



Invisible adjuncts: A review of *Indhu Rajagopal's, Hidden Academics: Contract Faculty in Canadian Universities*

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The increase in the number of contingent faculty has attracted much attention in higher education circles over the past several years. The topic even gained space in the disputed online world. In the United States, a part-time instructor created a weblog using the spirited and telling pseudonym of “Invisible Adjunct” ([www.invisibleadjunct.com](http://www.invisibleadjunct.com)). The weblog was so popular during its one-year history that it attracted as many as 18,000 visitors a month. I start with the Invisible Adjunct’s story because it is somewhat illustrative of the larger trend (and the site is an interesting source for those who would like to know more about the topic from someone who has been at the trenches). The Invisible Adjunct grew up and studied as an undergraduate in Canada, and then pursued graduate work in history at an elite American school. She hoped to land a tenure-track job after graduating, which she almost did; a search committee ranked her the second choice for an assistant professor position at an elite research university. Disappointed but ready to continue her job hunt, she took an adjunct job temporarily, in what would be a pit stop on her race to enter the academic mainstream. Or so she thought. The Invisible Adjunct was not invited for other campus interviews in the following five years. Life as an adjunct was hard: she was underpaid, overworked and unrecognized. She felt “invisible” on campus, whether to academic or administrative staff. The Invisible Adjunct documented her experience in the weblog, where she conveyed many frustrations and occasional moments of joy. When she decided to quit altogether – the adjunct job, the hope of a permanent appointment, and consequently the weblog – her story made the news (Smallwood, 2004).

In *Hidden Academics: Contract Faculty in Canadian Universities*, Indhu Rajagopal explores the situation of those like the Invisible Adjunct in Canadian higher education. To clarify the definition of “contract faculty”, Rajagopal deals with part-time faculty and full-time non-tenure track faculty on temporary contracts. She conducted a set of surveys of and about contract faculty in the early 1990s, which, however dated, form the foundation and the best aspect of the book. Rajagopal is correct in her assertion that “the findings are as relevant today as they were then” (p.15), as the trend of part-time appointments replacing full-time positions has persisted. A 2003 research report concludes that:

The delivery of courses by part-time staff at Canadian universities is no longer a new phenomenon but a reality of university staffing. Part-time faculty hired by

universities increased from 25,700 in 1990–1991 to 28,200 in 1997–1998, up nearly 10%. Full-time faculty hired by universities decreased about 8% over the same period. Men continued to outnumber women in both part-time and full-time positions in Canadian universities. In 1997–1998, some 58% of part-time faculty and 74% of full-time faculty were men. In terms of fields of study, over the same eight-year period Social Sciences and Humanities accounted for the largest number of both part-time and full-time faculty in Canadian universities, where about one-half of all part-time and full-time teachers taught in this field (Omicinski, 2003, p.14).

Given the sheer size of this group, there are plenty of academic and policy reasons justifying the book (and further empirical work). The book's meritorious *raison d'être* and laborious research effort are promising signs for the reader, whose interest is only enhanced by a look at the preface. There we learn that Rajagopal herself – a political economist trained at the University of Toronto – worked as an adjunct for years. She secured a tenure-line appointment at York University after internal candidates began to be considered in the search process, thanks to the bargaining efforts of the Canadian Union of Education Workers. Unfortunately, despite the promise of the project, it is hard not to get frustrated by the final product.

At its best, *Hidden Academics* offers original empirical data on an understudied and relevant population. Rajagopal's six national surveys help fill a gap in national-level, comprehensive statistical data on contingent university faculty. She initially gathered data from universities on definitions of part-timers and limited-term full-timers; then she surveyed national samples of both, along with tenure-line faculty and administrators. Chapter 3 points to the relationship of gender and occupational stratification that is described in the quotation above, showing the "feminization" of part-time work. Chapter 4 shows some interesting differences between "Classics", who hold full-time non-academic jobs and teach part-time, and "Contemporaries", who only work as contract faculty. Chapters 5 and 6 probe the different views and interests of part-timers, full-timers, and administrators.

At its worst, some aspects of the book would not meet the standards required for a doctoral dissertation in higher education. Such aspects include the insufficient use of relevant literatures, and problems in the coherence and flow of the overall argument. Let me explore these issues in more detail below.

*Hidden Academics* has three main characters. First, the exploited, hardworking, talented, but unfairly treated contract faculty who fell through the cracks of the academic job market. Second, the technocrat administrator who seeks to manage the university as a business and seize control of the institution by dividing and conquering the faculty. Third, the aristocratic tenure-line faculty who treats part-timers with different levels of contempt, depending upon their life stage in academia. I do not mean that these stereotypes do not correspond to observable realities; there are certainly plenty of part-timers, administrators, a tenure-laden faculty that conform to the descriptions above, as even a reading of online archives of the Invisible Adjunct weblog will tell you. What is disturbing is the determinism: only narrow variation is allowed within these role-based constructions. Having set the stage with these one-dimensional characters, Hollywood-style, the narrative progresses monotonically and predictably. There is no attempt to

develop a fine-grained understanding of the actual decision-making processes of the different actors.

