For this Sunday, March 8, the Today's Issues group will discuss two essays from the March 12 issue of the New York Review of Books.

Page 4, Carolyn Fraser, "Warren in the Trap," which argues that the criticism of Elizabeth Warren as "not electable," and so on, is fundamentally sexism against her as a woman. A copy of this essay is attached. A story with a different perspective on the Warren campaign is Shane Goldmacher, "Elizabeth Warren: A Populist for the Professional Class, NY Times March 3

Page 42. Charles Petersen, "Serfs of Academe," about the widespread use of poorly paid part time "adjunct" professors in academia. A copy is attached.

The group meets in the parlor of the religious education building next to the church at 9:30 on Sunday mornings. Everyone is invited to do the reading and join our lively discussion.

Warren in the Trap
Caroline FraserMARCH 12, 2020 ISSUE
Drawing of Elizabeth Warren by Anders Nilsen
Elizabeth Warren; drawing by Anders Nilsen
Since Elizabeth Warren's formal announcement of her candidacy on February 19, 2019, the narrative about her has had little to do with her actual qualifications. From initially low poll numbers, she rode a brief upswing in October to the top of some national polls, immediately drawing a backlash, in part over concerns that her Medicare for All plan was too far to the left. After the debate on January 14, 2020, when Bernie Sanders denied having told her, at a private meeting in 2018, that he did not believe a woman could be elected, it was clear that the issue of "electability" swamped all else.

To anybody paying attention, however, that issue has been central since the beginning. In Warren's rhetoric, in the media, and in voters' reactions to her, perceptions of her have always been driven by gender. Again and again, in books, in stump speeches, and in response to voters' repeated queries, she has emphasized that her qualifications as a "fighter"—she is constantly casting herself as one—were earned in the trenches of the gender wars.

In nearly 250 years of American history, a woman candidate has come this close to the presidency exactly twice, and in both instances, the woman has been running against Donald Trump. Given that Hillary Clinton won the popular vote by nearly three million votes in 2016 and still lost the election, the anguish in Democratic circles over a woman's "electability" is legitimate, even as it's deepened by atavistic fears. Yet Warren's approach to handling blatant misogyny as well as the bias cloaked in pollsters' lingo—"authenticity" and "likability" are among the terms—has lacked force and clarity. Although she was late to formulate her controversial support for Medicare for All, she has famously had a plan for just about everything: a wealth tax, student loan debt forgiveness, gun violence, criminal justice reform, climate change. But she seems not to have had a plan for tackling a form of bias entrenched for centuries. Indeed, at

times, she has appeared to be running two races simultaneously—the real one, involving her actual positions, and an amorphous one involving an obsession with women's gender differences.

In 2016 Clinton struggled to respond to charges that she was "cold," "aloof," and not "authentic," bigoted code for being different, as in not male. This time around, Warren had a chance to shift the debate by comprehensively rejecting such coded language, challenging voters to confront the history, costs, and consequences of prejudice.

Briefly, she appeared to recognize the opportunity. When the issue broke out into the open in January, she said, "It's time for us to attack it head on." But she didn't, instead employing a superficial zinger about having won every election she's been in, unlike the men on the stage. Since then, she has insisted that "this is not 2016," citing the women's march and the 2018 midterms, in which women in both parties did, in fact, outperform men. But presidential elections are different, and between the January debate and the New Hampshire primary—and throughout her candidacy—Warren chose not to tackle the topic of sexism in any substantive way.

Warren's personal story is a potent one, and, as with Hillary Clinton, her professional qualifications are not in question. Born in Oklahoma City, she grew up in poverty, won a debate scholarship to George Washington University, married at nineteen, and put herself through law school while raising two children, subsequently teaching at Rutgers, the University of Houston Law Center, and the University of Texas at Austin. She now lives in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and is a national expert on bankruptcy and commercial law who has held endowed chairs at the University of Pennsylvania Law School and Harvard Law School. In the 1990s she became for a time the highest-paid professor at Harvard. She has two grown children from her first marriage and is on her second, to Bruce Mann, also a Harvard law professor. From 2010 to 2011, she served as special adviser to the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, an agency she proposed under Obama, and was elected to the Senate in 2012, beating the popular Republican incumbent, Scott Brown.

Yet criticism of Warren, from tabloids to newspapers of record, is often ad hominem, referring not to her experience but to her manner. Despite her solid support in Massachusetts, and the enthusiasm engendered by her willingness to take selfies with long lines of fans and her surprise phone calls to voters, the Boston Herald has criticized her "self-righteous abrasive style" and "scolding self-righteousness." When Warren appeared at the top of the polls, Bret Stephens, the New York Times Op-Ed columnist, enthused over a less popular woman candidate, Amy Klobuchar, finding Warren "intensely alienating" and a "know-it-all."* At the same moment, David Brooks, another Times Op-Ed writer, said he'd hold his nose and vote for Warren if he had to, but found her "deeply polarizing." A grown billionaire has wept over her vilification of deadbeat tycoons. (Warren responded by selling mugs emblazoned with the slogan "Billionaire Tears.")

As its columnists dallied with retrograde attitudes, the Times newsroom reported on a range of biased responses in its coverage of electability, addressing issues of appearance (height and weight) and documenting the history of distaste for female voices. Early broadcast mikes, the paper noted, were designed for male voices and distorted the female voice so profoundly that women learned to alter their speech by lowering the tone, something Margaret Thatcher apparently did to project authority. More flagrantly, so did Elizabeth Holmes, former CEO of Theranos, the now defunct blood-testing start-up, whose siren call to the elderly white men she drew to her board of directors (George Shultz, Henry Kissinger, James Mattis, David Boies) involved pitching her speaking voice freakishly low. The majority of listeners complaining to NPR about newscasters' voices are complaining about women and people of color.

