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Why the Neoliberal U is Making Us Stupid

Some Insights Based on Marx

Jyotsna Kapur

One of the lasting effects of neoliberalism on higher education is the total dismantling of the very purpose of education, i.e., to enhance human potential, individual self-realization, and social development. In this essay, I read Marx's theory of labor to indicate that Marx's deeply held regard for humanity as capable of self-production and transcending its conditions of existence—which was, in fact the vantage point of his bitter critique of capitalism—also underlies the conception of the true purpose of education, at least since the Enlightenment. In critiquing capital from the point of view of labor we can see how the goals of neoliberalism are anti-education, anti-human, and wasteful. Taking the concept of time—i.e., the relationship between time and intellectual labor and intergenerational relationships within the university—as a key to understanding the nature of neoliberalism, I argue that the public university is not just collateral damage in the neoliberal assault on labor. Rather, it is one major site of the war itself.

Keywords: Marx's theory of labor; Neoliberalism and the university; time; inter-generational relationships; class war

It is difficult to read Marx and not recognize his scorn for the sheer stupidity of the capitalist system and the stupidity it generates in turn; his rage at the human ability to generate abundance, but then lay it at the feet of a system bent on concentrating wealth in the hands of those farthest from labor. For instance, how else to read the following lines from *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* (1844b) if not as an attack on the sheer waste of human creativity and effort, when it fails to win for all the time to enjoy life. Evoking Kronos, the Greek god of time, Marx wrote:

But again, the way in which the booty that we win from old Kronos himself in his most private domain, is shared out is still decided by the dice-throw of blind, unjust Chance. (29)

In other words, the booty stolen from a mythical god, i.e., time itself is not freed up for the worker for herself, but rather the degree of control she will have over it remains contingent; a mere accident based upon her place in the market. If you have to, for instance, work 24-7 to eke out a living, then life would appear beholden to one's luck. To steal time is to steal life itself, to live a little more freely and consciously (i.e., in the most private domain) and thus wrest a truly human life from the jaws of a certain death (the promise of Kronos).

Marx could claim that humans were capable of self-production and simultaneously changing the conditions of their existence because of the enormous technological and material advancement of the Industrial Revolution. The increased productivity of labor should have, according to Marx, freed labor; creating time and resources for human beings to pursue their passions, find their purpose, and live more fully. His argument was that having created such abundance, the only work remaining for the working class was to emancipate itself; in his words, to “expropriate the expropriators” (1867, 929).

Under capitalism, however, instead of increased security there was deepening uncertainty; in place of community, increased competition; and life continued to be at the mercy of luck or chance. What could be more senseless than that? The subtitle of *Capital*, after all, was the *Critique of Political Economy*. In other words, Marx opposed the regime of capital and the primacy it placed on economics. Against this, he posed humanity as an end in itself and this involved a conception of the human species as both creative and capable of transcending its limits through collaboration with others and the ability to imagine, in advance, the results of its own labor. “But what distinguishes the worst architect from the best of bees is this, that the architect raises his structure in imagination before he erects it in reality” (1867, 284) is Marx's well-cited explanation of the ability of humans to externalize the imagination, i.e., to imagine in advance before realizing it in actuality. Furthermore, the object of transformation is not just the world, but

that human beings are capable of working on themselves, i.e., producing oneself as both object and subject. For the human, Marx had claimed in the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* (76-77), “his own life” exists as “an object for him.”

There is a remarkable congruence between the socialist conception of humanity and the goals of education, in that both seek to free human *potential*, i.e., the possibility of what could be, at the level of the individual and society. Therefore, Marxist theory can offer an astute critique of the capitalist assault on education. There are several outstanding analyses of the advances of neoliberalism in the U.S. university: on corporatization and the increasing sway of market fundamentalism (Aronowitz 2000, Brouillette 2013, Ginsberg 2011, Williams 2006); on the escalating insecurity of academic labor and student debt as means of disciplining dissent and eroding the ability of the university to function as a voice of dissent and democratize the public sphere (Chomsky 2014, Nelson 1997, Giroux 2007, Folbre 2010); and the targeting, in particular, of the humanities and arts (Donoghue 2008, Viano 2014). I wish to discuss this transformation in terms of temporality: how the political economy of labor under neoliberalism is changing the nature of academic life and intergenerational relationships within the university. My argument, in short, is that neoliberalism is effectively a program of anti-education, which imposes diminished horizons on a younger generation with consequences for social reproduction and the meaning of human life itself.

