Graduating a Debtor Nation:
Shameless Confessions of a Dissenting Citizen

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A COUPLE OF WEEKS AGO, I was preparing to host the visit of my twelve-year-old goddaughter Claudia over the holidays. Then I realized that my total ignorance of all things Nintendo meant that I would have zero credibility as an engaging host according to the cultural standards of today’s adolescents. Suddenly, it dawned on me that the old family board game might actually be considered a new and radical form of entertainment to people of Claudia’s generation. So, after contemplating the relative intellectual and political merits of such games as Monopoly and Connect Four at my local store, I opted to buy the still-popular (if heterosexist and unabashedly pro-capitalist) game of Life. First developed by Milton Bradley 1960, the primary objective of the game is to choose a career, manage your finances responsibly, get married, have kids, buy a house and retire to either “Countryside Acres” or “Millionaire Estates.” When players start the game, they can either choose a career from a deck of cards and start earning money right away, or they can get a professional degree and leap head-first into financial debt.

While going to college ultimately allows players multiple career choices, salary levels are always a matter of luck rather than skill. Worse yet, the luxury of getting to choose a career entails taking out $100,000 worth of loans and paying them back with an additional $25,000 in interest by the
end of the game. Incredibly, the last time I had played *Life* (in 1984), the total amount of debt players automatically incurred was less than one-fourth that amount. When I pointed this out at the start of our first game, my goddaughter, whose dad works in a window factory and whose mom sorts mail for an insurance company in Miami, took it as a bad omen. Nothing could persuade her to pay such a price for a fancy college degree; she would take her chances. To my amazement, I couldn’t even get my husband to opt for the college-plus-debt path on the game board: he was raised in Cuba, and thanks to a revolution, he told Claudia, he had become a molecular biologist *for free*. In the end, my own ill-fated attempts to prove the value of higher education by being the only player to take out loans and go to college in the corporately constructed universe of Milton Bradley failed miserably: I came in third place in 4 out of 4 games!

And yet, I have no idea why I was surprised. As a graduate of Dartmouth College who holds a Ph.D. from the University of Wisconsin-Madison, I launched my academic career with a total debt load of over $105,000. As soon as I started working as a full-time faculty member six years ago, I began to make payments of between $600 and $1,000 a month to creditors, depending on what my current salary was. Today, I am still nearly $38,000 in debt. I began my career by taking a job at Bates College, where I was happy and grateful to have such hard-working students and wonderful colleagues for over four years. But I was also naïve. According to the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Bates was, during those years, the lowest paying four-year liberal arts college in its category. Yet, I do not blame Bates for keeping me in debt. Rather, I blame what has become a universally acceptable degree of debt now required for getting a graduate degree.

In particular, I blame the utter invisibility of that debt to senior colleagues and administrators for whom speaking of money or complaining about salary levels remains strictly taboo. I would venture to say that most senior colleagues and administrators at virtually any institution who finished graduate school in the 1970s and 80s have never encountered such problems nor have they had to endure 10 to 15 years of post-graduation debt limbo before being able to make the down payment for a house. Few probably ever considered having children a function of the affordability of local childcare services. Indeed, even fellow junior faculty who attended elite universities like Yale or Princeton and received generous fellowship funding throughout their graduate careers often do not understand such a predicament: they never had to take out a student loan to pay for books, rent, or food. To put it simply, *any one* of my own graduate students upon leaving Yale will be in better financial shape than I am after four years of teaching there. Let me be clear: my current salary would be terrific if
one-third of it was not going to such creditors as the U.S. Department of Education.

Ironically, I would argue that super-wealthy corporate giants like Yale do not reflect the values and characteristics of corporatization in the same way that super-dependent public universities do. Corporatization of graduate education at elite programs is defined as efficiency or “time to degree”—putting candidates through the program as swiftly as possible in order to reduce the financial burden of supporting them. But these programs do support their students and reward them for doing their work on time. By contrast, at public or state institutions like the one I attended, corporatization is defined as providing as little funding as possible to graduate students while keeping them employed as teaching assistants and lecturers. Using them as a cheap and dependent labor pool for large undergraduate classes provides an automatic institutional incentive to slow down the progress of graduate students, especially upon reaching the dissertation stage. It is no wonder that most doctoral candidates at the UW-Madison do not take 5 to 6 years to complete their degrees but 7 to 9 or even 10 years.

