



Been there, done that

Toby Miller did not take a straight path into academia – far from it, having been, among other things, a DJ, a ditch digger, a speech-writer, a bureaucrat, a security guard and a merchant banker. He reflects on how his atypical trajectory shaped his views of the insular scholarly world



How did I end up, to the extent that I have “ended up”, as an academic? To answer that, we need to go back, back, back, as commentators say when an outfielder is chasing a fly ball.

Most folks in this game (academia, not baseball) seem to follow very straightforward, teleological trajectories – undergrad, grad student, tenure – but not me. Putting together a list of the jobs I’ve had either before or after becoming a professor, I find radio DJ, newsreader, sports reporter, popular-culture commentator, speech-writer, cleaner, merchant banker, security guard, storeman-packer, ditch digger, waiter, forester, bureaucrat, magazine and newspaper columnist, blogger, podcaster, journal editor, youth volunteer, research assistant, suicide counsellor, corporate consultant, social-services trainer, TV presenter and secretary. Some of these positions were very fleeting; some were longer-lasting. Perhaps as old-school industrial models are replaced by precarious employment, my experience will become more typical.

First things first. I’m a serial dropout. I survived my first degree [where?], despite fleeing for a few weeks in the first term, and tried going straight on to a doctorate in political science. It was to be a comparison of Cameroon and Kenya’s different colonial legacies. Although I got a Fulbright [scholarship??], I dropped out, convinced that I was too stupid to be a professor. At the same time I also ran from a job in radio I’d held throughout my

full-time studies to a completely new world: merchant banking. I emerged from union bars and windowless studios into the corner-office light of sober, corporate day. I was suddenly a credit analyst.

I did wonder at the time why the bank chose me. Other applicants boasted business degrees, accountancy qualifications and capitalist inclinations. I had none of these. But my parents had sent me to expensive schools in the UK and Australia, sites of ruling-class parthenogenesis. It must have been that O level on *The Aeneid* that propelled me over the line.

I lasted four months.

During those four months I did some peculiar things. When the chair of the bank’s international advisory committee, Grandee Famous Feller, came to stay in Melbourne, I flew from Sydney to deliver slides and to ensure that his boxer shorts were pressed in accordance with his wishes, then jetted home the same day.

When the bank’s president, Welcome T Baker, arrived, we asked Taronga Zoo for a kangaroo to greet him on the tarmac.

And I overheard people arranging crop-dusting in Mount Isa to ensure that our dignitaries did not have their barbecue disturbed by insects. All these things were done to persuade New York to grant our office greater autonomy.

Then there were the nightmares.

As the bank entered into negotiations to be the leading lender in the takeover of a mineral-extraction company, I began to dream about men working underground, exposed to danger. And when we lent money to a finance company that used rabbits in its commercials, I woke in fright to visions of thousands of bunnies running amok.

I generally have nightmares once a decade. So these were serious signs indeed.

I left the job, troubled by what I had seen, heard, done and dreamed. My brief flirtation with corporate capital supported the conspiracy theories I had rejected at university for being, well, conspiracy theories.

I became a low-level public servant, gradually progressing from cleaning shelves and taking notes to writing speeches and inventing acronyms. Along the way, I turned down the chance to become a national TV reporter and dropped out of a graduate certificate in industrial relations and law. The television job came right after I’d started cleaning shelves. I thought it churlish to quit after two happy weeks with fluids and mops.

The Grad Dip was an attempt to return to academia gently, via distance learning. I loved it but when my starter marriage broke up I felt unable to continue.

This was the mid-1980s in Australia.

Great excitement swirled around a new social-democratic government that favoured Keynesian attention to aggregate demand combined with a neoclassical

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commitment to wresting subsidies away from industries. This gave birth, inter alia, to the understanding that bureaucrats dressing up a desired policy or programme as constructing a market was a sure-fire way of gaining public funds.

I became an early low-level proselytiser for this neoliberalism, writing speeches for businesspeople that argued for market forces. But I didn’t know the reality of this rhetoric, now so obvious to us in both its power and its flaws. I didn’t have the vocabulary.

I did know that something was wrong with the story I was peddling for these guys, who doubled as spokespeople for the government.

The story was all about how education was failing us, that it should be directly and comprehensively articulated to what “industry” wanted. Competition produced the best results, not research or the relative autonomy of the professions.

The speeches were short on evidence, long on assertion and overflowing with certainty. But the conviction of the words belied the scepticism of their author. Confused, I ran away again, opting to study for an MA in public policy in the hope of sorting out the contradictions between equity and excellence, as we called them – what is now rightly laughed at as the “third way”. In fact, I wanted to supplement the bourgeois economics I had studied and parroted with more critical alternatives.

I lasted six months. Why? I encountered cultural studies, political economy, semiotics, and Foucault. I learned that my autodidactic Marxism, 1970s feminism and love of the popular were no longer necessarily in tension – and that people studied these things, which was news to me. Such knowledge helped me to understand the work I had been doing and opened up new fields of inquiry.

