

УДК: 372.881.111.1 (575.2) (04)

Clyde R. Forsberg Jr., PhD., Professor
European and American Studies (for the moment)
American University of Central Asia

**“SAVAGERIES OF THE ACADEMY ABROAD:
THE DEATH OF AMERICAN STUDIES AT THE AMERICAN
UNIVERSITY OF CENTRAL ASIA AND THE PROBLEM OF GLOBAL
REFORMS TO HIGHER EDUCATION”**

This article deals with The Death of American Studies at the American University of Central Asia and the Problem of Global Reforms to Higher Education.

Keywords: American Studies, Higher Education, Global Reforms.

В этой статье речь идет о крахе направления “Американоведение” в Американском университете в Центральной Азии и проблемах глобальных реформ в высшем образовании.

Ключевые слова: Американоведение, Высшее образование, Глобальные реформы.

“[American Studies] is dead, and we have killed him.” The aforementioned is taken from Friedrich Nietzsche’s famous denunciation of the state of contemporary German philosophy and the debilitating effects of liberal German theology. In their attempts to defend the faith, German liberal theologians managed somehow to destroy it. To what degree the same might be said of the death of American Studies at the American University of Central Asia as the handiwork of academicians bears mention. Coming to Kyrgyzstan in 2003 as a Visiting Faculty Fellow for the Civic Education Project (now the Open Society Institute) and to assist with the creation of new courses and to mentor local faculty, for me personally to return ten years later and witness first-hand a department and program of study that I helped to create as it were pack up shop is heartbreaking.

I can recall, and with a degree of pride, how important the department seemed to be to the American University of Central Asia and to people like Bill Hansen (M.A., London School of Economics) of the ICP Department and East-West Center, AUCA President Dr. David Huwiler, and AUCA Provost Dr. Camila Sharshekeeva. They were also instrumental in the creation of the American Studies Association of Central Asia (now Kyrgyzstan), as well. Their reasons for creating such a department were economic and ideological. The vast majority of AUCA students, as well as the administration and board of trustee at that time seemed to think that a program of American Studies ought to be an essential part of an American university’s course offerings. As the university moves toward adopting a liberal arts college model and thus a broadly based set of course offerings in the humanities, American Studies would appear to have outlived its purpose. The half dozen or so American Studies majors yet to matriculate, when they graduate (should they graduate) will have weathered a kind of educational perfect storm--as American Studies faculty either leave of their own accord or are not rehired, and despite significant professional training and experience in their field.

The official reason for the closing of American Studies is simple enough: not enough students. Despite a number of distinguished American Studies graduates over the years, parents seem concerned that a degree in American Studies *per se* amounts to a waste of their hard-earned money. The problem in this case can be seen as part and parcel of a crisis in education, exacerbated by a

downturn in the economy, pressure to economize from above and below, and other global reforms to higher education at home and abroad. Given the radical nature of the “economizing” of late, with fewer and fewer tenured faculty hires and part-time and/or non-tenure-track (adjunct) professors the norm, many university administrators have succumbed to (perhaps against their will) to a variety of autocratic necessary evils in order to expedite what they, rightly or wrong, consider to be inevitable.

To be clear, the death of American Studies at the American University of Central Asia is symptomatic of a much larger problem, that being, the slow and agonizing death of higher education around the globe, as universities here, there, and everyone put economics ahead of education. The original mission of the humanities, going back to the Renaissance and the birth of higher education so to speak, was the creation of a virtuous society vis-à-vis a curriculum and education intended for leaders—kings and queens, monarchists and republicans alike. When the subject of what one can do with a degree in the humanities came up in my European History course, for example, I told my freshman students simply this: “you can—and ought to--change the world.”