Trump has a bizarre fixation on women's mouths that seems related to this contempt for women's speech, and it gives off a distinctly demeaning vibe. Since 2016, he's been saying of Warren, "She's got a fresh mouth," a "big mouth," and a "nasty mouth." He expanded the preoccupation to Nancy Pelosi, claiming that her teeth "were falling out of her mouth and she didn't have time to think!" He'd certainly like to close those mouths, and judging by the sexual assault allegations and defamation lawsuits against him, his orifice-related remarks are just one way of attempting to do so.

If you're a woman, whatever your voice or appearance, you qualify for special forms of intolerance. Klobuchar plaintively compares herself, at five foot four, to James Madison (the same), because "height bias" is still a thing, with 58 percent of Fortune 500 CEOs topping out at six feet or over. As of 2019, thirty-three women led Fortune 500 companies—6.6 percent of the total. At Davos, women are sparse, and the World Economic Forum estimates that at current rates it would take 257 years to achieve gender parity in "economic participation." There's "second generation bias" in the workplace, reflecting a range of ways people unintentionally reward masculine traits (such as assertiveness) or networks, and "maternal wall bias": a 2007 American Journal of Sociology study found that companies are significantly less likely to hire a woman who is a mother than a man or a childless woman. If they do, she's likely to be offered $11,000 less than a childless female with similar qualifications. Progress has been so slow that California (among the most progressive states when it comes to diversity) recently enacted a law requiring public companies in the state to place at least one woman on their boards.

Warren reached the height of her popularity last fall, when she also pulled ahead of Biden in Iowa, a feat attributed in part to Biden's weaker Iowa ground game and to a sense that she represented a sensible progressive alternative to Sanders. Roundly attacked by rivals in the October debate for not having a health care plan, Warren was preparing to announce her Medicare for All policy, costing $20.5 trillion over ten years. Even some of her supporters were taken aback by the plan's daunting cost and legislative prospects, and she eventually refrained from referring to it in her speeches.

But in September, at the crucial moment of her greatest popularity and before the Medicare policy was announced, the Times and the Siena College Research Institute conducted the most

extensive poll since the 2016 campaign of the six critical states carried by the president in 2016 (Arizona, Florida, Michigan, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin) and found a seemingly unshakable prejudice against female candidates, held by men and women alike. In the November 5 episode of the Times's podcast The Daily, Nate Cohn, a politics correspondent focusing on demographics, said that one reason for the poll was to correct for the kind of flaws that occurred in 2016, when Hillary Clinton was consistently found to be ahead. Trump, this later poll found, was still very competitive in those states, and Cohn was surprised to find that among frontrunners, Warren faced the most deficits:

Her results were worse than I thought they would be. The president led her in five of the six states. He led her in North Carolina and Florida by comfortable margins. He led in Michigan by a comfortable margin, even though Bernie Sanders was ahead there. She only led the president among registered voters in Arizona. And even that dissipated when you looked at the likeliest voters. So overall, she trailed by two points across these states among registered voters. That's the same as Hillary Clinton's performance. So if the election were held today, and if these results are right, Elizabeth Warren would lose to the president.

Not only were Warren's left-of-center views and progressive support for Medicare's expansion dismaying to voters. The poll examined underlying reasons, as Cohn described:

Six percent of voters told us that they would support Joe Biden against the president but would not support Elizabeth Warren in a head-to-head match-up against Donald Trump. And that 6 percent is going to be hard for her. We asked every one of these voters whether they agreed with the statement that Elizabeth Warren was too far to the left for them to feel comfortable supporting her, and a majority of them said they agreed with that statement. We also asked all of these voters whether they agreed with the statement that most of the women who run for president just aren't that likable. And 40 percent of them said they agreed with that statement.

Such voters, the poll found, "have an unfavorable view of Warren by about a two-to-one margin." One woman polled in Florida said:

"There's just something about her that I just don't like. I just don't feel like she's a genuine candidate. I find her body language to be off-putting. She's very cold. She's basically a Hillary Clinton clone." And when asked about the women running for president more generally, she said, "They're super unlikable." So it actually turns out that among persuadable voters, women are a little likelier than men to say they agree that most of the women running for president are unlikable.

Anyone looking to understand why women may be more apt to discount candidates of their own sex need look no further than FiveThirtyEight's "When Women Run," a compilation of prejudices faced by more than ninety politicians. Knocking on doors, women candidates have repeatedly been asked, by other women, Who's taking care of your kids? How can you run and take care of your family?

Acknowledging doubts about her “electability,” as Warren tentatively began to do after the January debate, does not appear to help. Deborah Walsh, director of the Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers, told the Times that doubt has now become “a self-fulfilling prophecy.” A woman knitting a pussy hat at a Warren event told a Washington Post reporter, “I love her, but she doesn’t really have a chance”; a man outside a Warren event (his wife and daughter were supporters) said he couldn’t imagine her on stage with the president, “as slightly built as she is, compared to a 245-pound Donald Trump,” as if debating were sumo wrestling. The success in New Hampshire of Sanders, a socialist, suggests that it’s not Warren’s left-of-center policies that are off-putting to voters.

In Rebecca Solnit’s endorsement of Warren’s candidacy in The Guardian, she claimed that Warren has “overcome misogyny,” praising her “Big Structural Mom Energy” (a play on Warren’s calls for “big structural change”) and “radical compassion.” But any overcoming has so far been limited by the all-too-evident glass ceiling. If you’re cooking up some “mom energy,” you can expect it to be spat out by a significant portion of the electorate.

That’s why nothing you read about Elizabeth Warren is really about Elizabeth Warren, including her own books about herself. In order to figure out who she really is, it helps to examine the relentlessly upbeat tenor of a self-image she has developed in reaction to low expectations. Her 2014 autobiography, A Fighting Chance, and recent stump speeches are festooned in pep club spirit and folksy blandishments, cloying bits of business that have attached themselves to her life story. Like Elizabeth Holmes’s voice alterations, these mannerisms are the product of long-fought constraints, suggesting the boxes that generations of women have found themselves in and the contortions adopted as a result, trying to appear smaller, less likely to offend, less likely to attract male disapproval and censure. What’s more: the linguistic stress positions that women have assumed to survive in a harsh environment are also meant to evade the concurrent shaming of women by women.