The lack of nuance is perhaps exacerbated by analytical and narrative choices. Aware of the strengths and weaknesses of survey research, Rajagopal included open-ended questions in the questionnaires to allow surveyed faculty to express their voice. Respondents' comments are quoted throughout the book, but in such a way as to leave the reader wondering where those remarks came from. For example, one respondent is quoted as follows: "The last time I applied for a tenure-track job (2 years ago), I was told that my articles [publications] are not the right kind... Some of the full-time faculty in my department sabotaged even my application for a post-doctoral fellowship... and they hired a Harvard PhD for a job for which I was more qualified" (p.71). While the quote reinforces the established roles of part-timers and full-timers described above, it is hard to know what to make of it in the lack of any contextual knowledge. Were this quote the result of in-depth interviews, for instance, Rajagopal would have been able to give the reader some clue of whether this individual seemed to be venting frustration or providing reflective observations of his or her experience. In general, Rajagopal does not clearly establish whether a comment from a part-timer represents frequent or idiosyncratic opinions in the context of her dataset. Similarly, by reading the quoted material we cannot determine whether they are central issues or tangential remarks at the level of the individual respondent. The otherwise good methodological appendix is of little help in this regard, since it does not explain how the open-ended data were analyzed.

In the first two chapters, the author establishes that she views contract faculty through a Marxian conceptual framework. In Chapter 1, Rajagopal suggests that "While shifting the blame to the financial shortfalls, in order to extract surplus value, central administrators in universities have effectively stratified the academic labor force" (pp. 27-28). I am ready for the ride, and want to know precisely what is going on. Extracting surplus value seems to be the overarching goal, and financial shortfalls a convenient excuse.

In Chapter 6, Rajagopal reports on the findings of the survey of administrators, which asked why part-timers are hired and what prerogatives they should have, among other questions. The most salient reasons for administrators to recruit part-timers are financial shortages, the short-term need for instructors to replace full-time faculty on leave, and the need for professionals from the outside (p.199). The rest of the data presented in the chapter reinforces the conventional view of the part-timer as a contingent worker. Interestingly, when reporting that 59% of administrators do not believe that making part-time appointments are a "regular cost-saving strategy", Rajagopal claims that "in reality, however, vice-presidents and deans who make policies relating to finances and staffing regard the practice as a continuing strategy. They consider such appointments to be a money saving strategy" (p.202). This is interesting, I think, because the implication is that perhaps upper-administrators are interested in pursuing efficiencies that undermine the conventional wisdom that universities seek prestige through the research achievements of their full-time faculty. Rajagopal suggests that given the *real* option of choosing between a full-timer and two or three part-timers upper-administrators opt for the latter, contrary to what many higher education scholars would predict. In other words, they pursue surplus value. However, Table 6.2 actually shows that most

VPs/deans (43%) and department chairs (63%) *disagreed* with that notion; only 29% of the former and 15% of the latter agreed (p.203).

What conclusions can we draw from this? In the final section, Rajagopal proclaims that “part-timers are now a permanent and inexpensive source of labour, producing a surplus value that the universities transfer to compensate for the fiscal shortfalls resulting from government underfunding,” (p. 237) and I lose hope that this notion is up for debate or verification. If you are curious about the (1) extent to which the concept of surplus value enhances our understanding of the behavior of public universities, or (2) whether there is any actual surplus value to be “transferred” in the maze of cross-subsidizations of university finance, or yet (3) whether the pursuit of surplus value is better understood as a voluntary administrative strategy – presupposing there are real choices to be made – or a reactive accommodation to shifting external environments, you are likely to be frustrated. None of these issues are raised or elaborated on.

There are clear connections between Rajagopal’s argument and extensive segments of the higher education literature, such as work on privatization, marketization, and managerialism. However, the book’s discussion of these trends is at best anecdotal. They appear on about four paragraphs of the introduction (pp. 9-11) and in scattered remarks throughout the text. In addition to ignoring segments of the literature, Rajagopal quotes secondary sources to provide evidence of at least questionable value. One example offers Sid Gilbert’s remarks on performance indicators quoting Bill Graham’s critique in the *Toronto Star* that “the new design of higher education has students as ‘clients’” and the bottom line as the ultimate objective” (p. 34). In this Russian Matrioshka-like citation, Rajagopal relies on an article published in a newsletter of the Ontario Confederation of University Faculty Associations (the OCUFA Forum), which slightly misquotes the *Toronto Star’s* writer paraphrase of Bill Graham’s viewpoint.<sup>1</sup> A priori, there is nothing wrong with sources such as the OCUFA Forum, but there has been substantial interesting research on this phenomenon in the past two decades. However, even when citing scholars who have contributed to the debate (such as Gumpert, 2000), the discussion barely scratches the surface.

A symptom of the problematic logic flow of the book’s argument is the curiously misplaced penultimate chapter, “Sweated Labour”. Chapter 1 indicates that “in chapter seven the major theoretical understandings of this contract faculty’s work and status, which our empirical finding fleshed out in earlier chapters are outlined [sic]” (p.23). Curiously, the author goes back to the literature in Chapter 7 and only then situates her analytical approach in relation to other studies of the topic, and brings in sections on “ideological structures” and “stratification”. This would have been a much stronger background for the entire book, had it appeared as Chapter 2. This becomes evident when Rajagopal describes the “political economy model” as a stream of the literature and states, “this comprehensive model is appropriate for my study of the hierarchical interactions studying the university’s power structures as well as their ideological justifications” (p. 239). Appearing in the third and concluding section of the book, it suggests that perhaps we have not learned much from the study, or maybe the author only got to a relevant analysis of existing research by the end of the manuscript.

Despite its flaws, *Hidden Academics* is a useful source for those interested in the subject of contract faculty in Canadian universities. The ambitious scope and scale of the surveys deserve credit, as does Rajagopal's overall effort to contribute to an understudied aspect of higher education in Canada.

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<sup>1</sup> The actual text is "Graham says that instead of actually running the universities, as they used to do, more and more academic boards are now having to sit and listen while a specialist management consultant comes in with reports written in corporatese. Students have become 'clients' in the new-speak; the bottom line is all." Hurst, L. (1998). The battle to save us from higher training. *Toronto Star*, May 17, 1998. Retrieved electronically from:

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