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CLAREMONT
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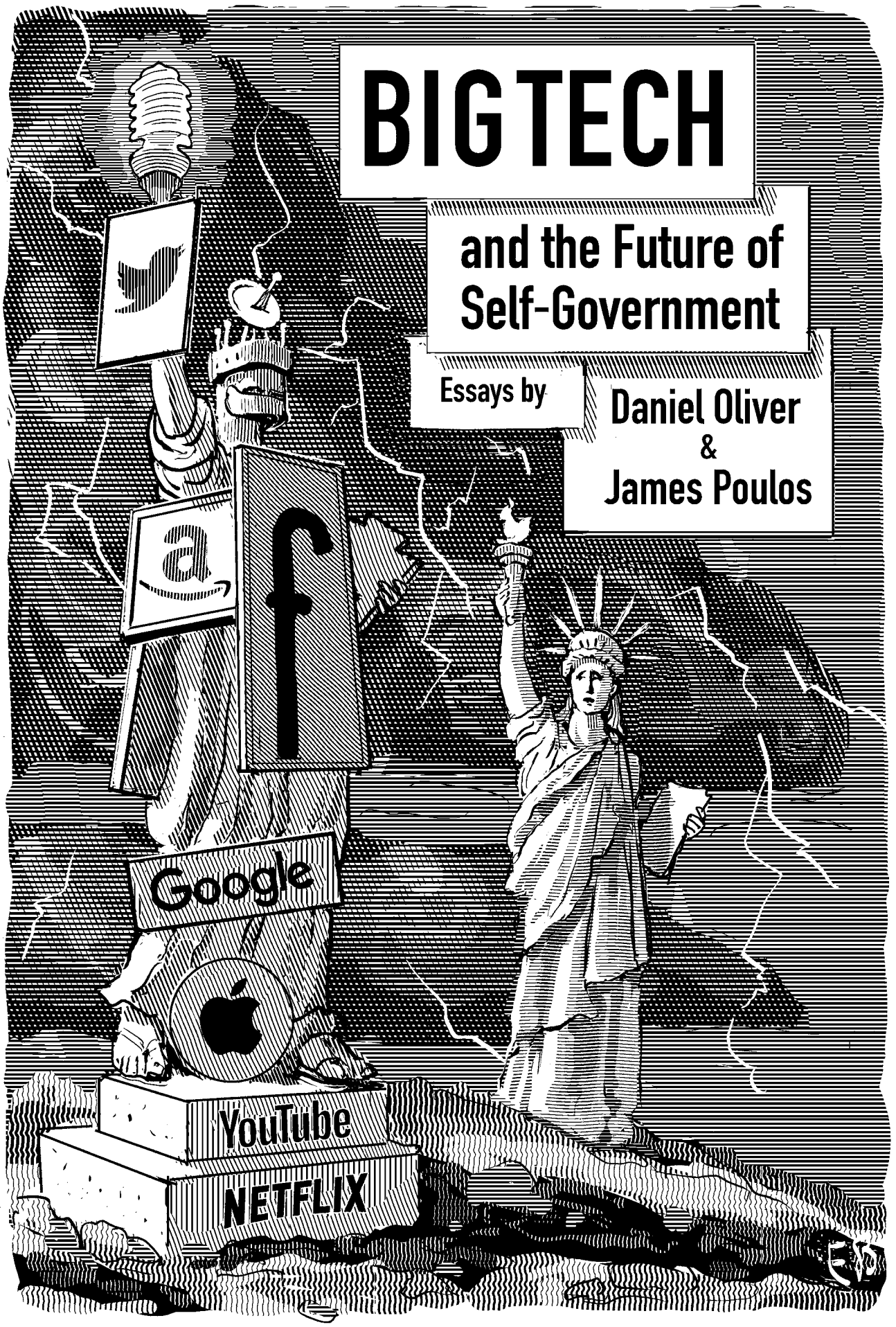

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Book Review by Mark Bauerlein

Those Who Can't Teach

The Amateur Hour: A History of College Teaching in America, by Jonathan Zimmerman.
Johns Hopkins University Press, 312 pages, $34.95

In 1966, princeton professor martin Duberman had enough of the soul-killing, mechanical instruction taking place at universities across the country, including his own. A whole "superstructure of authoritarian control in our schools," he believed, was distorting higher education into a cookie-cutter process that demeaned the young and blocked learning. Grading was but one of the many ways in which professors "turn potentially creative individuals into data-processing machines." The whole system had to change.

