



HUMANITIES FACULTY FOR HIRE!

Kerry D. Soper

I'M A LITTLE TIRED OF HEARING ADMINISTRATORS claim that the low salaries of humanities faculty are a natural result of there being no competition for our services in the private sector. If that's their sole argument for denying us fair wages, then I say we should make it work in our favor. According to their rationale, if we could simply prove that we are indeed desirable commodities beyond academia (as our colleagues in the business or law schools do), then we could also demand heftier salaries. Well let's finally set the record straight: We humanities folk actually *do* possess a number of highly marketable skills that have heretofore gone unnoticed and underappreciated by administrators, private-sector employers, and even ourselves. If we can successfully highlight these abilities more explicitly in our day-to-day working lives, our paychecks will soon inflate to reflect the true worth of our labors. Consider the following:

LUNCHTIME BANTERER

Nobody I know in other colleges, in government labor, or within the corporate world, can match the wit, range, and

Kerry Soper is an associate professor of humanities at Brigham Young University. This essay appeared in the September 17 edition of InsiderHigherEd. See www.insidehighered.com.

profundity of the conversations that my colleagues and I put on display at the local taco shop each Tuesday between 11 a.m. and 12:30 p.m. Our elaborate exchanges are dense with both literary and pop allusions; devastating put-downs; cleverly layered inside jokes; self-deprecating, self-reflexive asides; impromptu philosophical rants; withering caricatures of foolish colleagues; and even ironic deconstructions of the very food before us. Only 10-plus years of intensive liberal arts training could forge the formidable verbal skills on display during these mealtime conferences.

I wonder how many corporate managers or governmental bureaucrats would pay generously to have just one of us present to enliven awkward luncheons, spice up deadly boardroom meetings, or elevate the rhetoric at boring staff retreats? All of them, I'm guessing; they just haven't known (until now) where to find us. Two hundred dollars an hour (or perhaps \$10 per clever comment) seems a fair price for our conversational skills.

(Disclaimer to potential employers beyond academia: There is a vaguely cynical, leftist slant to much of our banter that may not match the spirit of many business settings, most fraternal clubs, and any gathering where people are easily offended by detailed diatribes against the myriad evils of the Bush administration and/or corporate America in general. As long as that's clear, I think we can move ahead with whatever plans you have in mind.)

ORGANIZER OF ARCAINE INFORMATION

Because I had almost complete control of my schedule during graduate school (and was eager to find ways to procrastinate working on my dissertation), I was able to spend copious amounts of time tracking down, organizing, and cataloguing an immense music CD collection. The size of the lot was matched by its eclecticism: zydeco, blues, medieval chant, grunge, Americana, be-bop jazz, Norwegian folk, etc. In order to keep track of these discs, I was forced to create elaborate systems for arranging them according to date, artist, genre, relative social significance, jewel-case condition, good to bad song ratios, and on and on. While my wife may have occasionally questioned (with some acute shortsightedness!)

Humanities Faculty for Hire!

the value of time spent creating the intricate charts, databases, and filing systems necessary for this job, I could sense at the time that I was developing useful skills of a highly marketable nature. In fact, I feel vindicated now when I see the reactions of new friends when I first show them the sum results of my improvisational, clerical genius. Indeed, they can only goggle in amazed silence at the color-coded reams of data that I have amassed.

Let me assure potential employers that these skills have not abandoned me in subsequent, busier years; I have since applied them to corralling the contents of my massive iTunes library, to the maintenance of an elaborately rotating podcast collection, and to the sorting and indexing of old copies of *The New Yorker* that I have every intention of reading once the current semester comes to an end. Imagine the way that my creative, free-wheeling – but almost obsessively detailed – organizational style could shake up the filing system of the average moribund office! I may have to figure out a clever way to catalogue the flood of offers from the private sector that will soon be coming my way.

HYPHER-CONFIDENT, KNEE-JERK CRITIC OF ALL THINGS HIGH AND LOW

For a number of years my family and close circle of friends have benefited from my cutting-edge, almost encyclopedic knowledge of all that's hip in popular film, television, music, and literature. Thanks to me, they have been able to refine gradually their cultural tastes as I have peppered them continually with suggestions of what to watch, listen to, and read. I've also been able to give them detailed analyses of why their former (and often incorrigibly persistent) viewing and reading habits were lame, embarrassing, or otherwise uncool. My students have also benefited from these authoritative recommendations, dutifully reading (with only the occasional murmur) the great books and films that I assign to them semester after semester. (Let me clarify that I mean "great" in a hip, cultural studies sense – not the stuffy "Great Books" tradition.)

