

The Terms of Tenure: To Have and Be Held

*This article is part of our series
on Work in America.*

by Suzannah Lessard

Inferring facts from etymology may not be the soundest policy, but the history of the word tenure reveals a fundamental ambiguity as to whether tenure implies holding something or being held by it. As the original usage applies to land under the feudal system, independence is definitely not an intrinsic part of the meaning, and while security is implied in some senses, it is almost always a contingent security, contingent upon payment of a definite price, upon some form of homage. While contemporary reasons for tenure are quite different from the medieval, the feudal connotations of the word apply to the modern sense, too. Psychological as well as material pressures demand fealty of the tenured person and subtly bind him into a condition of dependence, diminishing his flexibility and self-confidence until, though the gate stands wide open, invisible hurdles reduce to the realm of theory his option to leave.

While the employee tenders no reciprocal guarantee that he will stay, tenured jobs seem to exercise a powerful claim on people, holding them when, were it not for their tenure, they would go. One reason is that, given a lifetime position, one tends to focus on the position, role, title, and

place, rather than on the substance of what one is doing there, on the job rather than on the work. When, for example, the 647th auto theft case comes before a district judge, he controls his inexpressible boredom by maintaining a 10 per cent alertness, allowing the remainder of his faculties to be anesthetized in a numbing semi-snooze. Yet as he goes home that night he does not say to himself, "Today I tried my 647th auto theft case, and it was so boring that even though I was half asleep, I nearly expired"; he says, "I am a Federal Judge." And saying that, he convinces himself that his work is vital and important. It is reasonable to assume that five years as a district judge is bound to drive at least some live minds to exasperation, but have you ever heard of any federal judge freely resigning?

Another example is a certain type of tenured professor. If you ask him what he does, he will say, "I am a professor of English," thereby communicating deep involvement in education. Actually, he long ago began to repeat himself and lost his zest for teaching the young. Through finagling, which has become his second expertise, he actually teaches only a few hours a week, and even those select graduate classes try his patience to the limit. The main satisfaction he gets from his job is saying, "I am a

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professor of English.” This keeps him from confronting the fact that he hates doing the work of a professor of English.

Another body of tenured people is civil servants, on whom tenure works its most deleterious effects. The idea of giving up his tenure is apt to send ripples of shock down the civil servant’s spine, and he, too, is apt to concentrate on the job-frame rather than the work in the middle, even though, or perhaps because, that work is apt to be the most trivial nonsense. But aside from flexibility, he pays a second and graver price. Although the very substance and purpose of his work is political, his tenure is contingent on abstaining from political activity.

If a person accepts this standard of neutrality, accepts the mandate to implement policy, not to judge it or in any way form it, he reduces his value to the level of a computer. If the design defeats his purpose, that is not his affair, he only draws the lines, hammers the nails. He is expected to be as ready to draft a program segregating school children as to draft one integrating them.

The civil servant is not to consider the purpose of what he does, nor even to engage in any activity resembling an expression of political commitment, lest he begin to think about the purposes of those stratagems to which he daily contributes his talents. Awareness of and responsibility for the use of one’s work is not only the first principle of integrity, but a basic requisite for a healthy, integrated attitude toward what one does with oneself.

The only standard in the civil service is that of technical competence, the only ideal that of the bureaucratic mastermind, the whiz-kid technician. There is no tradition which emphasizes the dimension of professional responsibility or concern with the purpose of what you do and your loyalty to that purpose, hence to what your work should be and what it should accomplish, and, by extension, to

what your boss, your colleagues, and your department should be and should accomplish. Such loyalty finds a destructive or ineffective policy a violation and useless work an affront, not only for ethical reasons, but because it’s an insult to one’s dignity. This loyalty is predicated on the assumption that you are working not just for money, or to please a higher-up, but to achieve a definite end, that your ability cannot be used to achieve just any end. Fidelity to a professional standard however, implies a dignity and autonomy which is neither expected nor desired in the tenured civil servant. If he adheres to it he will soon be made aware of his presumption.

The Pro’s Sad Bargain

The concept of prostitution, doing something for money without love, is widely applied to disparate forms of activity. When applied to work, love in the metaphor would seem to represent caring about your task, choosing it not just because of a reward attached, but because it is consonant with what you believe is right and worth doing. So the unprostituted professional should be one who brings his own terms to the bargain with the buyer. The power to enforce them is his competence, which the buyer needs, and which he can threaten to withdraw if the terms are not met. Hence, no matter how small his stature in relation to the buyer, they meet on a basis of equality. It is clear that he is not a slave of demand, not a commodity to be paid for and used. He is self-determined. Yet despite the currency of the prostitute metaphor, the pro ethic which reigns in and out of the government places no importance on accordance with the substance and end of one’s work, only on doing it well—the Wall Street lawyer, brilliant drafter of contracts, no matter in whose interests, or the special assistant, fabulous strategist and solver of problems, seldom giving a thought to whether the operation itself is right

or wrong. The trouble with the pro ethic is that it sees the prostitute in the man who does second-rate work for money, but not in the man who does first-rate work on a project for which he has no love.

