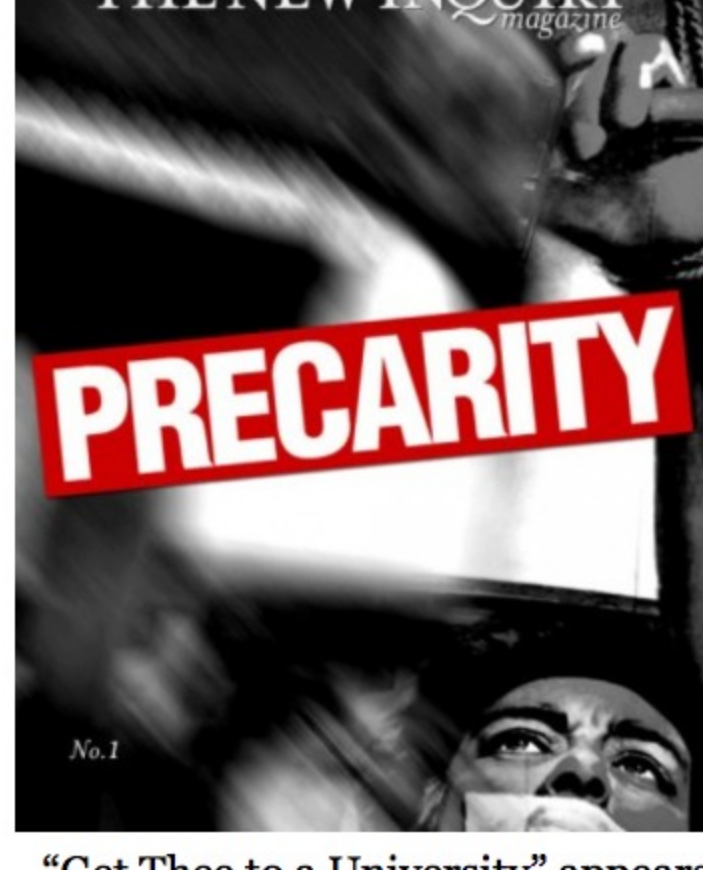




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"Finishing School"



"Get Thee to a University" appears in The New Inquiry Magazine, No. 1: Precarity

## Get Thee to a University

By CHRISTINE BAUMGARTHUBER



### As the value of higher education starts breaking bad, the unprecedented number of degree-holding women reach a milestone and assume a millstone

Had my father his way, a plate of goulash would have decided my fate. The dish is a specialty of mine, and a favorite of his. He had settled in his mind that I should spend two years in the culinary arts program of our local community college and a year apprenticed to the owner of a Hungarian restaurant in town. I suppose he wished to maneuver me into the *dírnél* vacated by my grandmother, an Austrian *Hausfrau* direct from central casting, who was seldom seen without a ladle or pastry bag in hand.

As much as I would have liked to honor my *Oma* and her culinary acumen, I had other plans. My father's visions of steaming crocks of goulash could do little to dislodge daydreams of a bluestocking's life in the New Mexico desert. My senior year of high school, I submitted an application to St. John's College. When the fat envelope arrived in the mail, I was overjoyed. I nagged my mother to send me on a campus visit. Once there, I strolled the school grounds, eavesdropped on evening fireside discussions of Lincoln's political genius and became infected with the belletristic spirit of the place. I was struck when, after breakfast one morning, I found a pair of undergraduates sitting in the shade of a tree. One read aloud Xenophon while another trimmed his hair, a silver bowl clapped over his head to guide her scissor strokes. I was sold.

Neither a toga nor a toque was in the cards for me, as it turned out. When it came time to talk turkey about how I would meet my expenses, my father mumbled that he'd lost the family college fund through risky investments. My hopes of attending St. John's were dispatched in much the same manner as Rosencrantz and Guildenstern—obscurely, and with little ado. I had to pack my bags, then, for Giant State U., that fallback position of so many ambitious kids.

Giant State U. was in those days reasonably affordable, but I still had to take out loans. I did so with little apprehension, as my college career happened to coincide with the millennial boom years. I felt free to concentrate on my studies without any real concern for résumé-building, and enjoyed school so much that I double-majored (English and History) and pressed on to graduate school.

