

Academic Labor

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## **The Contingency of (Some) Academic Labor: Communication Studies and the Cognitariat<sup>1</sup>**

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My focus here is on contingent academic labor, a phenomenon explained by Antonio Negri (2007) in his re-signification of that otherwise rather forgettable Reaganite futurist Alvin Toffler's (1983) idea of the cognitariat. Negri uses the concept to describe people who are mired in casualized work, but have heady educational qualifications and an easy facility with communication and cultural technologies. They live at the complex interstices of capital, education, and government, and they do so under the sign of cybertarianism.

Cognitarians are classic subjects of post-Fordism, or disorganized capitalism. Their conditions of existence are created by complex social relations, even as they often engage in an identity formation that locates them in a seemingly autotelic mode of being. The effect can be that joining a gentried poor dedicated to the life of the mind appears to be fulfilling (Gorz, 2004).

The precarious nature of the cognitariat, which is generated structurally, and its tendency toward collusion in its own oppression, which is generated ideologically, are central to the labor process. I recall working at various tertiary institutions across Australian cities as an adjunct or on one- or three-year contracts during the 1980s. In many ways, I was happy to roam around like that; even as it was a product of larger social forces, it felt like autonomy by contrast with my earlier life in studios and offices. I was taking buses and trains between campuses and teaching in distance modes via correspondence courses for prisons and farms as well as face-to-face—and enjoying it. So I think I have some sense of the cognitarian mode of being. I liked the life, even as I recognized that it was structured in dominance. It was an ambivalent experience. I was lucky—I had a union, and one that encouraged me to stand for election and become an official, which meant I had a great deal of support from fellow academics who were full-timers.

I think the ambiguity and ambivalence of such conditions have become cosmic, though, rather than casual. I am principally concerned in this essay with academic life in the United States, a vastly bigger and more complex place, one where I have had the privilege of working almost two decades as a

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professor in research schools. But I see and hear stories similar to my own history. It worked out for me. It doesn't for many who are less fortunate.

Andrew Ross explains the structural situation of U.S. colleges like this:

[H]igher education institutions have followed much the same trail as subcontracting in industry: first, the outsourcing of all nonacademic campus personnel, then the casualization of routine instruction, followed by the creation of a permatemps class on short-term contracts and the preservation of an ever smaller core of full-timers, who are crucial to the brand prestige of the collegiate name. Downward salary pressure and eroded job security are the inevitable upshot. (2008, p. 38)

His implication is that the prevailing ideology of capitalist futurism that underpins the ideology of the cognitariat requires correction. As Marcuse (1941) predicted seventy years ago, far from liberating all and sundry, we have seen new forms of technology intensify managerial coordination from above in the name of liberation below. Writing in this critical neo-Marxist tradition, and contra the Cold Warrior futurists, corporate celebrants, credulous positivists, and bourgeois individualists who continue to determine the world view of communication studies, Herbert I. Schiller (1976, pp. 8–9, 16) recast pedagogic and technological development as an "infrastructure of socialization" that synchronized the interests of dominant strata via "business cultures," organizational models, "institutional networks," and modes of communication and cultural production.

In the United States at least, the humanities and the soft social sciences (i.e., communication studies, *inter alia*) are a cheap means of mass teaching, delivering control of the working class and elevation of the ruling class at low cost. Their ideological function is something we might consider another time. But let's think about their style of economic management for now, as it operates alongside cognate areas. For example, tenure-track vacancies in language and literature remained static in the past forty years, even as their undergraduate enrollment grew by 55%. In 2009, just 53% of U.S. humanities faculty were in full-time employment, and an even smaller proportion were in tenurable positions. When compared with other fields, hiring in language and literature occurred at two-thirds the occupational average (Deresiewicz, 2011; Geiger, 2009, p. 4; Newfield, 2009, p. 272).