So I dropped out again and gave up on suits, ties, speeches and influence in favour of another MA, this time on cricket and TV – the Australian media tycoon Kerry Packer’s 1970s revolution (the Indian Premier League *avant la lettre*).

But once more, I didn’t finish. While the subject interested me, it seemed too parochial and small to satisfy. Then a producer told me that I was no longer good-looking enough to work in the media and a lecturer said that I was perceived as a wild man without a clear narrative. I needed a fresh start where my biography wouldn’t count against me. I did a doctorate on a big topic – citizenship and postmodernity. It became my first book and my ticket out <of the corporate world>.

Between 1986 and 1993, I worked at five tertiary institutions across three Australian cities as an adjunct or on one- or three-year contracts. In many ways, I had been happy to roam around. Even though such conduct was as much a product of social forces as of individual choice, it felt

like autonomy by contrast with my earlier life in studios and offices. I was taking planes between jobs, hopping buses and trains between campuses, teaching correspondence courses for prisoners and farmers as well as face to face – and enjoying it.

Along the way, I’d seen my salary and security diminish monumentally and my happiness and excitement head in the opposite direction. But the lines on my face and my CV were not helping. So I moved to New York in 1993 and a tenure-track post.

Over the past three decades, I have taught humanities and social sciences at a military officer training institution, several big public universities and large private secular and religious ones. I have done so as adjunct, assistant, associate, full and even “distinguished” professor, in seven countries and two languages, and as both citizen and foreigner. I’ve experienced long-distance learning, in Australia and Chile, as well as the face-to-face privilege of New York University, the University of California and, now, City University London.

I’ve worked full-time in communications studies, cultural industries, cinema studies, American studies, Latin American and Caribbean studies, sociology, media studies, English, cultural studies and women’s studies, and been an adjunct in sociology, history, journalism, Australian studies and social and political theory. I’ve had contracts that were not renewed in sociology and media studies.

I have adjusted my portfolio, as it were, in accordance with changing economic conditions – as well as acting in ways that are far from professionally instrumental.

Do folks who’ve always worked in universities seem different from me? I suppose I have always felt like an outsider, neither fully understood by nor understanding those who did one thing in their lives – had one goal, followed one path. That’s probably why I write columns, op-eds and blogs as well as books and articles, and why I am bemused that so many faculty and administrators who have never worked for government or capital are enamoured of the neoliberal discourse that informed my nutty speech-writing all those years ago.

Although I have taught in the three



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countries where I’m a citizen – the UK, Australia and the US – I have felt most at home doing so in Mexico, Brazil and Colombia as a visitor, where it’s understood that these lines are blurred and virtually everyone has diverse histories.

When I was at NYU, we brought young undergrads from historically black colleges and universities to Gotham each summer. The idea was that they would spend time under the mentorship of leading research faculty and think about going to graduate school. These students often came from backgrounds that were far from teleological. So in addition to meeting senior African-American professors who served as role models, they were introduced to me – the black faculty at an elite institution such as NYU probably couldn’t afford meandering, chaotic pasts like mine.

Is my trajectory either feasible or desirable today? I liked the life even as I recognised that I was lucky. A union in Australia encouraged me to stand for election and become an official when I was an adjunct, and I was supported by full-timers – since then, the ambiguity and ambivalence of such

circumstances have become cosmic rather than casual. It’s tougher for people now than it was for me. But I think my history gives me insight beyond the cloisters, makes me sceptical of assumptions about what is possible or necessary, and endows me with a flexibility that endures. It enables me to think about how things might be different.

I regret nothing – or at least very little. Two anecdotes help to explain the limits and pleasures of my story.

When I was invited to give a talk at a Cambridge college a few years ago, I informed the organisers of a formal lunch that I didn’t eat meat. The butler whispered to me on arrival in the Great Hall: “Ah, yes, the vegetarian. You’re the first one we’ve had here since the 16th century.” When he returned with a salad, I helped myself to it via silver service. *Sotto voce*, he oozed: “I believe that Sir has worked in service.”

Around the same time, Michael Jackson was acquitted on child molestation charges. Now back sweating in the Californian desert, I was telephoned by BBC Radio 4’s *Today* programme to discuss the matter. My fellow interviewee was Max Clifford, presumably in a cooler London. I pontificated airily and was duly invited on to several other Radio 4 shows about the topic, such was their obeisance to the example set by noisy masculinity – whoops, I mean John Humphrys. But my moment soon passed.

Max, conversely, had pointed out that Jackson needed to leave the country, perhaps head for a Gulf state and lie low. Jackson promptly followed suit. Max didn’t represent him but he had much more impact than I did.

The moral of these stories? All my fancy education couldn’t hide my chequered past from a gentleman’s gentleman. And all the semiotics in the world couldn’t offer more pertinent advice than a veteran publicist’s. But at least the Communist Party of Great Britain was listening. “Professor Miller is not necessarily spouting obscurantist scholastic nonsense,” it said of the interview. Nicer words were rarely written about me. ●

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