Female shaming, and accommodations made to it, lie at the center of Warren’s life. The facts are stark. She grew up in Oklahoma, a state synonymous since the Dust Bowl with rural desperation and poverty, something that would be, as Warren later put it, “a constant presence” in her parents’ lives. Donald Herring and Pauline Reed, his girlfriend, were both from Wetumka, a tiny town in east-central Oklahoma. Donald’s family owned the local hardware store and disapproved of Pauline, who was thought to have Native American ancestry on both sides of her family, a common (if largely untested) assumption among many in the state after its divisive history as Indian Territory. The two eloped in 1932 to a neighboring town, causing a permanent rift between the families.

By 1945, the Herrings had three boys, with Donald serving as a flight instructor at the army air fields at Muskogee; he later sold cars, carpeting, and fencing. Elizabeth, or Betsy as she was called, was born in 1949, and the family settled in Norman, south of Oklahoma City, taking out a mortgage on a small house in a new subdivision on the prairie. From the second grade, Betsy

wanted to be a teacher, a goal her mother, a stern believer that women should be homemakers, strongly discouraged. When her daughter was eleven, Pauline convinced her husband to move to Oklahoma City so Betsy could attend a better high school, not for scholastic benefit, but so she could meet a middle-class boy to marry. On the strength of his Montgomery Ward sales job, Donald bought a second car, a used station wagon, for his wife.

Within a year of the move, disaster struck. Donald, at fifty-four, suffered a heart attack, and after hospitalization and weeks of recovery, demotion. The station wagon was repossessed, and Betsy watched as her parents began drinking, arguing over Donald's inability to support the family. One day, as her daughter watched, Pauline, who had never worked outside the home, wrestled herself into a girdle and a black dress and walked to Sears, scoring a full-time, minimum-wage job taking catalog orders, saving the family from true privation.

In high school, Betsy began calling herself Liz. From the age of thirteen, she had been earning money babysitting and waitressing on weekends and summers in a restaurant owned by one of her mother's sisters, Alice Reed, who lived in the back. "I saw first-hand the kind of commitment and energy it takes to launch a small business and to keep it going," Warren would say later, noting that her aunt did everything from cooking to fixing appliances. "On the seventh day," she recalled, in what was surely meant as a contrast with the Lord's full day off, "we scrubbed floors on our hands and knees and got ready for the next week."

Tensions between Liz and her mother exploded after her father's health crisis. Excelling on the largely male debate team (while still scoring highest in her school on a test for the Betty Crocker Homemaker of Tomorrow), Liz wanted to apply to college, but her mother was vehemently opposed, denouncing her selfish ambition: "Why was I so special that I had to go to college? Did I think I was better than everyone else in the family?" Years later, Warren recalled retreating into silence, staring at the floor, trying to hide in her bedroom. Her mother followed, and the girl shouted to leave her alone. Pauline struck her in the face.

Throwing clothes in a bag, Liz ran to the bus station, where her father found her and sat with her, sharing his own struggles. Quietly, he took his daughter's hand and told her to persist. "Life gets better, punkin," he told her. She wrote later:

I carried that story in my pocket for decades. It was how I made it through the painful parts. Divorce. Disappointments. Deaths. Whenever things got really tough, I would pull out that story…. I'd hear my daddy's voice, and I'd always feel better.

Running for president, Warren has pulled the story out of her pocket repeatedly, using her mother's minimum wage job as an example of an era when Americans could support families on such an income. She has purged it of her mother's defeatism, but those resentments still make themselves felt. In speeches, in a mawkish practice carried over from her autobiography, she constantly and warmly refers to "my daddy," with the twang of a country singer. By comparison, Pauline Herring is referred to stiffly as "my mother," and only rarely as "my momma." While her

affection for her father is clear, the unconscious animus toward her mother begins to establish another, distracting agenda.

She often introduces herself, as she did at Grinnell College in Iowa last November, by revealing that “I am what used to be called a late-in-life baby.” She stays with it, insisting that in her family, her brothers were always called “the boys,” but “my mother always just called me ‘the surprise!’” It’s her idea of a laugh line, and the audience does laugh, a little. But there are layers of discomfiture here. Aside from its irrelevance, the confession plays into yet another form of bias, the perception that women aren’t funny—because this isn’t funny. It’s more Sally Field than Fleabag, a plea for sympathy in which Warren compares herself with “the boys,” perpetuating a veiled sense of gender resentment. This too is an unforced error, and a minor one compared to the unfortunate Medicare roll-out or the completely avoidable claims to Native American heritage, which touched off Trump’s “Pocahontas” frenzy. But it’s too bad, since she’s capable of coming up with a deadpan comeback. (Asked how she’d reply to an “old-fashioned” supporter who favored marriage between a man and a woman, she said, “I’m going to assume it is a guy who said that. And I’m going to say, ‘Well, then, just marry one woman. I’m cool with that. Assuming you can find one.’”) Yet on the chaotic, inconclusive night of the Iowa caucuses, she was still playing the Okie card, declaring that “as the baby daughter of a janitor, I’m so grateful to be up on this stage tonight,” asking voters to overlook a Harvard career and lifetime of experience, and instead see her as daddy’s little girl.

“Fight” is a word she employs with numbing regularity. She used some version of it in her announcement speech twenty-five times. To donate to her campaign, text “FIGHT.” Her book titles sound like college football fight songs—A Fighting Chance and This Fight Is Our Fight. But for Warren, especially when it comes to sexism, talk of fighting has taken the place of actually fighting, which would mean confronting misogyny directly. When Barack Obama, arguably one of the most nimble and preternaturally gifted presidential candidates in American history, attacked racism in his pivotal speech in 2008, he took it seriously, analyzing it incisively and at length. The fight against misogyny will take far more than lip service or pinky promises or the use of slogans such as “Women win!”

