative discourse and in the world of digital learning technology that supports the expansion of online

learning, that language can obscure the unequal material conditions of students' lives and can justify the privatization of debt and financial uncertainty that such 'access' still requires.

Furthermore, the key strength of *Lower ed* is its consistent articulation of racialized stratification and the ways in which access to what McMillan Cottom calls 'risky credentials', or credentials that have been divorced from the promise of a good job, can compound long-term inequalities. Race and class not only circumscribe the choices available to individuals, they fundamentally shape the outcomes of those choices. We see in *Lower ed* what it means to continually insist that 'opportunity' is the same thing as social investment in students and in workers. Such an investment, I would argue, could look less like loans for 'risky credentials' than affordable or free education, affordable housing, health care and mental health care, child care, and other social provisions. It would also look like not needing an advanced degree to simply be eligible for work. I say this not to suggest that education is not personally meaningful or transformative or that it is not socially valuable, but that a sociological imagination is needed to temper, resist, and reform the deep privatization and hustle that now stands in as the link between education and work. There is such a thing as a bad job, as the history of labor attests, but, as McMillan Cottom writes, there is also 'such a thing as "bad" education. It is an educational option that, by design, cannot increase students' odds of beating the circumstances of their birth' (p. 67).

Second, *Lower ed* is a guide for interrogating what it means for education, as a social institution, to be reconstituted as a commercialized and transactional space for the hedging of risk. In line with deepening privatization, as McMillan Cottom suggests, education is now seen as a 'personal good' rather than a social good. When we think of a college degree we now tend to think of an individual's earning potential rather than our collective enrichment. In the United Kingdom, this logic was drawn to its bankrupt conclusion when Michael Gove, the Environment Secretary (and former Secretary of State for Education), publically supported raising University tuitions fees by claiming that, 'if you don't benefit from a university education, you shouldn't have to pay additionally to support those who do' (*The Guardian*, 2017). Gove's comments would suggest we don't all benefit when we encounter educated teachers, consult educated doctors and nurses, or when we drive on roads and bridges designed and maintained by educated engineers, to give a few examples.

Nonetheless, the shift from students as social investments in the future to students as consumers who make the self-interested choice to purchase an education has been rampant across both higher and lower education. The guiding logics that McMillan Cottom traces here – bottom line thinking, students reduced to enrollment figures and tuition dollars, the centralization and corporatization of curriculums, and the weakened role of faculty and researchers – are prevalent in various forms across private and public universities. While many educators (particularly graduate students and adjunct and contingent faculty) rightfully fight to show how this restructuring is a labor issue, requiring a stronger unionized faculty, what is happening across higher education also fundamentally speaks to the question of what it means to teach and to learn, and what we as a society consider knowledge. While *Lower ed* does not explicitly address the issue of the content of for-profit curriculums, we do learn that these schools favor centralized and standardized curriculums. Such curriculums intend to guaranteed quality, but are often, as McMillan Cottom explains, used to cut costs. They do this by limiting the role that faculty play in designing and developing educational materials or by relying on 'canned' material cut off from current research and current teaching pedagogy. These curriculums may also be informed by corporate or business interests. At their worst, they are reduced to curriculums as 'content', which are created for quick and flexible consumption and to meet the need for increased course sizes or 'massive' online

enrollments. Lower ed should prompt us to ask what happens to curriculums, and to real learning outcomes, as schools and workers attempt to divine the market and its requirements.

Lower ed is also a clear prompt for readers to dig deeper into the question of the notorious ‘skills gap’ or the notion that students graduate without the necessary skills for a digital economy, with its supposed demand for science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) skills. This gap is, apparently, to blame for a dearth of unqualified applicants, despite job opportunity. Unfortunately, as scholars have shown (Ward 2015), the ‘skills gap’ is ‘simply wrong or, at best, incomplete, simplistic and misleading’ as it obscures the types of jobs that are currently available. These jobs, it is argued, under-utilize existing talent (you can think here of David Graeber’s (2013) notion of ‘bullshit jobs’) or simply don’t exist, resulting in under-employment. Furthermore, while we see that some sectors like digital technology are currently dominating the discussion of skills – with students continually being reminded that coding and programming skills are essential for success – we do not see this sector or employers taking responsibility for an investment in workers. We might ask why and how it has fallen to higher education, where our work is fundamentally broad in its interest and cannot be reduced to STEM, to pick up this employer slack. We have been witnessing a great disinvestment in workers, simultaneously accompanied by a weakening of unionized labor, as well as a decimation worker-education and continuing education programs for several centuries. What we have been left with – ‘access’ and ‘flexibility’ – is much more of a gamble for workers and for schools, who are now left to chase the next big market pivot. In many ways, the argument that McMillan Cottom is making about lower ed, which suggests that access and flexibility are important to for-profit students, finds a parallel in the proliferation of the gig economy, where workers are encouraged to embrace flexible work arrangements. Yet, like the for-profit degree, work in the gig economy is (at a larger, macro scale) devalued, continually removed from worker protections, worker benefits, and worker leverage.

Lower ed should be read widely because it speaks to a collective predicament, which is the severing of work and education from wage security. If neither a job, job experience, nor continual reskilling can provide individuals with some financial security, then what shall? If our answer is more education, financed through student loans and private risk, we will have created what McMillan Cottom so rightly calls a ‘negative social insurance program’, where public funds are funneled into private, corporate profit. While for-profit colleges have been able to capitalize on this emerging arrangement, even they will start to seem like a stop-gap solution in due course, as inequality will continue to grow and the value of credentials will decrease in the market. Finally, I would like to suggest that we should, collectively, refuse to accept the notion that education can or should fix the job market, but, more specifically, as educators we should see that it is time to put labor history back on the curriculum and encourage students to read beyond the buzzwords of ‘entrepreneurialism’ and ‘coding’. Gutting worker protections and severing the link between work and mobility is not new. It’s where we came from and it requires an education in history, organizing, civil rights, and racial justice to fight it.

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