The transformation of the university towards neoliberalism is part and parcel of the shift in state policy, since the Reagan years, to 19th century principles of free-market; i.e., to the belief that any intervention by the state towards social redistribution is an unfair tax on the rich. Aided by new technologies (broadly characterized as ICT/Information and Communication Technologies) and business practices (increasing financialization that made the flow of capital as well as speculation easier; just-in-time leaner practices of production and distribution), capitalists have, over the last four decades, enjoyed a high degree of freedom, moving jobs where labor was cheaper and buoying consumer demand at home through credit, thus sowing the seeds of the current economic crisis.¹

This was made possible by the increasing deregulation of finance from the ‘70s onwards—a process which became “unstoppable,” as David Harvey (2010, 16) calls it, in the 1990s. This deregulation enabled speculation in the stock market, real estate, commodities such as art and oil, and created the demand for an ever-increasing portfolio of financial instruments, such as credit defaults or insurances, capable of generating interest. As David McNally (2009) has explained, the low interest rates—particularly, for home mortgages and credit cards—that working and middle class people were offered were a response to this demand for

1. David Harvey is one of the best resources for a clear definition of neoliberalism. See most recently, *A Short History of Neoliberalism* and *The Enigma of Capital and the Crises of Capitalism*. You may also see some of the lectures online here: [David Harvey Lecture “A Brief History of Neoliberalism” part1 | Audio.isg.si](#)

financial investment. In other words, it was not the greed of working and middle class families that drove the debt. Rather, by borrowing, the working and middle class generated profits for capital and also sustained consumption. However, debt cannot resolve the basic problem of declining real incomes, purchasing power and profits. The U.S. economy has been in a recurrent slump that began in 1997, was reactivated in 2001, and reappeared in 2008. The higher costs of college tuitions relative to family incomes, student debt, and a generation that faces the prospect of a lower standard of living than its parents is a reflection of this political and economic shift towards neoliberalism.

The university has a key role to play in this transformation as it is called upon to produce a new generation of workers for an economy characterized by precarity. As jobs have become increasingly temporary and adhoc in the midst of declining social networks that would have met basic needs such as health, education, and housing, workers face an intensely competitive environment in which obsolescence and deskilling are everyday realities.

The dominant discourse justifying this in terms of education is the so-called “creative” or “knowledge” economy thesis which has made a virtue of precarity and idealizes the starving, but self-motivated, artist who loves her work as the model worker². According to Richard Florida (2002), amongst the best-known proponents of this position, we now live in a “Creative Age” where the very nature of work has been transformed to resembling the “flexible, open, interactive model of the scientist’s lab or the artist’s studio more than the machine model of the factory or the traditional corporate office” (117). In this “new economy,” workers, like artists, are expected to function perpetually as free-lancers who constantly update their skills and knowledge, i.e., they retrain themselves at their own expense and also own their tools.

Not only is the university supposed to incubate the future workers of the “knowledge” economy, it is itself thoroughly transformed from the inside by, what the Frankfurt School had called “instrumental reason”: the conversion of everything, including human relationships and creativity, into calculated exchanges between antagonistic and alienated individuals and measuring the value of these exchanges according to their ability to further capital accumulation.

Setting the Stage for Economic Take-over

For the university to imagine that the reason for its existence is to be measured primarily, if not solely, in economic terms, it has to accept two premises. The first is measuring the value of higher education by its ability to produce saleable products. Its consequences are that academic administration turns into managing,

2. See (Kleinhans 2011) and (Kapur 2011) for a detailed critique of the creative economy thesis.

accounting, and cutting costs to increase revenues, while simultaneously investing in real estate and monetizing university services and resources (such as land). The outcome for research/knowledge production is that value is placed on research that is directly paid for, supervised by, and advances corporate interests, businesses applications, and spin-offs. Teaching is to be measured by the performance funding model of numbers taught, degrees granted, and time to graduation. An inalienable entity like critical thinking or self-actualization cannot enter this paradigm.