Like the vast majority of my peers, including seven recent UW-Madison graduates whom I informally polled in anticipation of this essay, more than half of my debt did not derive from four years of undergraduate study, but from six-plus years spent in a doctoral program at a public university where good, competitive students like myself were officially “fully funded.” How is it possible to be “fully funded” and still have to take out loans? The reason is simple. Most students at the UW, like those at similar state schools, rely on teaching assistanceships or research fellowships that their advisors offer them on a varying basis to get by. After paying tuition, housing, and utilities, there is hardly enough money to pay the hundreds of dollars that eight to ten books per class per semester represent, let alone the cost of reliable computer equipment, paper supplies, and food. As my own experience attests, taking out loans from the federal government and supplementing income through credit card “checks” with low rates of interest over the summers happens regardless of whether teaching assistants are unionized and regardless of whether one is particularly frugal or not.

As a graduate teacher for three semesters at the UW and a member of the country’s oldest teaching assistants’ union in the mid-1990s, I made between $650 and $800 a month while living in a one-room studio apartment on Gilman Street in Madison. Rent alone cost $422 a month plus utilities. Later, when I returned from a year of field research abroad (during which I stretched a $10,000 fellowship over the course of 14 months), I worked as a lecturer at the UW—a position not covered by the
teaching assistants’ union. As a result, despite the fact that I was teaching all aspects of the course, including lecture and three discussion sections, I actually made less money than ever before while doing twice the work of a teaching assistant.

Amazingly, very little at the UW seems to have changed in this regard. Of the 7 graduates in U.S. and Latin American history that I informally surveyed, none left their Ph.D. program with less than $50,000 in debt and none could claim more than two semesters in which they lived on campus and had been able to stop working so that they could study or write. Arguably, today’s graduate programs at purportedly “non-elite” institutions are producing a debtor nation of academics who face not only diminishing prospects of getting full-time, tenure-track jobs, but a decade or more of long-term debt levels that exceed fifty to one hundred thousand dollars. Such levels may be most comparable to the debt burden incurred in medical school. But even those young faculty who land jobs at this country’s most elite institutions (like Yale) can never expect to make the same salary a doctor makes in his/her first year on the job. At Yale, for instance, first-time assistant professors earn $55,000-$60,000 whereas most newly minted medical doctors earn twice that much, even if they work in a federally-funded clinic or hospital. As one junior colleague at a state university in Connecticut who owes $42,000 in loans and earns $65,000 after six years of teaching told me, “My goal until I get tenure somewhere is to avoid incurring further debt and never be late with a loan payment. I have no savings. How can I save if after paying expenses, rent, and my loans, I am left with only $500 a month and I live within a 100-square mile radius of New York City where butter costs $5 to $6 a pound?”

How does such a high degree of indebtedness affect our lives, productivity, and outlook as young faculty? I would say that it has at least three effects. First, it is insanely demoralizing on a personal level, especially for single people who rely on one income and wonder how they can possibly squeeze the expenses and anxieties of having a normal social life into their tight monthly budgets and already packed teaching and publishing schedules. Second, in today’s context of rising standards for tenure, increasing competitiveness within fields for the best jobs and tough administration mandates that faculty use time and resources ever more efficiently, the burden of worrying about tens of thousands of dollars’ worth of debt does not exactly inspire young faculty to encourage gifted undergraduates to follow in their footsteps. The profession may look all the less attractive to the very groups that have been most responsible for transforming the nature of higher education and democratizing institutional cultures for the better in the last fifty years: namely, blacks, Latinos, women, and members of the working class. Unlike the children of middle-class parents
whose families have enjoyed financial stability for multiple generations, minority and immigrant historians often shoulder much more debt from undergraduate years and once graduated, and may also be responsible for the health and security of family members beyond their own home or even living abroad.

And so, tuition hikes for undergraduates at public institutions may make colleges and universities more “elite” in terms of the ethnic and class make-up of their student body every year. But at the same time, the nature of our academic institutions and their role in the wider political and social community may also suffer as the identities and background of faculties change—in a regressive way. The price of graduate education and the non-existent prospect of a timely pay-off of loans after graduate school invites underprivileged or minority students who might otherwise become professors to elect traditional, higher-paying jobs in business, law, medicine, or computer technology. The result is a corporate model of education that reproduces and validates a corporate model of life.

In short, the predictable world of the game of Life that Milton Bradley first made for the mass market of family entertainment forty-six years ago and its attendant social values is quickly becoming reality. It is no wonder that my goddaughter and husband preferred to place their faith in hard work, luck, and the possibility of social revolution rather than the financial insecurity of getting a college degree. Like many astute young people today, they wanted to beat the corporate version of Life at its own game. Unless something is done to bring down the cost of higher education and increase the real wages of graduate student teachers, the Milton Bradley vision may soon become the only game in town.