For most of us, our bargaining power is competence—that sheer technical, neutral ability. Even if 90 per cent of the work done in your office is bureaucratic confetti, your competence to do the 10 per cent of real work is a compelling card to hold. But it is compelling only if you are willing to withdraw it, willing to refuse to compromise it. If you care more about your job guarantee than you do about your control of that card, your power is cancelled out. If in your heart you have bartered your competence carte blanche, relinquishing responsibility for the effect of your labors, then you are powerless, like a mere commodity with no say in its own use, like a little island which sacrifices autonomy in return for security. This is the relationship between employer and employee which tenure in the government nourishes and protects.

Riding the Eurail Pass

The crunch of the tenure system is that people in it find it very hard to leave. Tenure is like a Eurailpass. Having bought the pass, you are perfectly free to stop riding the train, but if you come upon a town which promises an unprecedented good time if you would only stop over, chances are you will be simply incapable of staying there, or if you do stay, you will dance on thorns, knowing your pass is expiring unused. Likewise, a tenured person is theoretically no more prevented from seeking new work than his untenured neighbor, but the plain truth seems to be that somehow job guarantees intimidate people into staying when they would otherwise go. This makes about as much sense as refusing to trade in a toaster which clanks and smokes for a better model because noxious and irritating as it is,

it is guaranteed to go on working.

In order to work well, particularly at something which demands imagination, intellectual energy, and dedication—in other words, something other than plain labor—people have to feel free to leave: they stay only because they choose to stay, not because they are afraid to leave. It's rather like a troubled marriage in which the wife can't decide whether she really wants to leave or stay, but because she is so terrified of being alone, stays, never discovering that in the absence of terror she would have decided for positive reasons to stay. Such a marriage would limp along, slowly wearing down the partners. But if she felt ready to leave if necessary, and felt able, then having decided to stay, she could face the problems with confidence and work fearlessly to make something constructive out of the relationship. Paradoxically, by being willing to dump the marriage, she would make it worth saving. The same applies to a job. If, unafraid of being fired, you work courageously, with conscience and commitment, then the job is far more rewarding—worth staying in—than if cowed by the fear of dismissal, you yielded to all pressures in the effort to keep it.

Being ready to leave a job can cut through problems much less drastic than, but equally pernicious as, being utterly miserable. Even the most idealistic and aware person who goes to work in an institution will find defensiveness eroding more and more of his energy. This is particularly true in

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government agencies where the accumulation of things to defend builds rapidly and where just the simple fight for the survival of your agency against the budgetary and status-seeking inroads of other agencies, just fighting for your project's slice of the pie, can rapidly absorb 90 per cent of a person's time. Defensiveness can creep up unrecognized, the gradual shift from saying, upon hearing that something is wrong, "That's terrible, what can I do about it?" to "Will the press find out about it?" This is the kind of static that being ready to leave can cut through. You simply don't tolerate nonsense work, and don't bother with defensiveness if you are there to get something done and are perfectly clear in your head that you will leave the moment the treadmill overtakes the balance of your efforts. A corollary of this point is that when they know they're going to leave, people very often become extraordinarily lucid, direct, tenacious, and courageous, the phenomenon known as lame-duck guts. Suddenly freed of showing up its flanks, the mind clears and goes into top gear.

The most tangible holding power of tenure is fear that you won't be able to compete in the "outside" world, that if you leave your cozy little niche your real lack of qualification will be exposed. Fear of failure if you try something else and a reluctance to give up your investment in time compels people year after year to throw good money after bad, to hold on to the scrawny, irksome bird in the hand rather than drop it to go after one of the plump gorgeous creatures in the bush. A subtler force is reliance on structure. It takes a fair measure of inner sufficiency to let the Eurailpass lie unused, because it represents an order, a guideline. Tossing it aside seems to invite chaos. Unless you are deeply inner-directed, unless you really know what you like and want, letting go of a structure like a tenured job seems like throwing away your rudder to become a piece of flotsam

tossed whimsically and cruelly about a chaotic world.

The same holds for fear of losing your investment: if you have not been inner-directed in your work, then it is likely to appear to you that leaving your tenured job means crossing out your stay there as lost time. But if you have worked by choice, regardless of guarantees, if you have spurned the phony jobs and put your back into genuine work, then nothing can cheat you of that investment. Any work you have done, if you have really done it, is an enrichment and becomes part of you, just as any relationship you have participated in becomes part of you whether it ends or not. You take it with you. The trouble is that structures like tenure, like any job which arranges your life for you, insuring against risk, providing a neat little stepladder on which to mark your progress, will tend to weaken inner-direction and sufficiency. The spirit, like the body, if constantly given a substitute for its own strength, will lose its strength. So like a self-fulfilling prophecy, it creates the dependence it presupposes.

Security for Gobs, not Jobs

A person burdened with the responsibility of a family, or anyone who has known real poverty, might justifiably be angered by what appears to be a cavalier dismissal of the value of security. While a guaranteed minimum income could not completely relieve a person of that responsibility or fear, it would at least put a net between a person and hard disaster, and go a long way towards allowing him to demand more of his work than a livelihood.

