

Martin J. Finkelstein, Valerie Martin Conley and Jack H. Schuster the faculty factor: Reassessing the American Academy in a turbulent era

*The Faculty Factor* is the last contribution in a series of comprehensive studies aimed at depicting in detail the working conditions of scholars ('faculty' in American English). The gist of the book is that general conditions for academics are getting worse. Not necessarily in terms of salary levels, which are quite constant when measured by purchasing power parity (PPP) during recent decades, for instance. The decline is more complex and entails the role of scholars in assuring what they are expected to perform for society. In fact, those scholars active in the study of higher education may find this book very informative not only for the plentiful information and data provided, but also for the authors' in-depth analysis of the evolution of the place of faculty in academia and beyond. This topic is even more important for higher education studies given that the USA is a reference point for many other countries, obviously Anglo-Saxon nations, but also beyond these, although with time lags and translations for different contexts.

The authors discuss in historical perspective the origins of this peculiar profession. They trace a trajectory from the very beginning of US academic history in the seventeenth century, later highlighting especially the role of universities in that country in the late nineteenth century and different phases in the twentieth century, with the 1960s as the peak or golden age of expansion. This longitudinal account is enriched by reflections on the role of faculty in a young society such as America. In particular, the authors contest the thesis, developed by mainstream scholars in the 1960s and 1970s, of a progressive evolution of the profession. Christopher Jenks and David Riesman's 'The Academic Revolution', Clark Kerr's 'The Uses of University' or Walter Metzger's idea of an 'Age of the Professional' (in his 'Faculty Tenure'), all adopted a positive stance toward the evolution of the system. The authors of *The Faculty Factor* perceive that period as the start of the erosion of what was a common conception at the time: that the academic profession was a coveted form of employment. (A parallel with this in the UK was *The Key Profession* by Harold Perkins, published in the wake of the 1963 Robbins Report, the peak of expansion and benign relations with the state funder). They see this thesis emerging at the very time when the USA was beginning to take a step in a more hostile direction.

The authors elaborate ten developments that have shaped 'the faculty factor' in American society. They are as follows: (1) Technology has transformed the way the job of an academic is pursued. (2) There has been an increased responsiveness to market place forces—steepening the academic pyramid and expanding contingent positions. (3) Faculty work is increasingly shaped by multinational and global actors. (4) Tenure and tenure-track appointments are becoming less and less the normal way to pursue a career in academia; some states are even thinking of 'abolishing tenure'. (5) Faculty are witnessing an increasing division of labour (specialisation). (6) An increasing polarisation or re-stratification of the hierarchy of faculty appointment types is creating different 'job markets'. (7) There is also a 'diminishing of influence' of faculty in shaping their own destiny, including a decline in collegiality and participation in institutional governance. (8) Problems in the demography of faculty are no less important. Faculty are older, more ethnically diverse and spend more time in postdocs positions. (9)

Accountability and quality assurance has to be demonstrated by faculty, most tangibly through an accreditation process, forcing them to produce student-related measurable results. (10) Smaller proportions of contemporary faculty members feel a sense of 'home base' with his/her institution, as a result of lack of membership.

Finkelstein, Conley and Schuster detect, above all, the progressive loosening of grip over society inasmuch as American universities have been/are very adaptive to external society, which in turn is translated into a demand for entrepreneurialism (the neoliberal assumption of tangible value for money) rather than other purposes (such as being a 'public intellectual', I would add) and/or pure unfettered (or 'blue sky') research whose return on investment is longer and more uncertain, albeit potentially greater. The 'human factor in academia' (hence the 'Faculty Factor'), in other words, is dissected with the purpose of demonstrating and denouncing how far the American system has pushed itself in searching for effectiveness and efficiency. One of the results of this—objectively successful, if we bear in mind the global leadership and hegemony of the US higher education system—endeavour is to have developed such an 'industry' to have encountered some counterproductive phenomena previously listed.

In their conclusion to the book, the authors propose a relaunch of the Pell Grants ('Higher Education Act 1965') to solve at the federal level some of the problems nowadays experienced more tangibly at the state level. In relation to tenure, they propose to 'implement a radical age-related capping of tenure' combined with 'an intensification of long-standing commonplace higher education practice—namely, serious post-tenure review' and also 'deploying a reinvigorated set of policies that provide positive incentives for transitioning into retirement' (pp. 472–481). The last sentence of the book is a public admonishment of the American higher education system that may have wider implications: 'if that [societal] veneer [once protecting the still vaunted American higher education system] is further pierced, the consequences for intellectual life and for the institutions that struggle to nourish their faculty will be severely costly. The stakes, not just for the academic profession, but more consequentially for the larger society, are enormous' (p. 486).

The strength of *The Faculty Factor* is to shed a light on an 'American contradiction': American society demands a lot and claims adaptation of its academic system but, in turn, the human factor results stressed, over-consumed and hence possibly less effective. It also becomes slightly less attractive as a profession as a whole. For me, their contribution is very apt and extremely detailed in highlighting the problem of the 'over-engineering' of higher education human resources. Faculty as a 'productive' factor are nowadays not used in the best possible way because their environment is less comfortable and their genuine engagement is hampered. On the other hand, the main weakness of the book is that it does not propose a general viable solution to the problems the authors are so good in detecting and listing in an evidence-based way. For this reason, their warning that —whatever the specific role in academia—is a global call to further research on the theme to keep the flame of interest for research (and teaching) ought not to be seen in contradiction with the quest for competitive institutions. Reading *The Faculty Factor*, you might have the feeling that it is time to envisage 'sustainable' competitive universities.