The leisurely path I took though my undergraduate years seems impossible now. University students today must either work part-time or borrow massive amounts of money simply to make it from semester to semester. Under conditions of such pressing necessity, navel-gazing is ill advised, if not impossible. In the time it has taken me to receive my Ph.D., the dominant cultural themes have gone from those of capitalism triumphant, soulful work, and an ever-ascending Dow to those of capitalism in crisis, a "new normal" of ten percent unemployment, and a jobless economic recovery. Indeed, as a recent National Public Radio story reported, the burning policy issue of 2000 (my junior year) was the retirement of the national debt, which was projected to happen in 2012.

Yet even as the notoriously "irrational exuberance" of the late 90s had beaten a full retreat, progress had been made in other areas. In 2009, for instance, American women surpassed men in earning master's degrees. Admittedly, the women's majority, as reported by the Council of Graduate Schools, was exceedingly slender (50.4 percent); but this seems merely evidence of the first signs of correction in a temporal lag following much more dramatic developments at the undergraduate level, where fully two-thirds of bachelor's degrees are conferred on women. Some may rush to dismiss these figures on the basis that they conceal certain salient factors, such as whether these degrees are going to science or to humanities majors. Recent figures suggest, however, that women have made substantial gains in the so-called STEM subjects (science, technology, engineering, mathematics), a trend which will have some legs if women's scores on standardized testing offer any indication. According to the American Association of University Women, the ratio of seventh- and eighth-grade boys scoring higher than 700 on the SAT math exam was thirteen to one thirty years ago. Today that number has shrunk to three to one.

To hear popular media tell of it, however, is to gather the notion that for all of its impressive briskness, this victory can only be described as Pyrrhic. College degrees have never commanded less pay than they do presently, announces one headline or another, each marshalling hard numbers to support their claim. An ambitious electrician earns some \$1.8 million dollars during the course of his career; a real estate broker with a college degree, a mere \$1.5 million (the real-estate bust has no doubt dented this figure). The refrain among many pundits is that most people have no use for a college degree, so it's silly to encourage them to pursue one. Joining this chorus are certain oligarchs of a right-libertarian bent. Venture capitalist and Stanford grad Peter Thiel, for instance, recently established \$100,000 fellowships for teenage entrepreneurs who wish to journey down the road less taken.

It appears that present trends augur the eventual success of Thiel's pet project. The traditional connection between level of education and earning power has faded. Salaries have stagnated, and in some fields have declined. Meanwhile, tuition and fees at U.S. colleges and universities climbed 439 percent between 1982 and 2007, as measured in current (inflation unadjusted) dollars, outstripping by three times the increase of median family income. Rapidly rising tuition and declining family wealth have compelled nearly two-thirds of undergraduates to borrow in order to cover their expenses. The average student debt hovers somewhere around \$24,000, and one in ten college graduates owes \$40,000 or more. Extruded into a lethargic job market, debt-saddled grads enjoy little hope of making their monthly payments. Last year, the dearth of jobs forced 320,000 post-collegiates into default. Between 2008 and 2011, the college diploma, that veritable golden fleece of middle-class striving, had become a millstone.

Increasingly, it has been women who have had this millstone forced around their necks, and the misfortune of this event achieves added poignancy when you consider that women's educational triumphs had come during a period of chauvinist retrenchment. In *The Terror Dream: Fear and Fantasy in Post-9/11 America* (2007), Susan Faludi discusses how the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center had the effect of recasting women in the mold of June Cleaver. Images of a "nesting nation" protected by "the virile and vigilant guardians of its frontier" came to dominate the American Imaginary, which found its poster girl in a recumbent Jessica Lynch, the fair maiden, ravishing in her wounded passivity, rescued from fire-breathing Iraqis.

"Taken individually, the various impulses that surfaced after 9/11—the denigration of capable women, the magnification of manly men, the heightened call for domesticity, the search and sanctification of helpless girls—might seem random expressions of some profound cultural derangement," Faludi writes. Behind this seeming randomness lurked a deep cultural logic wholly atavistic in its implications and effects. When considered closely, this logic "form[ed] a coherent and inexorable whole," namely, "the cumulative elements of a national fantasy" that undergird an "elaborately constructed myth of invincibility." In an America bloodied but unbowed, sisters were most definitely no longer doing it for themselves.

This myth of invincibility suffered a serious shock with the economic meltdown of 2008, and with the consequent overthrow of those virile and vigilant guardians women once again found berth for individual agency. This is perhaps no more evident than in the role they have played in the Occupy movement, arguably a delayed but inevitable sequel of the Great Recession. As many women as men camped in Zuccotti Park and elsewhere. And some put themselves to great personal and financial trouble to do so. "I had a conflict between leaving my family and being here," admits Stacy Hessler, an Occupy Wall Street participant who lives in Florida, "and so I finally talked to my family and they said to come here; they would be OK without me.... So after they said that, I got a ticket and came on the train." Hessler couldn't deviate further from the standard post-9/11 construct if she tried. No retiring domestic goddess, she, like so many other women, felt duty-bound to rebuke the financial tyrants that cowed so many others with their apparent omnipotence.