Duberman devised a new course as an antidote. It would have no grades, no tests, no papers. Readings would come from a list of books he had compiled and from which students would choose what they wanted to read and ignore the rest. Duberman's goal was a "permissive, non-judgmental atmosphere"; students would call him by his first name and meetings would follow a group therapy model of expression and freedom.

Princeton approved the course, including the no-grade policy. The experiment failed, however, despite the good intentions. Duberman wasn't the problem; he was sincere and dedicated. Instead, it became clear that the students weren't nearly as troubled by the professor's authority as he was. The ones who signed up for the course preferred that *he* choose the readings. A glum Duberman reflected afterwards, "In short, they preferred dependence to active exertion in their own behalf."

I couldn't help laughing at this time capsule from the crazy '60s. It's one of the many lively anecdotes with serious undertones in historian Jonathan Zimmerman's *The Amateur Hour: A History of College Teaching in America*. A professor at the University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of Education, Zimmerman surveys various pedagogies dominating classroom practice from the old word-by-word recitation ("Just memorize this section of the *Aeneid* and recite it when I call your name"), to the '50s promise of television piping the best lecturers into hundreds of classrooms and displacing the dullards at the podium, to egalitarian exercises such as Duberman's. He sketches mini-profiles of figures such as President James A. Garfield, who started his career as professor and president of Western Reserve Eclectic Institution (later Hiram College) until he realized, "teaching is not the work in which a man may live and grow"; and recounts in sorry detail the many programs purported to improve classroom instruction at top schools. We read of the impact of teacher-of-the-year awards (negligible), the rise of the research university which subordinated good teaching to methodical and prolific publications, the introduction of student evaluations (too often a popularity contest), and small rebellions by students angry at the lax conduct of their teachers (Princeton undergrad F. Scott Fitzgerald wrote on his textbook: "Gee but this man Griffin is terrible, I sit here bored to death and hear him pick English poetry to pieces. Small man. Small mind. Snotty, disagreeable. Damn him.")

Everyone concedes that the quality of college teaching is often atrocious, but how do you build a better teacher when so much depends upon personality and charisma? That's the sticking point—the human dimension, the capacity to entertain *and* edify, to "read" the faces of your listeners, to cajole and in-

spire. Those are talents not easily instilled by "professional" or "faculty development." "It is the personality and character that count in the professor and not the knowledge on tap," says the president of Rollins College in an opinion echoed a hundred times in the book. Unlike scholarship—which is supposed to meet objective standards that everyone in a discipline respects—teaching rests on "highly personal" factors that can't be codified. The words "highly personal" come from Max Weber, whom Zimmerman quotes extensively in the opening pages and who also said "[t]he fact that students flock to a teacher is…determined in unbelievably large measure by purely superficial factors such as temperament and even tone of voice."

Popularity doesn't equal skilled teaching, but certainly some people have a gift for teaching that follows natural traits, not only academic training. You can demand a teacher be prompt and hold regular office hours, and you can set requirements on the syllabus such as the minimum of 25-pages of essay writing that we demanded in upper-division English classes at Emory when I was director of undergraduate studies. It's harder to alter a professor's voice, or to train him to sense when his students get what he says and when they don't—or even to like his charges instead of disdaining them.

