Jennifer Ruth

A Downwardly-Mobile Professor Reads Bruce Robbins’ *Upward Mobility and the Common Good*
(on Robbins’ *Upward Mobility and the Common Good: Toward a Literary History of the Welfare State* [Princeton: Princeton UP, 2007])

As a Victorianist who studies the professional class, I have always followed Bruce Robbins’ work with great interest. *Upward Mobility* is quintessential Robbins: generous-minded and progressively-motivated. There are moments, though, when Robbins’ generosity feels a little like veiled aggression and his progressive agenda tries to make up in determined earnestness what it lacks in structural analysis. I do not offer here an overview of the book’s contents—*Upward Mobility* discusses such an impressive number and diversity of texts that I am afraid to try—but instead focus on the way Robbins frames his argument.

In *Upward Mobility*, Robbins reveals a curious, counterintuitive logic at the heart of the upward-mobility story. In an eclectic mix of nineteenth- and twentieth-century British and American literature and film, Robbins finds that the narrative of upward mobility *disperses* rather than concentrates the agency of the so-called self-made individual. The rags-to-riches hero does not ascend through sheer pluck and ingenuity but because someone—an older woman, a benefactor with money, a benefactor without money (Robbins identifies a number of types)—lends a helping hand. The successful character cannot claim sole credit for his rise, then, but by the same token he need not shoulder undue guilt for having left family and friends behind. In the genre of upward mobility, society is a web of dependency, impossible to disentangle, and so, like the corporation, the individual has only “limited liability.” Robbins links this hitherto unacknowledged aspect of the upward-mobility narrative to the emergence of the welfare state in Britain and America. “This dispersal of responsibility,” he writes, “is just what citizens had to be convinced of in order to divert their resources into rescuing society’s less fortunate members from what had previously been seen as the results of their own actions and inactions” (89). In other words, Robbins finds precisely the opposite of what we would expect to find in these stories: a call upon society to aid rather than condemn those unable to pull themselves up by their bootstraps.
In short, the upward-mobility narrative justifies the welfare state—a brilliant and timely argument. It pulls the rug out from under our assumptions about boot-strap literature, and, in doing so, changes the criteria for the genre itself. Robbins cobbles together a new genre out of such disparate materials as *Sentimental Education* and *Erin Brockovich*. Because he ranges so broadly, both in terms of high/mass art as well as in medium (film, novel, memoir), he gives us the palpable, if ill-defined, sense that aesthetics underwrites the political economy of the state—a heartening assertion of art’s centrality in an era ever-invoking its marginalization. Though Robbins articulates no clear causality between the upward-mobility story and the development of social services in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries (he doesn’t find FDR propped up in bed with *Ragged Dick* the night before unveiling the New Deal), he does sketch a structure of feeling that could support the growth of the state and an increase in its responsibility for its citizens. Finally, in challenging our received wisdom about this kind of story, Robbins also manages to check the baleful effects of Michel Foucault’s work on literary and critical theory.

In *Upward Mobility*, the allegedly conservative upward-mobility genre ironically ends up supporting the welfare state while leftist-identified critics in the humanities and social sciences do not. “In his familiar antistatist posture,” Robbins writes, “Foucault encourages serious mistakes about how power works today” (91). Appalled by neoliberal cutting-and-slashing, many leftist critics nonetheless continue to churn out Foucaultian monographs, as if there were no possible relationship between a discourse suspicious of state services and one dismantling such services. In a startling but effective move, Robbins places Foucault not in his usual company of Derrida and Lacan—or, more recently, Agamben—but of social conservatives like Christopher Lasch who see the rise of a professionally-administered state as an assault on individual accountability and self-reliance. Robbins writes, “The complicity of Foucaultian antistatism with Republican free-market enthusiasm for privatization should give pause even to those who are most likely to be skeptical of expanding state surveillance and intervention” (183). Again, brilliant.

Robbins wants us to abandon some of our cynicism. From the vantagepoint of the dystopian present, leftists and liberals alike have no choice but to look back at the welfare state with longing. Surely, now, Robbins seems to say, we can shed some of our Foucaultian/Nietzschean affectations and admit that whatever else it was (infantilizing, self-serving, a release valve preventing the eruption of socialism), the welfare state was also a remarkable achievement. This makes good sense to me. When I began working
on professionalization and its discourse of merit over patronage, I scorned the idea of a meritocracy. Now, I look back at the Cold War years as a high point in the history of the American university. Money flowed into state schools, the vast majority of faculty at these schools enjoyed tenure-line positions, and federal scholarship and loan programs made higher education accessible to low-income students. Yet my original cynicism was not simply wrong either. It is just as clearly the case that the discourse of meritocracy acts as an alibi for competitive capitalism and its excesses. In other words, even if it has—or had at one point—a basis in reality, the idea of meritocracy is also compensatory ideology.

Robbins knows the Janus-face of meritocracy and/or the welfare state as well as anyone, so he wishes to loosen Foucault’s stranglehold on literary criticism without retreating from the best insights Foucault enabled, such as those in D. A. Miller’s work. He wants to “rescu[e Foucault and D. A. Miller] from their admirers” (91). Having critiqued Foucault for “encourag[ing] serious mistakes,” he proceeds to argue that Foucault’s work is “a useful and perhaps necessary step in the prolonged process of reversing our society’s present priorities: too much individual responsibility, not enough collective responsibility” (91, 92). By showing all the ways in which we are shot through with discourse even when we feel most ourselves, Foucault affirms—even when apparently hostile towards—the logic of interdependency that endorses the state’s entry into previously private domains. There is something a little exasperating about this: brave for risking our indignation when marrying the beloved Foucault to the despised Lasch, Robbins now reasserts his belief in the value of literary criticism’s dominant coin.