Second, each institution in higher education is imagined as a competitor in a global market pitted against one another for consumers, i.e., paying students or corporate funding. Beating this drum and perpetuating both fear and excitement, befitting a war cry rather than the deliberate thoughtfulness associated with education, Eugene P. Trani and Robert P. Holsworth (2010) cite India and China as the most lucrative markets, claiming that something equivalent to a “19th century gold rush” (188) is going on in the bid for market shares in higher education in these countries. The threat of global competition pits public universities against each other in a circular logic in which to not function on the corporate model is to invite extinction.

Subsequently, economics overtakes education, leading to “dilemmas” such as “how to teach” universities to better market themselves to investors and paying students. This has brought forth absurd “problems” that educational entrepreneurs like Trani and Holsworth look to solve. For instance, they note that Russia now faces the problem of how to make its scientists, the largest in the world relative to the population, profitable. Their solution (188) is to give Russians an education in the free market, i.e., teach them to increase “entrepreneurial infrastructure with personnel who are skilled in the application and marketing of scientific advances” and thus serve the global market. Along the same lines, they applaud university-corporate partnerships, such as between GM and Indian Institute of Technology, Kanpur as the way future for higher education.³ David Harvey (2005) has described the privatization of public assets, by first defunding and destroying them and then opening them up for private enterprise as “accumulation through dispossession.”

To put a price on education requires that the time-intensive, holistic, inalienable labor characteristic of teaching and research—after all ideas/knowledge once arrived at through investigation and understanding cannot be forced out of a person—has to be made into an exchangeable commodity. Essentially, what this means with regard to faculty is that a price has to be put on our labor and that price has to be driven down by dividing, sub-dividing, and deskilling.

3. The two set up a research lab to be co-managed by GMs Bangalore lab in Bangalore and IITK, funded by \$1 million from GM over five years.

A necessary precursor to the codification and division of academic labor is to split apart research and teaching. Once this principle is accepted, research is measured by the dollars generated by grants and investments in the university, while teaching by the numbers of students and, that dull accounting term, “credit hours” generated. The effect is that innovation/knowledge is reduced into producing saleable properties while teaching is turned into the delivery of information that can be canned for maximum returns through online courses, pre-established syllabi to be handed out to the lowest in the academic hierarchy. Performance-based funding models evaluate teaching effectiveness according to numbers of students enrolled, time taken to graduate, and numbers of degrees granted as opposed to the harder-to-quantify attributes like the ability to write, understand, and creatively develop one’s own independent analysis or creative interpretation.

At the top of the academic labor hierarchy, then, is the celebrity professor with the cultural capital to do only research and at the bottom the teaching machine for whom research is to be done, if at all, in “her own time.” Teaching itself diminishes in value with the circular logic that those who do the most teaching have the lowest market value. So we have “research inactive” faculty, the adjunct, the graduate assistant, the equipment manager, and finally the undergraduate student who pays to go to school and also works “for credit” increasingly replacing the tenured teacher-scholar-artist. The separation of research and teaching impoverishes education, drawing a line between education and job training and de-professionalizes the faculty. To imagine that you can teach without learning is to imagine a robot who steps out of the class and forgets it until the next one and simply repeats directions that have been programmed into it, class after class.

The University in the Eye of the “Creative Economy”

The expansion of market logic in every sphere of life has naturalized the self-exploiting labor of the “creative economy” in the university as well. In fact, the university is especially susceptible to this ideology because it is, after all, the single largest collection of people gathered together in pursuit of their passions. The image of the free-thinking artist engaged in pursuing their own passions with people they like resonates with faculty, especially the tenured, who also identify themselves as professional bourgeoisie and not labor. Nadine Muller (2014) and others have commented on how this ideology serves to make people work for less, free, or even pay to work and suffer an incredible degree of pressure and sense of failure when unable to keep up.

The notion of the artist, although the figure of freedom in capitalist society, is nevertheless entirely compatible with the neoliberal university. It has its foundations in the bourgeois notion of freedom as something wrested away from society by especially talented individuals and the free market idea that society is

constituted by individuals who freely enter into contracts according to their own self-interest. In contrast, Marx (1845 (1998), 570) conceptualized the individual as a relational entity, “an ensemble,” a unique intersection of the multiple relationships and conditions forming the individual.