The National Humanities Alliance describes a "jobless market" in terms of full-time employment for new PhDs, with an over-supply of a thousand humanities people a year (2010). Most people teaching communications are freeway professors traveling feverishly between teaching jobs, cobbling together a living, or folks working full time in second-tier schools with gigantic course loads. Thousands of adjuncts each year await last-minute phone calls and messages asking them to teach courses to hundreds of students, because full-time faculty are doing their "own" work.

Hiring discussions don't reference the experience of students looking for the "professor" who taught them last quarter—who didn't have an office, isn't back this year, and is forgotten by all concerned other than the personnel department, which has closed its files until the call goes out again for a reserve

army of the professoriat to emerge at short notice from highway hell in time of need. Take the next exit and turn off at the large undergraduate lecture class.

Even job candidates for tenure-track lines in our field don't expect, say, US\$200,000 as start-up funds with which to build their research in the expectation of large grants that will help pay for university administration, as would a scientist or engineer (Brinkley, 2009). Nor do they expect to be remunerated as though they were suffering the slings and arrows of opportunity cost by not working in corporate America. If we compare salaries in communications or literature to medicine or management, it's clear how cheap a humanities or soft social science professor is, and that these disparities are increasing: In 2003, health academics were paid US\$6,000 on average more than in 1987, during which time humanities averages declined by US\$1,000; and in 2005–2006, business faculty cost twice as much as their humanities equivalents, compared with 1.5 times twenty years earlier (Zuckerman & Ehrenberg, 2009, p. 131).

The relativities and flexibility are all in one direction. The alibi that economists and business "academics" must be paid more as part of a market loading that is based on opportunity costs incurred by working in universities versus corporations doesn't hold up. That kind of labor-market flexibility—if one accepts its mad premises—should see elasticity of employment and pay in both directions. So it is astonishing that the beneficiaries of these alleged comparisons with the private sector were not fired or reduced in salary with the economic crisis that began in 2007. Then again, it isn't, because the alleged market loading was never going to work like that.

Clearly, there needs to be industrial action to counter the tendency to proletarianize significant parts of academic working life in the United States through the creation of a cognitariat. How might that be achieved? Democratic Party politicians, who owe so much to unions and scholars both monetarily and intellectually, are largely ineffective debaters and advocates for labor power, while their Republican counterparts have no remorse in assaulting labor tout court. As such, we need to engage in political organizing and ideological struggle in the classroom, the corridor, and the Congress.

In this brief conclusion, I am most concerned with the campus itself. What is to be done? Academic stars in the primary labor market must recognize their dependency on a secondary labor market and organize against this prejudicial class bifurcation in the context of the needs expressed by cognitarians who are alert to their oppression. That means senior research faculty taking responsibility for ameliorating the circumstances of colleagues in this secondary market such that the stars teach the big classes, the untenured people teach the small ones, and the freeway professors teach the ones in the middle. Stars should invite freeway professors to publish with them and participate in grants. Department chairs must stand up to managerial bureaucrats, contra their tendency to nod obediently in the presence of deans before shrugging resignedly when reporting back at departmental meetings (Tuchman, 2009). Right-wing bodies like ICA and NCA and progressive ones such as IAMCR and UDC must be lobbied to take a stand, and graduate students must appreciate the real political economy, so that they eventually identify and question the nature of the cognitariat.

It's a hard road to hoe. But there is hope. Even ICA and NCA have progressive factions, and we need to focus on supporting progressive people for presidential elections and within the associations' divisions. Would-be presidents of scholarly societies who are based in the United States must be called on to make policy statements on labor, and they must promise to establish commissions of inquiry. We should look to make policy statements on work in the profession.

Such things are utterly standard across much of academia. For example, the world's biggest academic association, the American Chemical Society (n.d.), has a sizeable roster of lobbyists in Washington to secure its future conditions of existence. But when I was on the Board of ICA, attempts to put these topics on the agenda and adopt positions on any matter of public interest other than health messages were frowned upon by everyone, bar feminist and queer scholars. The fear of such developments was palpable, equaled only by disdain for them. So let's get past that and make a mark in an area where so much needs to be done. The profoundly American blend of timidity and self-aggrandizement must be displaced by a collaborative ethos in our most intimate working relationships.

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