Warren appears to fear what former Obama strategist David Axelrod calls her “lecturing,” said to be objectionable to white voters without a college education, and thus spends less time deploying her teaching skills and more indulging in cheerleading, couched in the apologetic, accommodationist pattern of women’s speech. This can be heard when she mentions her divorce and remarriage. Channeling Dr. Seuss, she calls her husbands H1 and H2, saying “Bruce, known as H2, I’ve held on to him and he’s a good guy! You bet!” But the pep rally vim only underscores the awkwardness professional women feel in trying to ingratiate themselves, struggling to be likable.

Warren is reportedly gifted at one-on-one meetings, and her legendary selfie lines are proof of the physical stamina and emotional flexibility that Sanders and Biden lack. But presidential campaigns are overwhelmingly public performances in which candidates must convincingly

assume the mantle of leadership, working the levers of inspiration, excitation, and, on occasion, mass delusion. In that arena, Warren's personal and autobiographical speeches contrast sharply with the brisker, policy-driven pitches of her male rivals. Springing to the podium to Dolly Parton's "Nine to Five," she's the spunky gal from 1980s send-ups of sexism, recalling the day when her first teaching contract was not renewed when she became "visibly pregnant," a line that elicits sympathetic groans from the audience. (It also inspired right-wing taunts and claims of exaggeration.) Her shorthand reference to her next pregnancy—"baby on hip, three years of law school, graduated visibly pregnant"—likewise harks back to the "barefoot and pregnant" tropes of an earlier time, inviting commiseration but not action.

Amy Klobuchar, whose campaign unexpectedly leapt ahead of Warren's in New Hampshire, has argued the issue more effectively. She describes what she did in response to similar discrimination, citing her 1995 maternity ward ordeal, when she was asked to leave the hospital after twenty-four hours in compliance with insurance rules, even as her baby was suffering complications. A few months later, she brought six "visibly pregnant" friends to a Minnesota state hearing, successfully lobbying to end the hospital-stay limit.

Warren's experiences are recognizable—no woman who remembers the 1970s could question them—and, for a certainty, her campaign is being held to a different standard. When a black man whose middle name is shared by a notorious despot ran for president, he too had to run an almost impossibly disciplined and flawless race. Whatever woman is going to win the highest office will have to display the same "ruthless pragmatism," as Obama put it, that he brought to the job, the unswervingly calm, eloquent, uncompromising leadership that lays doubt to rest. The few women who have held on to long-term power across the centuries, from Elizabeth I to Margaret Thatcher and Nancy Pelosi, have always wielded that ruthlessness. When you're in a knife fight, you don't ask to be liked.

—February 13, 2020

*
I was unable to find any instance in which Stephens referred to a man as a "know-it-all." ↩

Serfs of Academe
Charles PetersenMARCH 12, 2020 ISSUE
BOOKS DISCUSSED IN THIS ARTICLE

Adjunct
by Geoff Cebula
Self-published, 137 pp., $7.99 (paper)
Reclaiming the Ivory Tower: Organizing Adjuncts to Change Higher Education
by Joe Berry

Monthly Review, 162 pp., $75.00; $13.00 (paper)
The Good University: What Universities Actually Do and Why It's Time for Radical Change
by Raewyn Connell
Zed, 233 pp., $22.95 (paper)
The Adjunct Underclass: How America's Colleges Betrayed Their Faculty, Their Students, and Their Mission
by Herb Childress
University of Chicago Press, 213 pp., $24.00
Where Historians Work: An Interactive Database of History PhD Career Outcomes
American Historical Association. Available at www.historians.org/wherehistorianswork
Professors in the Gig Economy: Unionizing Adjunct Faculty in America
edited by Kim Tolley
Johns Hopkins University Press, 219 pp., $34.95
The Meritocracy Trap: How America's Foundational Myth Feeds Inequality, Dismantles the Middle Class, and Devours the Elite
by Daniel Markovits
Penguin Press, 418 pp., $30.00
Listen, Liberal: Or, What Ever Happened to the Party of the People?
by Thomas Frank
Picador, 334 pp., $17.00 (paper)
Degrees of Inequality: How the Politics of Higher Education Sabotaged the American Dream
by Suzanne Mettler
Basic Books, 261 pp., $27.99
Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution
by Wendy Brown
Zone, 295 pp., $29.95; $18.95 (paper)
The Great Mistake: How We Wrecked Public Universities and How We Can Fix Them
by Christopher Newfield
Johns Hopkins University Press, 430 pp., $36.95; $29.95 (paper)

1.

Adjunct, a novel by Geoff Cebula, is a love letter to academia, a self-help book, a learned disquisition on an obscure genre of Italian film, and a surprisingly affecting satire-cum-horror-comedy. In other words, exactly the kind of strange, unlucrative, interdisciplinary work that university presses, if they take any risks at all, should exist to print. Given the parlous state of academic publishing—with Stanford University Press nearly shutting down and all but a few presses ordered to turn profits or else—it should perhaps come as no surprise that one of the best recent books on the contemporary university was instead self-published on Amazon. Cebula, a scholar of Slavic literature who finished his Ph.D. in 2016 and then taught in a variety of contingent positions, learned his lesson. Adjunct became the leading entry in the rapidly expanding genre of academic "quit-lit," the lovelorn farewell letters from those who've broken up with the university for good. Rather than continue to try for a tenure-track teaching gig, Cebula's moved on and is now studying law.

Drawing of a professor running on a college campus by John Cuneo
Drawing by John Cuneo
The novel's heroine, Elena Malatesta, is an instructor of Italian at Bellwether College, an academically nondescript institution located somewhere in the northeast. Her teaching load—the number of officially designated "credit hours" per semester—has been reduced to just barely over half-time, allowing the college to offer minimum benefits even though her work seems to take up all of her day. Recently, the college has been advised to make still deeper cuts to the language departments, which are said to not only distract students but to actively harm them by inducing an interest in anything other than lucre. Elena responds with a mixture of paranoia and dark comedy: after the cuts there will be only so many jobs in languages left—maybe the Hindi teacher, anxious about her own position, is conspiring to bump her off? Then Elena had better launch a preemptive strike: this could be a "kill or be killed" situation.