A few very basic facts concerning the state of universities in the West before turning to the East, and what has been termed the “corporatized college” and/or the “Wal-Martization” of education in America.¹ One may consider, too, the concluding address of the 2008 annual meeting of the College and University Professional Association for Human Resources, where University of Akron (Ohio) human resources executive A.G. Monaco suggested that Wal-Mart may well be “a more honest employer of part-time employees than are most colleges and universities,[and so] academics ‘have to stop lying’ about the way non-tenure-track professors are treated.”² No friend of non-tenure track faculty and a notorious “union buster,” Monaco went on to explain that “a highly educated working poor”

¹ See in this connection, Scott Jaschik, “Call to Arms for Adjuncts ... From an Administrator” *Inside Higher Ed.* 14 October 2008),

<http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2008/10/14/adjunct-2014-slCDMUuXlO.jHKmrzpu.dpbs>, accessed 26 April 2014.
<http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2008/10/14/adjunct#ixzz2zzen8xPt>

Inside Higher Ed.

² Ibid.

is the present and future of higher education in America.³

The story of one PhD graduate in America, Victoria, albeit a construct based on countless such examples, drives home Monaco's point.⁴ Victoria is an adjunct (part-time) assistant professor at three different universities and despite twelve years of teaching experience, publications, and a stellar performance record, she has yet to be given a full-time and/or tenure-track appointment. As Jim Hightower and Phillip Frazer point out in their illuminating study of the treatment of adjunct professors across the United States:

None of her employers provide health coverage, pension, paid sick leave, paid vacation time, ladder of upward mobility, or respect. There's no job security--she can be fired on a boss's whim, with no notice and no severance pay. Also, Victoria's bosses keep shifting her work schedule at the last minute, forcing her to recalibrate on the fly. She gets no say in any of this.⁵

Victoria is a full-fledged member of the academic working poor in America. With one exception (paid vacation), her precarious employment situation is exactly that of nearly every full-time professor working at the American University of Central Asia—most especially now as it plans to move to a new campus in the near future and must continue to downsize. American Studies *per se* can be seen as but one casualty of the “corporate campus” abroad.

In fact, one can speak of a trend in higher education, going back now more than forty years, in which universities have opted to save money (at the expense of education) by hiring part-time instead of full-time faculty. At present, some 1.3 million adjunct assistant professors are scattered across American campuses. As the number of adjuncts increases, so has the cost of education and tuition fees, and so the savings are not passed along to the consumer it would seem. And finally, quoting Hightower and Frazer,

[m]ost schools are run by extravagantly paid CEOs (cloaked with the more benign title of ‘president’) . . . have no personal ties to the institution, feel no need to listen to the faculty, and are most eager to please corporate donors and wealthy benefactors. They tend to be climbers (always looking for a better paying/more prestigious school to jump to) and empire builders (enhancing their power with layers of vice-presidents, executive assistants, lawyers, lobbyists, PR flacks, alumni liaisons, et al.).⁶

One reason for so many cost-cutting measures, Hightower and Frazer contend is the preference of boards of trustees (and administrated by corporate executives in the main) is to fund their own salaries. The problem is not a lack of students, or even money, but a bottom line that favors a well-paid managerial class. In 1970, for example, tenured faculty constituted 77 percent of higher education professionals at America's universities, whereas today the average is less than 25 percent. The remaining 75 percent of university faculty are made up of adjuncts (more than 50 percent of the total), graduate students and full-time, non-tenured hires holding up the rear (and less than 25 percent of the total).⁷ Policies that are meant to deny adjuncts a full course load and thus access to benefits like healthcare is another way that many US colleges and universities avoid going into the red.⁸ From a purely managerial point of view, as

³ Ibid.

⁴ She is a composite character it should be added, but making it all the more problematic.

⁵ Jim Hightower and Phillip Frazer, “Lessons from corporatized college: Even PhDs are being squeezed out of the middle class” *Hightower Lowdown* Volume 16, Number 4 (April 2014), <http://www.hightowerlowdown.org/node/3627#.U1sTtqK8r5O>, accessed 26 April 2014.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ See in this connection, Patricia Sabga, “Adjunct professors in dire straits with low pay, lack of full-time jobs” *Real Money Matters* (15 October 2014), <http://america.aljazeera.com/watch/shows/real-money-with-alivelshi/Real-Money-Blog/2013/10/15/poor-working-conditionsforadjunctprofessorsleavestudentsshortcha.html>, accessed 26 April 2014.