While I don't want to deal with the hassle of actually having to become a newspaper critic (writing all those columns would be a

pain), I do think that media companies would benefit from hiring me as a sort of highly-paid, free-lance consultant or “super-critic.” This is how it might work: they could simply run movie ideas, book synopses, TV show concepts, etc., past me, and my lightning quick approvals or dismissals could save them millions in wasted development costs. If the authority of my opinion alone is not enough, I could back it up (for an additional fee, of course) with some vague references to Campbellian, Freudian, or even Lacanian theory.

INFORMATION OBFUSCATOR

From what I can gather from watching television, there is a great demand in the private sector for people who can mess with information so that the truth is obfuscated; apparently there are all kinds of highly paid spin doctors, book-cookers, double-speakers, and manipulative adsmen out there. I’m a little hesitant, for ethical reasons, of course, to offer my services in these fields, but if that’s what it takes to convince administrators that we humanities folk are indeed valuable commodities, then I am willing to make those compromises for the greater good of our profession.

In practice, my academic writing is devoted to discovering and communicating complex, and sometimes painful and unpopular, truths about American cultural history. But in theory (and if the price were right), some of my academic writing skills could be harnessed to a magnificent manipulation of whatever facts a company or organization may be eager to warp or hide.

One possible strategy would be for me to simply apply post-modern theoretical jargon to whatever information I am to spin. But I am afraid that this would do my corporate employers little good since that rhetoric is associated with longstanding culture wars and thus may raise the ideological hackles of most mainstream, conservative readers.

More effective would be a writing style that is employed by a great number of both traditional and postmodern scholars: an excruciatingly pedantic mode that features roundabout, redundant, and repetitive overexplanations again and again; a multitude of unnecessary parenthetical asides (that while impressive in their com-

Humanities Faculty for Hire!

plexity, are ultimately just showy and superfluous, adding little additional information that is useful to the reader); a slavish citing of myriad other and often better written texts to add heft to an argument (Prescott and James give an excellent elaboration on this concept in *The Academic Writer*, chapter 19); and an officious, patronizing manner of diction that happens, somehow, to be simultaneously overwrought *and* dull.

This brand of writing would be ideal for all types of corporate or governmental documents in which you don't want to technically lie, but that you hope will be so mind-numbingly dense and ponderous that no one will actually be able to read it all the way through (a press release about disappointing quarterly earnings, for example).

MARXIST TURNCOAT

As long as I'm willing to put a price on what I will *write* for the private sector, I might as well put my ideological and theoretical convictions up for sale as well. My particular graduate school training immersed me in a variety of Marxist theories that were designed to question and undermine the power of capitalist, corporate, and consumer cultures in people's lives. For a healthy price, I would be willing to defect from this camp and bring with me valuable information that would help corporations do an even better job at manipulating consumers and opiating workers. For example, I could offer corporate seminars on the following topics:

“Coopting and Flattening Vibrant Ethnic Subcultures for Fun and Profit”

“Using Subversive Anti-Spectacles to make your *Mainstream* Spectacle even more mind-numbingly Spectacular”

“Brie and Baguettes for the Nouveau Riche Buffoons: Exploiting American Consumers' Class Anxieties”

“iPods for the podpeople: Seven New Opiates for Highly Effective Media Capitalists”

There are lots more where those came from.

SOME CONCLUSIONS

(to be read only by my peers in the humanities)

The nice thing about the strategy that I have outlined here is that none of us will ever have to actually do any of these jobs (other than a few sacrificial lambs, of course, whose showy departures from the academy will add some necessary bite to our threats). Our goal, as I'm sure you will agree, is not to actually leave the university for corporate or governmental jobs (let's be honest, most of us would be hopeless in holding down a traditional 9 to 5 grind), but simply to give administrators the impression that we *could* leave and that if we *did* leave, we'd be earning a heck of a lot more than we are now.

So get out there and trumpet our unique and valuable skills. And let's be stalwart in our efforts, for there will be some awkward moments ahead; for example, having to say no to lucrative corporate jobs after executives spend a great deal of resources courting us, or being forced to play hardball in financial negotiations with stubbornly resistant administrators. But the end results will be incredible: greater respect on campus and in our communities; healthier egos; fewer debilitating panic attacks, or chronic depression about immense student loan debt; and paychecks (potentially) in the upper five digits! Best of luck, comrades, er, I mean valued corporate citizens, in the months ahead.

GB