Like a good slasher flick, Adjunct proceeds through misdirection and red herrings, pointing to one potential perp after another—does the department chair have a knife?—to keep the reader as anxious as Elena, while her colleagues, first to her delight and then alarm, begin disappearing. Conveniently, Elena's own research centers on Italian giallo films, which combine elements of suspense and horror and are one of the cinematic sources for American classics like Halloween (1978), A Nightmare on Elm Street (1984), and Scream (1996). As she flees into the safe confines of her office hours—the attackers' only fear seems to be endangering the college's primary profit source, the students—she thinks of the films she has assigned to her class and the ways they mirror her own predicament. A giallo, Elena thinks, depicts a world where the "circumstances determining who would live or die were completely ridiculous," a life of "pervasive contingency"—"contingent" being the most common term for part-time and contract-based academic labor. This is why horror, for Cebula, becomes the natural genre through which to depict the life of the contemporary adjunct, which is to say, the majority of academic workers today.

One suspects that Cebula's inspiration for this lark came directly from genuine academic horror stories. Among the best known involves an adjunct at Duquesne University in Pittsburgh who taught French for twenty-five years, her salary never rising above $20,000, before dying nearly homeless in 2013 at the age of eighty-three, her classes cut, with no retirement benefits or health insurance. At San José State University in Silicon Valley, according to the San Francisco Chronicle, one English teacher lives out of her car, grading papers after dark by headlamp and keeping things neat so as to "avoid suspicion." Another adjunct in an unidentified "large US city," reports The Guardian, turned to sex work rather than lose her apartment.

Though these stories are extreme, they are illustrative of the current academic workplace. According to the UC Berkeley Labor Center, 25 percent of part-time faculty nationally rely on public assistance programs. In 1969, 78 percent of instructional staff at US institutions of higher education were tenured or on the tenure track; today, after decades of institutional expansion amid stagnant or dwindling budgets, the figure is 33 percent. More than one million workers now serve as nonpermanent faculty in the US, constituting 50 percent of the instructional workforce

at public Ph.D.-granting institutions, 56 percent at public masters degree–granting institutions, 62 percent at public bachelors degree–granting institutions, 83 percent at public community colleges, and 93 percent at for-profit institutions.

To account for these developments, some may look to the increasing age of retirement of tenure-track faculty, which now stands at well over seventy. But, anecdotally at least, the reason many tenured faculty wait so long to retire may be the knowledge that they will not be replaced—when a Victorian poetry professor calls it quits, so, at many institutions, does her entire subfield. Who wants to know they will be the last person to teach a seminar on Tennyson? Others will blame the explosion of nonacademic staff: between 1975 and 2005, the number of full-time faculty in US higher education increased by 51 percent, while the number of administrators increased by 85 percent and the number of nonmanagerial professional staff increased by 240 percent. Such criticism can easily become unfair, as when teachers resent other workers who have taken over some of their old tasks—in fact sparing them chores like advising or curricula development—or when they act as though the university could do without programs that have made possible greater openness (such as Title IX officers and support for first-generation students).

The clearest cause for the poor pay and job insecurity of today's adjuncts is the decline in public support for higher education. Between 1990 and 2010, state investment per student dropped by 26 percent, even as costs per student increased. In most state budgets, "mandatory" spending for health care and K–12 schools steadily crowded out the single largest "discretionary" item, higher education. But if cuts in public support have been the clearest source of the crisis in academia, the reason the brunt of that crisis has fallen on adjuncts is a matter of quite specific power relations. Since the 1980s there has been a craze across the American workplace for cost-saving by "downsizing" management. But in private industry, there is strong evidence that initial cuts were rapidly followed by further hires, with the result that there were increases in both the relative number of managers and the pay they received, along with higher returns to shareholders—all paid for through reduced worker salaries and increased job insecurity.1

Although the evidence is less clear in the academy, an analogous process appears to have been at work. Just as business managers in private industry squeezed workers to satisfy ever more demanding shareholders, taking home a cut for themselves in the process, so university administrators have reduced teacher pay and increased job insecurity in an effort to make possible expansions in operations that typically resulted in yet more administrative and professional staff, and higher salaries for those who directed them. In this process, teachers, because of their commitment to their jobs and the relative nontransferability of their skills, were simply more exploitable than, say, financial compliance officers. Notably, between 1975 and 2005, the proportion of part-time administrators in higher education decreased from 4 percent to 3 percent, even as the proportion of part-time adjuncts exploded. As one college vice-president advised a group of adjuncts at a large community college in the 2000s (the specific details are left vague for fear of retaliation), "You should realize that you are not considered faculty, or even people. You are units of flexibility."

This is a story common across the American economy since the 1980s, and one should remember that the squeeze is being felt not only in higher education. A number of studies advocate for a sense of solidarity between workers in the academy and in the larger economy. Joe Berry, in his landmark book on unionizing adjuncts, Reclaiming the Ivory Tower (2005), notes that the characteristics that might make academic workers appear out of place in traditional labor unions—their high levels of education and strong personal commitments to their jobs—can allow them, in a society where 65 percent of young adults have some college education, to serve as "prototypes for the new union members of the future."

Raewyn Connell, an emerita professor of sociology at the University of Sydney and veteran union activist, makes a similar argument in The Good University. At most institutions, she writes, the academic staff and the operations staff share a love for their work, a dedication to the students, and a sense that their labor serves the common good—a firm ground, she hopes, upon which to build a full-scale industrial union, bringing together all the workers in the sector into one overarching organization.