⁸ As an aside, the passage of the Affordable Care Act, also known as “Obamacare,” requires large corporations to offer healthcare coverage to its employees working thirty hours or more, many universities adroitly instituting new regulations and limiting the number of hours its adjuncts could work to under thirty to avoid having to pay. See in this connection, “Miller Announces eForum on Adjunct Faculty in Higher Education” Committee on Education and the Workforce, Democrats (19 Nov. 2013), <http://democrats.edworkforce.house.gov/press-release/miller-announces-eforum-adjunct-faculty-higher-education>, accessed 26 April 2014). Cf. Colleen Flaherty, “Caps Untouched” *Inside Higher Ed.* (25 February 2014), <http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2014/02/25/some-colleges-consider-changes-adjunct-caps-wake-irs->

Monaco also points out, such cost-cutting stratagems are “doomed to create management problems and unfavorable scrutiny.”⁹

The problem is not that universities, as bastions of virtue, are guilty of unethical behavior, but that the quality of education is likely to suffer as a consequence of being penny wise and pound foolish. In the United States at least, the adjunct system does not work from either a managerial or educational viewpoint. Ironically, the present standoff at American universities that pits tenured faculty associations against adjunct unions also proves problematic, because this seems only to reinforce the *status quo*, that being, a two-tiered system in which the most qualified teachers do the least, and the least qualified teachers do the most *vis-à-vis* the actual work of teaching students and a variety of foundation course offerings. As one adjunct rights advocate at the State University of New York College (Buffalo) rightly observes, the “sudden espousal of the cause of contingent-faculty rights after 30 years of exploitation might just be a new face on the same old divide-and-conquer strategy that’s worked so well for . . . three decades.”¹⁰

The following real-life stories of adjunct faculty living and working in the United States suggest that “exploitation” is not too strong a word to describe what passes for a career in higher education, that is, being reduced to poverty in essence and a life of fear and uncertainty. English professor Maria Maisto was contracted by Cuyahoga Community College (Ohio) to offer an honors English course, which paid her only \$2,600 a semester. However, when enrollment fell below the minimum of ten students, the course was cancelled and she received a \$50 cancellation fee for her trouble. “This is the big dilemma that we (adjuncts) always have,” she explains. “How much of my unpaid time am I going to put into this preparation when I have no idea if the class is going to go or not?” Another problem is office space, or the lack thereof. “I rarely have the opportunity to meet with students in private, which is of huge concern to me because they have a federally mandated right to privacy.” One may compare her experience to that of Collin Community College (Texas) adjunct dance instructor Candace Bordelon. Hired in August, her

courses were reassigned to another teacher at the last minute. She was given three new courses, but at three different campuses. Darren Brown, a thirty-nine years old PhD graduate in American Studies and adjunct professor at San Francisco State University lives in his parents’ basement out of necessity. He is attempting to sell his library to raise money to pay his student debt—a cool one-hundred-thousand dollars. Among the best teachers at the university in the estimation of his students,¹¹ he was simply not given any courses to teach. The following student evaluation speaks volumes: “Darren Brown is the most awesome, down-to-earth professor I know. He has a passion for teaching. Too bad spring 2013 was his last semester at SFSU.”¹² Finally, Margaret Mary Vojtko taught French at Duquesne University in Pittsburgh for twenty-five years and loved dearly by her students. She was unsalaried, never informed of her teaching load until the very last minute, never made more than \$25,000 per annum, and never received any other benefits. For no reason that anyone could ascertain, her courses were simply reduced, causing her gross annual income to fall under \$10,000. Contracting cancer, a pauper without any savings or pension to fall back on, and unable to pay her electric bill one winter, she still managed not to miss a day’s work. She was fired by Duquesne for her trouble, later found dead of a massive heart attack—proud, but penniless.

