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## A Post-Lecture Assessment of Thomas Frank on Higher Education

by American Studies

Last week, we were delighted to host Thomas Frank and John Summers, founding editor and editor-in-chief of *The Baffler*, for a conversation on the future of higher education. In case you weren't able to attend the event (or watch our live-tweeting), one of our graduate students, Brendan Gaughen, has penned this thorough and thought-provoking write-up of the event. Feel free to weigh in in the comments, too – where *is* higher education going in the age of market pressures and student loans?



A student protests tuition hikes at McGill University in Quebec

Thomas Frank, founding editor of *The Baffler*, gave a talk called “Academy Fight Song” on October 30 in Avaya Auditorium on issues in higher education. Comparing higher education to an impossible dream burdened by unfulfilled promises, Frank decried the fact that universities have over the past few decades been increasingly run as businesses that value profits over the interests of students. Though his jeremiad was quite effective in articulating some of the problems presently occurring in higher education, his solutions were less clear.

Frank began the talk by describing the perception of the American university system as a dreamlike utopia of infinite possibility. Then all of a sudden, he said, recent college graduates wake up from the dream to discover themselves \$100,000 in debt with no prospects to speak of, despite the pervasive myth that their college degree grants automatic entry into the professional managerial class. Frank was careful to differentiate between a college degree and a college education, the former being what is thought of as the single most important credential to obtaining a career.

According to Frank, universities themselves are guilty of perpetuating this myth of self-importance. They are driven by what he called academic capitalism, selling promises to students but acting in their own institutional best interests, calling Harvard, for example, a “hedge fund with a university attached to it.” Frank cautioned against universities functioning like businesses that answer to the needs of the marketplace.

He claimed college students also feed into the problem, calling them cash cows who are duped into believing a college education is necessary. Like lambs to the slaughter, said Frank, they sign a student loan application, a blank check drawn on their own future, not knowing what they are getting themselves into. Once in college, they are trapped by the high cost of textbooks and ever-increasing tuition. Afterward they are saddled with huge amounts of student loan debt.

Higher education has been undergoing what he called deprofessionalization, and the bulk of the teaching is now done by low-ranking faculty with no tenure, benefits, or job security. University budgets go toward things like fancy architecture, sports stadiums, food courts, and celebrity professors with no academic credentials such as General David Petraeus and Chelsea Clinton, who was given a high-ranking position despite not have finished her doctorate. Perhaps most importantly, higher and higher percentages of university budgets are spent on an increasing number of administrators, whom Frank believes are largely unnecessary. Instead of a dreamlike utopia, said Frank, the American higher education system has become a “dystopia brought about by parasites and billionaires.”

The problem will remain unnoticed, said Frank, until there is an eventual breaking point: a bursting bubble that would take the form of a debt-driven failure of a prestigious university. The failure, he said, will inevitably be blamed on socialism, and the solution will be more standardized tests and more number-crunching administrators to monitor budgets and standards. There will be a mass faculty extinction that will miraculously spare administrators, and as a result humanities education will only be available to the very rich.


At the end of the talk, Frank outlined some components that would begin to reverse the process of marketization in higher education. Ideally, college should be very cheap, he said, with greater subsidies from the state. Universities should reduce the number of adjuncts and get rid of most administrators. Student loan debt should be forgiven in bankruptcy. Finally, he suggested college students speak up for their own interests and strike for better higher education. Though he did mention a recent event in Quebec where students were able to negotiate for lower tuition, one wonders if he truly believes college students would be able to successfully organize on a grand scale, given that he previously portrayed them as unsophisticated and charmingly naïve (though perhaps it takes a bit of youthful naivete to proceed when the odds are not in your favor).

In the question and answer session that followed, several audience members brought up good points. What about the positive experiences and transformations of students? What about the fact that universities continue to be at the forefront of scientific and intellectual innovation? Why isn't the solution to dream more, rather than less? Frank acknowledged the transformative power of college but again lamented the fact that it has largely been captured by market logic. He then described an intellectual epiphany that he had in college when he used to be a Republican, though surely he must have had a more significant transformative experience than that.

But let's face it – the climate of higher education was much different then. The cost of tuition and textbooks was much lower. University budgets were not burdened by cadres of administrators, and a significantly greater portion of the teaching was done by tenured (or soon-to-be-tenured) faculty rather than adjuncts. The high cost of a college education today has made it increasingly more difficult for even the middle class to attend, let alone those from lower socioeconomic classes. This makes the privileges afforded to certain groups (based on race, gender, and class) even more pronounced. Despite a somewhat condescending view of the ones who should be central to the story – college students – “Academy Fight Song” described quite effectively some of the main problems facing higher education today: belief in the necessity of a college degree, skyrocketing debt, shrinking budgets that have decimated some humanities departments, and a proliferation of administrators. But as I'm sure even Thomas Frank knows, outlining the problems is much easier than articulating realistic solutions.

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