Nonetheless, one of the reasons many adjuncts stay in poorly paid jobs is the dream of a position that would lead to tenure, and it is in the competition for such positions that the academic workplace may become distinctively terrible. "This is what faculty life looks like now," Herb Childress writes in The Adjunct Underclass, "living in hope about the promises that are made to keep everyone quiet"—the whisper in an adjunct's ear that "there may be a tenure-track line ahead." The numbers, of course, belie such promises. To take the field of history, in 2017–2018 there were an average of 122 applications for each tenure-track position, with some openings receiving almost seven hundred applications. Instead of a market, the tenure-track labor system has come to resemble a lottery—"a supreme arbiter," as Cebula writes in his slasher novel, "the magic of which [is] only confirmed by the seeming arbitrariness of its judgments."

Behind these numbers lies a larger structural transformation. As recently as the 1990s, there were largely two separate strata at which tenure-track hiring tended to occur: a national-level market with Ph.D.s from the magic circle of highly advantaged "top programs" migrating to less highly ranked research universities (the University of Washington hiring from UC Berkeley, for example), and a number of regional markets fed by Ph.D.s from regional centers (Western Washington University hiring from the University of Washington). Over the course of the 1990s and 2000s, in many humanities fields at least, these markets increasingly came to overlap; in the past decade, they have all but unified, with Ph.D.s from schools like Princeton and Berkeley now fighting over nearly every tenure-track job at four-year institutions across the country.

Yet even with the movement of national markets into regional ones, there still are not enough positions for graduates from the most prestigious programs—let alone for all the other Ph.D.s produced each year. The American Historical Association has published the most complete statistics on career outcomes available in any humanities discipline, and its database, "Where

Historians Work," shows that in the field of modern American history, to take one example, only 56 percent of Ph.D.s at roughly the top ten programs from 2004–2008 attained tenure-track positions at four-year institutions—a figure that dropped to 48 percent for the 2009–2014 Ph.D. cohort, as the job market crashed after the recession and failed to recover. (Job listings across the humanities remained down 31 percent between 2007 and 2016.)2 There are, however, around 150 universities offering history Ph.D.s in the US, and at a sample of mid-level institutions the proportion of graduates who found such jobs declined from 35 percent to 26 percent. In other words, while the national and regional job markets have become more unified, the outcomes for graduates of the most privileged programs have nonetheless declined—even as these Ph.D.s appear to have further crowded out the graduates of less well-off institutions. Both the academically rich and the academically poor are getting poorer together, although some of those at the top are maintaining their positions, to a significant degree, at the expense of those at the bottom.

The prospect of a full-time position may be a standard way to pacify contingent employees across the contemporary workplace, but there are few other sectors in which the differences in pay, prestige, or job security are as large as between contingent and core staff in the academy. There is also no other field in which one trains, on average, for eight years—with around half of one's peers failing to complete the degree—only to line up a poorly paid, insecure position, or else embark on a series of wide-ranging travels to take up short-term jobs (postdoc positions have nearly tripled in the humanities since 1996) in the hope that you may eventually get lucky and attain a permanent position. Pursuing a life in academia has become more like trying to become a professional athlete or a star musician than a doctor, a lawyer, or even a typical service sector worker. Little wonder that there are articles in mainstream publications like Slate with headlines such as "Getting a Literature Ph.D. Will Turn You into an Emotional Trainwreck, Not a Professor."

Circumstances are not much better in many of the social sciences than in the humanities, and while career prospects outside of academia are more attractive for those in STEM fields, there have been severe drops in the proportion of STEM Ph.D.s securing postdocs and, for those who want to stay in the academy, tenure-track positions. This is one reason graduate student unions have recently found success at institutions like Brandeis, Columbia, Harvard, and Tufts. A decade ago, when unions tried to organize graduate-worker bargaining units that stretched across entire universities, STEM students saw their interests as fundamentally different from those of students in the social sciences and humanities. Now, prospective Ph.D.s across the university find themselves facing comparable—if by no means identical—prospects.

2.

Public discussion of the academic labor crisis has remained limited over the past decade, although progressive candidates in the 2020 presidential election have made the economics of college education a major focus. In 2011 Occupy Wall Street defined student debt and medical bankruptcy as the chief afflictions of the "99 percent." In 2015 Bernie Sanders, in his campaign for the Democratic presidential nomination, included free public college along with Medicare for

All and a $15 minimum wage in his stump speeches. Sanders's College for All Act now demands that institutions increase the proportion of tenure-track faculty to an astonishing 75 percent; Elizabeth Warren, similarly, has put forward proposals that would strengthen the workplace rights of insecure workers across the economy and make college tuition-free for all—a universal program that, unlike Medicare for All, she has not yet walked back. But it's all too easy to imagine how this dream of increasing access to higher education could be built on the backs of adjuncts. In 2015 President Obama proposed making community college effectively free, based on the model of a highly touted program at Pellissippi State Community College in Tennessee, the institution where Obama announced the plan. A full 57 percent of its instructional staff are on part-time contracts.

Demands for free college have been driven in part by nostalgia for the social safety net of the midcentury United States. "In those days," Sanders observes of his own youth, "public colleges and universities were virtually free," which is why, he argues, the elimination of tuition should not be considered a radical idea. But the golden age of higher education, when increasing enrollments were matched by increasing public funds, salaries, and secure positions, was remarkably short, roughly 1950 to 1980, and coincided with the period economists call the Great Compression (for the reductions in economic inequality) and historians call the New Deal Order (for the normalization of union contracts and social benefits). College enrollment grew from 3.5 million in 1960 to 12 million in 1980, while community college enrollment boomed from 400,000 to 4 million.

The great majority of these students attended public institutions, or private institutions using federal grants, and thanks to steady increases in public funding the cost of college attendance remained stable relative to family income. Looking back on this inspirational if deeply imperfect era (one need only consider the position of African-Americans and women), it is easy to conclude that the only salvation for higher education as a whole, and adjuncts in particular, will be an improved version of the egalitarian model that briefly flowered thanks to the New Deal—not piecemeal, as with student debt relief or free college proposals, but wholesale.