The biggest losers in the whole affair, in fact, are the students themselves. The pioneering work of Adrianna Kezar and the University of Southern California’s Delphi Project sheds light on the impact of “shifting higher-education faculty dynamics on student success.” In short, students taught by non-tenured faculty are less successful. This is not to say that the quality of teaching offered by adjuncts is inferior, for many are better in the classroom than their so-called tenured betters. The problem, as Kezar explains, is that universities who dole out the bulk of their undergraduate courses to non-tenured and/or part-time faculty, set them up to fail:

They hire them at the very last moment, a day or two before class, so they can’t prepare for classes. They have no input into the curriculum, choosing textbooks, so they’re often teaching . . . resource[s] that they’re not familiar with. They also don’t know the broader learning objectives of

[guidance#sthash.zVs2DtWG.dpbs](#), accessed 26 April 2014.

⁹ Jaschik, “Call to Arms for Adjuncts.”

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ 4.5 out of 5, the university average being 3.7.

¹² Both cited in Ibid.

the department or school, so they're not tying in, or helping students to connect their learning to their other courses or curriculum.

The present decline in the quality of life of educators and of higher education in the United States in general is due to a number of factors--the downturn in the economy (Great Recession), enrollment patterns, and a reliance on contingent labor to balance the books.

It does not help that too many university administrators in the United States remain unfamiliar with the issue, toeing the Wal-Mart line out of sheer ignorance rather than a lack of moral fervor necessarily. As Kezer explains, "very few administrators to know of the studies that demonstrate the negative impacts for students from this shift away from tenure-track faculty to largely part-time faculty." What is called for is a new economic model (a business model with an ethical dimension and worthy of Aristotle rather than Aristotle Onassis), wherein pedagogy not a penny-pinching drives growth and insures sustainability; that is, by hiring more full-time faculty, lowering the numbers of adjunct faculty, treating the latter fairly and humanely.

SFSU President Leslie Wong is one example of what is possible, a veritable Abraham Lincoln of American university presidents and intent upon ending academic slavery and the migrant labor practices of the last forty years. Importantly, his university lost a third of its operating budget in 2009 and left with the daunting task of offering *bona fide* master's level courses, regardless. Wong's expressed long-range goal is to hire more full-time, tenured faculty not less. Wong understands, and has stated in public that "the declining numbers of tenure-track, faculty could not continue." Last year, SUSU hired some forty-five new tenure-track faculty. And where did Wong get the money? His answer is educational: from grant money and by putting off physical campus improvements. As he has explained: "We're just going to delay those [physical improvements] even longer and apply that savings or money to the hiring of talented faculty." SFSU understands that teachers and students alike must come first and before the erecting of monuments of brick and steel and glass.

The American University of Central Asia is clearly an American university in its basic philosophy and as expounded by its current president in a 2013 paper for Nazarbayev University and its Eurasian Higher Education

Leaders Forum on "Global Trends in Higher Education and their Impact on the Region." Time does not permit a detailed discussion and/or criticism of its content vis-à-vis the aforementioned discussion of the "corporate campus" and "Wal-Martization of higher education" in Central Asia. However, let me tender a few observations and suggestions in order to better understand where the American University of Central Asia appears to be headed, who or what might be responsible for the closing of the American Studies Department, and ultimately whether this is a good thing or bad where students are concerned.

- Northwest University appears to be the model: "both must contend with resistance on the part of students and parents to continued tuition increases, both must rely on philanthropy to make up the difference between what students can pay and what they must charge, and both must run balanced budgets on an annual basis."

- Northwestern is adamantly opposed to the unionization of its non-tenured, part-time faculty, retaining the services of Jackson Lewis, a New York firm considered by many to be "the number one union-buster in America."

- Northwestern's public expressions of respect and treatment of its adjunct faculty appear not to accord with the reality. The average hourly wage for adjunct faculty at Northwestern, and other universities like it, is \$8.90 an hour.