We have reached the point where if a person is not pulling his weight in the "economy" he is not dragging it back. In fact the once taut line between "productive" work and prosperity has become so flaccid that we have had to manufacture phony work to perpetuate the myth. Caught in the myth, huge resources of manpower

are trapped in senseless, demeaning work, while there are vast needs for genuine work and while thousands of unwanted people in the already clogged work force are scorned for being on the public dole. It's time to separate the right to a livelihood from the duty of a job. Or, taking "job" to mean primarily source of income, it's time to separate the job idea from our concept of work. In the quicksilver genius of language, "job" is derived from the Middle English word *gobbe*, meaning lump, portion, or mouthful. *Gobbe* in turn comes from the Celtic word *gob*, or mouth. Everybody can and should have a gobbe for his and the little gobs around him. Then, freed of the job ethic, he can decide what he wants to do with himself, what his work will be.

All this is possible only in a prosperous technological society. Those who scorn prosperity as deadening, bourgeois, and restricting miss the point that it's only the use of prosperity that's restricting, and that a poor economy means less freedom for everyone and dull work for most. The recession is the friend of the job ethic, and hence the friend of those who want to preserve the status quo. A huge excess labor force is in the interests of the rich ruling elite, because it means everybody has to keep in line and can't afford to challenge anything because necessity dictates that they hang on to their niche. It's hard to miss the irrepressible glee exuding from fat cats these days when they talk about how hard it is for the college kids to find work. No more nonsense about long hair, *pro bono* work, or defense contracts. It's not a seller's market, so they have to put on a suit, drop their demands, and conform. The fat cat wins.

On the other side of the coin, the guaranteed minimum income is a radically different concept from welfare, tenure, fringe benefits, and all the swaddling practices against which the conservative flank has railed for so long. It is not an extension of the cocoon. It does not willy-nilly provide

the individual with a credit card, blunting the challenge to make your own way and attain self-sufficiency. It is only a guarantee against financial disaster. It's function would be to break the cocoon, to supply a person with a base from which he can go forth into the adventure of life, be a rugged individual, prove himself, contribute, discover his potential, make his own way and all those other nostalgic phrases which ring like outdated coins from some treasure ship sunk in the past.

The Tenure Within

If tenure were abolished tomorrow and the guaranteed income established, everyone in the government would not become instantaneously purposeful and courageous, nor would all the dissatisfied professors and bored judges be suddenly struck by a bolt of lightning and leave their tedium for engaging work. It is not the institution of tenure per se which corrupts, it's the counterpart of the institution in a person's mind. However, the existence of tenure only promotes that mental set. Furthermore, in the case of government, it attracts people who want to make the bargain, who depend on titles, don't mind being neutral, and fear stormy weather to the very place where we desperately need the opposite mentality.

Nevertheless, it is plain that the attitudes discussed in this piece reign far beyond the formally tenured domain. Taking tenure to mean not the job guarantee, but the terms under which a job guarantee is issued, it is obvious that those terms are made and wreak their effects in almost every walk of life. They are malignant not when they are made on paper, but when they are made in the heart. Abolishing formal tenure might represent a halt in the sanction of such terms, but such a move would be useless without individual recognition of the nature of the bargain. The change has to come from within. ■



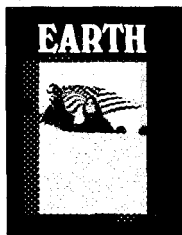
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to do with another
race. They were
few and weak
when our grandfathers
first met them, but
they are now many
and powerful....They
have made many laws,
and these the rich may
break but the poor
may not. They
take money from
the poor and
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THE CULTURE OF BUREAUCRACY:

Chronic Epistlitis

by Robert L. Taylor

Before me on my desk, in a red vinyl folder marked "confidential," is a congressional inquiry. It is addressed to the director of the National Institute of Mental Health. I am not the director, but my task is to act as if I were and compose a reply. Directors never write their own replies. Instead, inquiries are routed throughout the Institute along somewhat lawless traffic patterns, and the loser is the one with nobody to pass them to.

This time, I lost. That's why I'm sitting at my desk, staring at the wall, wondering what the director would say to the Senator from Texas, concerning his constituent, John Dingee of Waxahatchie, who suspects that the Institute doesn't evaluate its programs and challenges us to prove him wrong.

Dingee sought a congressional escort for his question only after a long

series of frustrating exchanges with me. I kept hoping the director's office would refer his letters to somebody else, but each time, like homing pigeons, they found me in the recesses of the Institute. Answering the letters of concerned taxpayers could perhaps provide valuable communication, but the Institute's output can always out-muscle and outequivocate even the most dedicated letter-writer's input. I held Dingee off for months with letters about how we were studying the problem, and, when he asked about the specific studies, I countered with the privileged communications ploy—the studies were being finalized and the information was not available.

That's when Dingee escalated to his senator. Dingee's words were robed in red vinyl with the attached senatorial note: "Please inform me concerning the question raised by my constituent." It is through such "Congressionals"—thousands a year at the Institute, 206,241 last year at the De-

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