Among the most promising starting points for such a transformation are Joe Berry's and Raewyn Connell's observations about the overlap between the struggles of academe and those of the larger service sector economy. The rise of unions for instructional staff in higher education has been limited by the Supreme Court's NLRB v. Catholic Bishop of Chicago (1979) and NLRB v. Yeshiva (1980) decisions, which held that teachers at religious institutions and tenure-track faculty at private institutions did not fall under the jurisdiction of the National Labor Relations Board. It is for this reason that in 2012, 25 percent of teachers at public four-year colleges, where state law determines bargaining rights, were unionized, while only 7 percent of teachers at private institutions had joined unions.

But starting in 2013 the Service Employees International Union began a campaign focused on private institutions, which to date has organized 54,000 faculty and graduate students at more than sixty campuses. The United Auto Workers (under their "Uniting Academic Workers"

campaign) and the American Federation of Teachers have been organizing faculty and graduate students as well, and the lessons from a few of these campaigns have been collected in Professors in the Gig Economy. These organizing drives were aided by decisions from the Obama-era NLRB, which held that instructors in nonreligious departments at religious institutions and non-tenure-track faculty generally (as well as graduate students) fell under its jurisdiction. So far, union victories for adjuncts have included salary increases as high as 90 percent, greater job stability, paid parental leave, sick leave, dependent health care benefits, retirement benefits, caps on course sizes, fairer teaching evaluation processes, and substantial professional development funds.

Such wins have redounded to the benefit of not only the workers involved: recent studies suggest that one of the main reasons for declines in student outcomes has been the rise of part-time teachers. As one rallying cry has it, “Faculty working conditions are student learning conditions.” With K–12 unions leading a widely publicized teachers’ movement in recent years—there were more workers on strike or locked out across the American economy in 2018 than in any year since 1986—it is not hard to imagine that strikes by adjuncts, who are if anything more exploited, could be the next decisive moment in the rise of a newly militant labor movement across the entire service sector.

But union organizing on its own can go only so far. A union drive can redress some of the balance of power between managers and workers in higher education, but the dramatic cuts in public financial support remain. Solving the adjunct crisis will require the reform of higher education in toto, and this will be impossible until political leaders are brought to recognize the sector’s ambiguous function in the contemporary American political economy. Medicare for All, a $15 minimum wage, a Green New Deal, the rollback of mass incarceration, the repeal of Citizens United, the expansion of voting rights—these proposals are all unambiguously egalitarian. But while higher education is frequently presented as a path to the middle class, the system as a whole—with its fine gradations between institutions that are, in the words of one standard application guidebook, “most competitive,” “highly competitive,” “very competitive,” “competitive,” “less competitive,” and the vast domain of the “noncompetitive”—now does far more to reflect the American class system than it does to equalize it.

One sign that the connection between higher education and egalitarianism has come under strain is the growing number of exposés of the “myth of meritocracy.” But while public attention may focus on the illegal fraud uncovered in the 2019 college admissions sting, and pundits point to the legal fraud that is the long-standing admissions advantage for alumni’s children, the real scandal—in which such preferences constitute little more than a rounding error—is that a majority of Ivy League colleges regularly admit more students from the top one percent of families than they do from the entire bottom 60 percent. A still deeper analysis, offered in exhaustive form in Daniel Markovits’s The Meritocracy Trap, suggests that inequalities in higher education, and education more generally, do not just reflect broader changes in economic inequality but actively work to make those inequalities more extreme. It is no accident, on this view, that the wage premium for college graduates, after declining in the 1970s, began its steep

and continuing ascent around 1980, when income inequality more generally began its long march upward. Between 1980 and 2005, the wage premium for recent college graduates relative to high school graduates more than doubled, and as of 2018 the average college graduate received wages 80 percent higher than those of the average high school graduate.

Nonetheless, to this day higher education retains its image as a social equalizer. One of the primary reasons may be the Democratic Party's peculiar attraction to policies that can appear egalitarian but that predominately work to the benefit of the top percentiles. At midcentury, Thomas Frank argues in Listen, Liberal, higher education occupied a relatively small part of the political imagination of the Democratic Party; it was only in the 1980s and 1990s, as the party moved to the right, that it became a fixture in the speeches of Democratic candidates.

A central episode in this shift, carefully documented in Suzanne Mettler's Degrees of Inequality, was Bill Clinton's decision to promote a tax credit for higher education during the 1996 election. Signed into law in 1997, these credits were opposed by no less a figure than Clinton's Wall Street–friendly treasury secretary, Robert Rubin, as a handout to the well-off. But for Clinton and his political advisers, the class-skewed nature of the program's benefits was a feature, not a bug. In a rhetorical sleight-of-hand that serves as an emblem for the political economy of higher education throughout this period, Clinton accurately claimed the programs would be open to all, even as he knew that their structure channeled benefits to the well-off. There was never any doubt that the credits would be used mostly by families in upper income brackets, and their main effect, later studies demonstrated, was to lead colleges to increase tuition prices. By the 2000s, Clinton's tax credits cost nearly as much to provide as the entire Pell Grant program for low-income students—a fact that did not prevent Obama from further expanding the credits in 2009.

Sanders and Warren, perhaps hoping to mitigate the association of higher education with the rich, limit the funds appropriated in their proposed plans to public institutions (as well as some historically black and minority-oriented private institutions). But it is not only Harvard, Stanford, and the other "Ivy Plus" institutions that have been at the center of the post-1980 Democratic embrace of inequality under the ostensibly egalitarian cover of higher education; it is also public institutions like the University of Michigan, where expenses for out-of-state students (49 percent of the entering class) run $64,000 a year, and where the median family income, whether for in-state or out-of-state students, is $154,000. It is these kinds of inequities that can make public investment in higher education appear, not entirely incorrectly, as a kind of kickback for the top percentiles.