Zimmerman mentions one such effort to manage the personal factor, a rating scale to "rank PhD applicants in personality" that the University of Iowa devised early in the 20th century. It added a physical exam, too, that had a component designed to pick up "psychopathic tendencies." Another project from the same period by the Institute for Public Service crafted a taxonomy of ten teacher profiles ranging from "sympathetic and open-minded" to "senile and decrepit." But these attempts to filter the right personalities into the professoriate fared no better than efforts to improve teaching without considering the personal side, though administrators never stopped trying. Harvard political scientist William Bennett Munro insisted in 1928 that teaching "is an intensely personal thing," an "art," in fact, and "true art can never be enslaved to formal rules." And yet, as he proceeded to become president of Cal Tech and chair of the AAUP's Committee on College and University Teaching, "Munro would attempt what his own words suggested was impossible: to systematically change something that was not—or should not be—systematic."

In the eyes of untenured faculty members and graduate students—the ones still in their formation—the fret over teaching can appear utterly bogus. "I hope I never get labeled in any student or faculty evaluation as a good man with undergraduates," Zimmerman quotes a junior colleague telling a senior. That would signify a weak research capacity, someone too attuned to the sophomore mind. Research universities in an age of rankings rivalry can't have that. As Zimmerman notes, in a research world a professor stands in closer relation to people in the same field at other schools than to his own colleagues and administrators. A prof with a book just out on Mozart thinks more about what potential expert reviewers will say than what his own dean thinks. This shift in a professor's focus from the institution that issues the paycheck to three luminaries 500-plus miles away affects the teacher-student bond. The kids see themselves as denizens of X University, while the faculty see themselves like free agents in professional sports. Loyalty to the institution dissipates, and so does loyalty to the undergrads who go there.

Zimmerman provides, then, a 200-year chronology of middling pedagogues and a parade of administrators and reformers trying to fix what can't really be fixed. He can't even provide much evidence that many people want it fixed, because the evidence doesn't exist. He doesn't mention it, but projects such as the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) show that half of undergraduates don't much care about their professors beyond what the syllabus orders them to do. On the 2015 NSSE poll, fully 29% of freshmen "never" discussed their academic performance with the teacher, 44% only "sometimes." Out-of-class discussion of course materials happened even less often: 34% "never" and 42% "sometimes." The high rates of disengagement have dropped a bit in the last 20 years, but still fall well above where they should be. While NSSE urges schools to raise academic advising time in order to raise retention rates, you don't hear many teachers pushing for more contact. Fewer students coming to office hours means more time for writing an article or preparing a conference paper.

Recent events have extended the distance between teachers and students. Black Lives Matter upheavals, episodes of shoutdowns and disruptions, complaints of micro-aggressions and calls for trigger-warnings, allegations of systemic racism—all have left my colleagues nervous and skittish. They worry about teaching *Huckleberry Finn* (because of the N-word), and they skirt controversial areas of race, sexuality, and politics. They know that the liberal outlook they embraced in 1995 when they started their careers contains a lot that displeases the woke undergraduates in the room and can lead to grievance and investigation. Zimmerman doesn't touch this development, however. He writes at length on mid-20th-century persecution of Communists—one section is called "The Great Fear: Political Repression in College Teaching"—but nothing on professors afraid of violating the woke creed. In my 40 years as student and teacher, political correctness has never been worse. The kids now lead the way.

The timidity of administrators and professors in the face of this threat adds another meaning to Zimmerman's title. Yes, teachers are amateurs in the classroom, the practice of instruction involving personal elements that can't ever be professionalized. They are amateurs, too, in this new contest between illiberal youths and the ideals of higher education. From what I've seen, the faculty are wholly incapable of standing up to social justice warriors, are ill-equipped to meet an accusation of racism or "-phobia," and are not trained to shrug at charges of insensitivity. The amateurism of the first is a worthy condition. The amateurism of the second is not. Rather, it's a failure of duty. Imagine what would happen, however, if a reformer took on this problem—an undergraduate dean, say, who organized a faculty development seminar with the agenda, "How to Handle Crybullies, Identity Politicians, and Grievance Personalities in Your Classroom—Research into Best Practices." Good luck.

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