If I understand Robbins, he wishes to foster a dialectical view of Foucault and the larger logic Foucault describes: that is, to hold in our minds simultaneously both the negative and positive elements of that logic. A boatful of critics have underscored the negative and Robbins corrects the imbalance. As he writes them here, though, the sections in Upward Mobility on Foucault come off more like fancy footwork than dialectical advance. Pierre Bourdieu’s work might have helped, since Bourdieu specializes in the kind of paradox whereby something is both illusory and real (or negative and positive). Most American critics know Bourdieu as the sociologist who demonstrates that socioeconomic class inexorably reproduces itself (and this Bourdieu is the one Robbins does discuss in Upward Mobility), but in most of his works Bourdieu also emphasized the paradoxical and dialectical nature of certain historically-produced concepts. In Rules of Art, for example, Bourdieu argues that the principle of aesthetic and intellectual autonomy is an element of
class mystification and at the same time is among the “most precious collective achievements of intellectuals” (339). Over the course of a century, intellectuals developed a critical disposition that was “simultaneously the product and the guarantee of their autonomy” (339). In a chicken-and-egg fashion, proclamations of independence facilitated the institutionalizations of independence—practices of peer review, fellowships disentangled from special interests, etc.—and vice versa. In other words, the fact that artists had an “interest in disinterest” cannot be taken to mean that disinterestedness is hypocritical. Indeed, this sociologic as built up over time made possible a position of relative autonomy for the intelligentsia that lent it a peculiar and often progressive authority.

Robbins discusses Bourdieu at some length but refuses him his most insistent wish, which is that we resist the temptation to reduce paradoxes to contradictions or hypocrisy. In fact, he defines the very paradoxes the French sociologist takes pains to illuminate as Bourdieu’s own personal contradictions. For example, discussing Bourdieu’s understanding of the trajectory of scientific careers, Robbins quotes his argument that “systems of selection” both “designat[e] whom they select as remarkable” and “confer a particular competence.” He then glosses this by saying, “This formulation takes away with one hand what it has given with the other... The equivocation also seems to express Bourdieu’s unwillingness to confirm or deny the possibility of a career that, like his own, might be seen as genuinely meaningful” (216). Robbins moves here from the sociologist’s analysis to his biography, interpreting an analytic insight about the paradoxical nature of consecration as an “equivocation” arising from Bourdieu’s alleged ambivalence about his own academic success. And again: “The paradox of a site,” Robbins writes, “that might serve, as he says of the Collège, as the home of consecrated heretics, seems to guide many of [Bourdieu’s] brushes with self-contradiction” (216). This prose defies parsing but the slide is clear: paradox degenerates into “self-contradiction” (216).

This mode of argumentation whereby Robbins hoists a critic on her own petard is typical of Upward Mobility, which is why I noted the book’s veiled aggression. The critique of Bourdieu seems especially misplaced in light of the fact that, in the decade before his death, he was one of the most vocal intellectuals fighting to preserve the welfare state (a fact Robbins never mentions). In The Weight of the World, in interviews, in organized protests, etc., Bourdieu worked tirelessly to mobilize resistance to neoliberal elimination of social provisions. He also recognized the relationship between the intellectual and the welfare state, which takes me to the second concern with which I opened: that Upward Mobility seems
unconscious of its own place within a dwindling welfare state.

Robbins wants us to think self-reflexively about the relationship between our function as critics and our role as citizens, but he does not provide an analysis of the university in civil society that can help us imagine an effective position as citizen-critics within it. He comes close to this point in a recent review essay for *Criticism* when he mentions various crises facing American society and then writes, “But even the less consequential challenge of defending the university against its current attackers would seem to demand that we try to remember, when we speak about the Enlightenment, that what we try our best to be when we evaluate the work of our colleagues is, indeed, objective and impartial” (267). What bothers me about this statement is not its affirmation of Enlightenment values (Robbins is more than sufficiently aware of the slipperiness of “objectivity”), but rather the idea that defending the university is “less consequential.” In my (Bourdieuian) view, defending the university must take precedence over other issues if only because we will have no authority with which to intervene in those issues without it.

*Upward Mobility* would have benefited from an explicit discussion of the structural possibilities and limitations of the citizen-academic, but maybe this point is not so much a criticism as a plea. So let me put it this way: Bruce Robbins! Please take your argument one step further. Part of the disturbing dismantling of the welfare state that is the occasion of your book is the unprecedented shrinking of the critic-scholar’s intellectual autonomy and the various institutions making it possible (tenure, promotion/publication by peer review, academic presses, etc.). In particular, the erosion of tenure and the explosion of contract-professorial labor are in keeping with the neoliberal campaign to undermine all forms of job security as well as social services or common goods which exist to serve humanity rather than accumulate profit. Those of us out in the state-school hinterlands where autonomy is disappearing fastest would love to see someone of your stature and intellectual acumen mount a vigorous defense of the institution of tenure which makes autonomy possible, in however qualified and modest a form. With your interest in disinterest, the intellectual/professional, and the welfare state, you seem particularly well-suited for the challenge. We humanities professors are falling fast and there is more at stake than middle-class anxiety.

Work Cited