- Northwestern is careful never to break the law in its anti-union efforts, but as Kate Bronfenbrenner at the Cornell School of Industrial and Labor Relations argues, in the case of Northwestern, "union avoidance" is now an industry and, increasingly, more punitive and illegal maneuvers such as retaliatory firings are employed.

- AUCA's budget is very much at the mercy of, and at the president's insistence, philanthropy and tuition: "we decided that an overreliance on the support of only two funders, generous as they might have been, was a mistake, and we recognized the need to find other sources of philanthropic support." The closure of American Studies seems a corollary of the university's decision to discontinue funding from either George Soros and USAID, its creation of the European Studies Department a corollary of its receipt of European Union funding.

- Several "unprecedented . . . fund-raising campaign[s] [are] beginning to bear fruit," but, to

date, these are “long-term activity [which] is not merely a fund-raising but rather a conscious-raising campaign that may or may not lead to direct and immediate support for the university.”

- Some of the language of the (2003) report is telling and indicative of a kind of factory mentality—higher education *per se* an assembly line—students described as “cost[ing] us some \$22K a piece to produce and who pay us on average around \$10K

- Research institutes are praised, not because of the quality of their scholarship, but the likelihood of attracting outside, private funding.

- The high price of tuition and a student-loan program are defended, too, because the percentage of their tuition that Northwestern students is much higher—a comparison of apples and oranges (50 percent to 70 percent respectively). However, tuition fees at AUCA average \$3,000 a year on average and roughly three times the average Kyrgyz annual income per capita of \$1,000. If the average income per capita of Northwestern supporting family is \$100,000, then tuition at Northwestern would be \$300,000 instead of \$30,000 to equal that of AUCA students. In real monetary terms, AUCA students are expected to pay roughly ten times the tuition that their counterparts at Northwestern, an elite, ivy-league American university, are expected to pay or amortize over four years.

- What is described as “incredible care on the spending side” is coupled with hiring “strong (mostly local) faculty and a competent (mostly local) administrative staff.”

- Little or no money will be allocated to support local scholars and their research, as well as visiting foreign scholars of renown and who are said to “cost a lot and provide little in the way of education substance for our students.”

- Other cost-cutting measures in the works include the introduce “open-source course material” (a form of intellectual theft) and, more importantly, to reduce personnel costs “in which faculty are not providing sufficient value added through their lecturing.”

- Finally, there is a tacit admission in the report of other policies and/or “experiments . . . that would be difficult or impossible in the States” and because, one assumes, that they would contravene labor relations and civil liberties.

In conclusion, as someone who played a role in the creation and development of American Studies at the American University of Central Asia in its early years, it is arresting to consider how the mission of the university has changed dramatically from one of “civil society” and “social justice,” the creation of a new generation of civic-minded and socially conscious graduates with a larger goal in sight than their own enlightened self-interest. Much of that original dream has been replaced by something purely economic in nature: “a first-class education for a good price.” And yet, the president of the most illustrious American University in Central Asia yet admits that “AUCA will probably never look like Yale.” Of course, on this point he is exactly right, at least as long as the mandate is an economic and corporate one. What made Yale was an undying devotion to the classics, in fact. In closing the American Studies Department, and simply in response to a particular shift in the market and in line with a corporate ethos that does not bode well for education in the United States and elsewhere, AUCA has unwittingly reduced its chances rather significantly of ever becoming a Yale and regardless of the money it may attract in the future; or, for that matter, a Macy’s, so long as it is a Wal-Mart.

References:

- <http://www.hightowerlowdown.org/node/3628#.U1tQUKK8r5M>
- <http://www.thechangingfaculty.org/>,
- <http://america.aljazeera.com/watch/shows/real-money-with-alivelshi/Real-Money-Blog/2013/10/15/poor-working-conditionsforadjunctprofessorsleavestudentsshortcha.html>,
- <http://democrats.edworkforce.house.gov/press-release/miller-announces-eforum-adjunct-faculty-higher-education>,