One solution, proposed by Hillary Clinton in 2016 and recently promoted by Pete Buttigieg on the campaign trail, would limit benefits so that no aid flows to the children of the wealthy. Buttigieg has argued that proposals to entirely eliminate college tuition would result in "turning off half the country" in an election; political expedience aside, he has also argued that means-testing is the best "governing strategy." But while this may represent an economically efficient approach, and would certainly be more egalitarian than the Clinton and Obama tax

credits, the main lesson of public policy over the past sixty years is that means-tested benefits, in contrast with universal programs like Social Security and Medicare, become stigmatized and lose public support through their association with the poor. As Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez explained in one recent tweet, “Universal public systems are designed to benefit EVERYBODY!… Everyone contributes and everyone enjoys. We don’t ban the rich from public schools, firefighters, or libraries because they are public goods.” If fixing the adjunct crisis is to become feasible—which is to say, if we are to envision a new era of more democratic higher education—a College for All policy must be made universally available, while addressing the part the university has played in producing and legitimating the rise of inequality.

Ironically enough, it is the Republicans who have pointed the way toward such a policy, by enacting a 1.4 percent tax in 2017 on the investment returns of institutions with small student bodies and large endowments. Introduced to pay for tax cuts for the rich, the origins of this program should not obscure its potential. The endowment tax is an institutional counterpart to the wealth tax proposed by Warren and Sanders. The law also offers a clear way to escape the tax, although one that would require well-endowed institutions to radically change their approach to education. If an institution does not want to see its endowment returns diminished, it can simply become less elite and admit more students.

Princeton, for instance, could escape the tax by becoming just a bit less elite than Berkeley (43,000 students) or UCLA (46,000 students)—both among the top-ranked universities in the world—and increasing its student body from eight thousand students to 52,000 students (Princeton’s endowment is $26 billion, and the law only applies to endowments over $500,000 per student). While some might feel that changes of this scale would alter the character of the institution, much the same was said when the old pastoral training grounds of the northeast first became modern research universities—and when those same institutions began to admit women and more people of color. One Princeton undergraduate in 1942 claimed that “the Negroes are not improved by their admission to a group with relatively high standards, but the group is corrupted to the lower level of the new members.” An alumnus in 1969 said, “Let’s be frank. Girls are being sent to Princeton less to educate them than to pacify, placate, and amuse the boys who are now there.” A more ambitious College for All bill might apply demands concerning student-to-endowment ratios to all federal funding, forcing colleges and universities, whether public or private, to stop hoarding resources if they want public support.

Unfortunately, if recent attempts at reform are any guide, a more likely outcome is not a diminishment of higher education’s role in producing inequality but the enshrinement of a way of thinking that will increase the forces that have brought on the adjunct crisis: “accountability.” For a fearful example of what this can look like, one need only consider the United Kingdom, which from Margaret Thatcher to Tony Blair to David Cameron raised tuition, lowered the academic quality of its universities, and further ratcheted up the demands on teachers by quantifying every element of education in the most reductive ways possible, whether the total number of times other scholars cite an article or the measurable economic impact of research. In 2013 Obama promoted an approach to accountability that would have set the United States down a similar

path, proposing to rank American colleges “on who’s offering the best value so that students and taxpayers get a bigger bang for their buck,” with the chief metric being “how well do…graduates do in the workforce?”

Sanders and Warren have done much to put forward policies that insist on the wide-reaching public goods offered by higher education, proposing to cancel virtually all student debt along with eliminating tuition at public institutions. But while Sanders and Warren have described higher education as a “right” and “basic need,” both have otherwise struggled to find a language with which to defend these proposals. Even Sanders, in an otherwise forceful statement accompanying the latest version of his College for All Act, offered little more than the market-oriented argument that “when our young people are competing with workers from around the world, we have got to have the best educated workforce possible.” Warren, similarly, often resorts to financial rhetoric, saying, “We need to make an investment in our future, and the best way to do that is to make an investment in the public education of our children.”

The political theorist Wendy Brown, in Undoing the Demos, offers a model of the kind of rhetoric that would go much further to argue for higher education as a necessary public good. After World War II, she writes, “extending liberal arts education from the elite to the many was nothing short of a radical democratic event”; a new offer of college to all should not hinge on economic results but on the promise to bring about “an order in which the masses would be educated for freedom.” If these words anticipate the revolution in public language that we need in order to advance toward social democracy for both teachers and students, Christopher Newfield, in The Great Mistake, provides a helpfully detailed vision for how to get there. Market-oriented thinking has fatally undermined the grounds on which public investment in higher education can be defended, he argues. Champions of an egalitarian university—publicly minded unions, mobilized students, or enlightened administrators—must show through every reform how higher education already does or can be brought to serve the public good, by, for instance, shedding outside contracts with self-interested businesses, reducing tuition and debt to provide broad-based opportunity, or pushing back against racial and gender inequalities.

Sanders’s and Warren’s proposals point in this direction, and while the barriers to success in the event that either enters the White House will remain enormous—the US Senate not least among them—one has to hope that if their plans were to approach passage, the cancellation of student debt and the elimination of tuition at public institutions would be combined with an additional set of policies, and a new political language, that would not only reduce students’ financial exigencies but also bring equity to the academic workplace and radically lessen the way higher education drives inequality in the US. This can only be achieved by building movements, not simply making plans, and in this respect Sanders clearly has an advantage. If something like this vision succeeded, the university would become neither an engine of inequality nor a growth machine for human capital; it would represent a foundation for an economically and culturally progressive egalitarian democracy—achieved as much through the efforts of teachers, students, and staff as through the passage of any particular law or the election of any political leader. If the adjunct crisis can be not just mitigated but solved, this is how it will happen.

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For the original version of this thesis, see David M. Gordon, Fat and Mean: The Corporate Squeeze of Working Americans and the Myth of Managerial “Downsizing” (Free Press, 1996). For a careful empirical verification, see Adam Goldstein, “Revenge of the Managers: Labor Cost-Cutting and the Paradoxical Resurgence of Managerialism in the Shareholder Value Era, 1984 to 2001,” American Sociological Review, Vol. 77, No. 2 (April 1, 2012). ↩

2
A similar though less detailed study of Ph.D.s in literary disciplines is also available: Modern Language Association Office of Programs, “Where Are They Now? Occupations of 1996–2011 Ph.D. Recipients in 2013.” ↩