Hessler's gutsiness inspires me. Once I was asked if I regretted the time, effort and expense it required for me to finish my education. Part of me wanted to answer "yes"; the other part, "no." Conventional wisdom has it that you're a fool if you major in anything other than finance or healthcare. Yet Lord Brougham once observed that "education makes a people easy to lead, but difficult to drive, easy to govern, but impossible to enslave." His insight I'm sure fairly captures the contradiction affecting the lives of many of the Occupy movement's members. On one hand their education has enslaved them through the excessive debt need to acquire it; on the other it has empowered them to discern the nature of the injustice aggrieving them and to take appropriate action against it.

As we know from Marx, contradictions are as much the stuff of capitalism as is capital itself, and from these contradictions are born the conditions of capitalism's overthrow. In this respect, the fact that the Occupy movement contains many college-educated demonstrators appears less a novelty than an inevitability. The U.S. economy developed in the direction of greater premiums on skilled and specialized knowledge labor, so subsequent generations of workers responded by earning college degrees. In so doing, they came by other forms of knowledge less amenable to the business of getting and spending. Rather than going meekly into that bad night of debt peonage or acquiescing to the devaluation of their credentials, men and women have come together in the interest of discovering fair remedies to the foul contradictions that at once bedevil and typify them. They have nothing less than, as the old socialist slogan phrased it, a world to win.

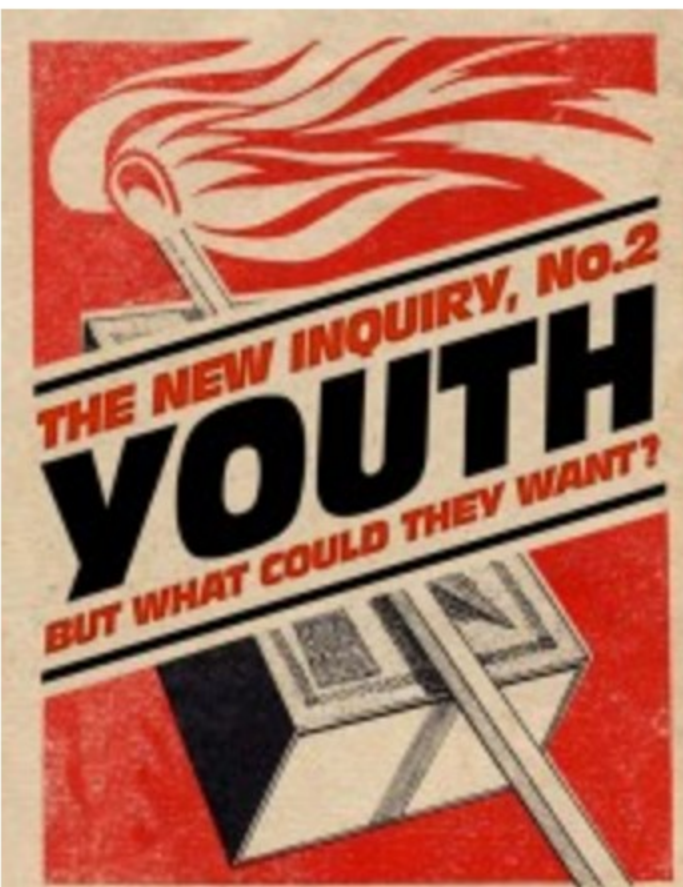
And win they just might. The financial class made a grave mistake when it leveled its guns on the scions of once-proud middle America. Until recently, thousands slept in parks across the country. Now thousands are blocking ports up and down the California coast, while others invent future actions. The planning, the cooperation, the improvised communities, the equitable distribution of resources that characterize the Occupy movement—these do more than simply challenge the prerogatives of the money power. They threaten to show that participatory democracy indeed works—and works beautifully. "Freedom's just another word for nothin' left to lose," goes a line from a song popular during an earlier age of political ferment, and I can't accept the idea that women have suffered pepper-spraying and arrest for so meager a version of liberty as the neoconservative aughties bequeathed us. After all, if I have anyone to thank for the fact that I'm writing this instead of stirring a pot of goulash, it's certainly not my father.



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Previously by  
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