Against free-market ideology, which imagined individuals as pre-formed atomic entities who came together to form society, Marx explained that atomization was the new “social” inaugurated by capitalism. Money depersonalizes relationships—no one, after all, cites their bank balance as evidence of their uniqueness, like they do their ability to cook or sing. Yet, money produced what Luca Basso (2012) calls the “asocial social” for the first time in history, laying the conditions for the emergence of the individual as a singular entity in relation with antagonistic others.

Moreover, the collectivization of labor and the wealth produced by this collective in the industrial revolution, made it possible to imagine labor as something more than a mere means of survival, a necessity—as self-expressive, meaningful activity. Yet, the view that labor is a sheer necessity for survival remains dominant in our world up till now.⁴

The Univers(e)ity and the Human

The university is premised on the notion that individual development is made possible by and can, in fact, only be guaranteed by society and social investment. Subsequently, we do a disservice to the socialist trajectory in the last couple of centuries if we equate the figure of the academic to the liberal conception of the artist as a special individual out of society. The underlying definition of university life, as a time of freedom, away from labor to be spent in learning and growing, is based on the understanding that the individual can develop only in society. This notion has its material basis in socially generated abundance, which can free entire groups of people, such as the young in this case, from the labor of daily necessities, enabling them to devote this freed up time to their development instead. “To educate children,” Marx (1844a) had noted, “it is necessary to feed them and free them from the need to earn a livelihood. The feeding and educating of the entire future proletariat, would mean the abolition of the proletariat and pauperism.” The university, as a community of teachers and students, assumes the social nature of individual development.

4. I am reminded of a conversation I overheard this past summer while watching an elephant doing tricks in a park in Kerala, India. In reply to a child who objected that it was not right to make the elephant do the same thing all day, the adult remarked, “Everyone has to work to be able to live. If he did not work, who would pay for his food?” This for an elephant who could have happily lived on the plentiful forests still in that region.

The public university in the U.S. was part of the economic boom in the country and the expansion of the middle class following the First World War. There was a substantive increase in institutions of higher learning in the beginning of the 20th century. The process had started with the Morrill Land-Grant College Acts of 1862 and 1890, which enabled states to use federal funds to start land grant colleges in agriculture and engineering. The GI Bill passed in 1944 made higher education free for all veterans, thus widening the circle of university graduates. The Higher Education Act of 1965 took this further with scholarships for students and funds for academic institutions. The dismantling of tenure began, along with the shift towards casualization of labor more broadly, in the 1980s and has continued since (Aronowitz and DiFazio 1994); (Rifkin 1995).

Unlike the “genius artist” unfettered by history or society, the idea of the university is premised upon the theory that people need social support simply to live and that personal growth happens with others. As Marx put it in the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* (1844b, 77):

[T]he senses of social man are different from those of non-social man. Only through the objectively unfolded wealth of human nature can the wealth of subjective human sensitivity—a musical ear, an eye for the beauty of form, in short, senses capable of human gratification—be either cultivated or created.

Basically he is saying what we repeat constantly in our classes: you cannot be musical without listening to music and the music that you listen to comes to you from the entire history of music at your disposal; you cannot be a writer without reading and in reading you automatically access the human history of writing up to your moment in time. In other words, “The forming of the five senses is a labor of the entire history of the world down to the present” (Marx, 1844b, 108).

Attached to the university is also the notion of youth as a time of learning, experimenting, and freedom from the constraints of the market. The attack on education as a public good, then, has to be justified by an attack on youth itself and we can see it everywhere in conservative attacks on a “sense of entitlement” amongst young people, urging them instead to enter the market as early as possible. A Google executive recently dismissed college education as “prolonged adolescence,” unnecessary for securing a job at Google (Friedman 2014). Measuring education against a diminishing job market, it has become natural for working class people to ask if student debt is worth taking if the result is a McDonalds job anyway?

In the U.S., this sort of attack is strengthened by an anti-intellectualism that dismisses intellectual labor as effete, ineffective, and elitist. The postmodern dismantling of knowledge while complicating academic language, as Timothy Brennan (2006) has noted, did not help either. It adds up to the caricature widely available in the genre of the academic novel, in which, faculty and students (rarely

the administrators) live out unconscious libidinal drives in an adolescent haze—with their elbow patches, petty politics, and summers in Europe.

This is not to say that there is no pettiness or acting out of unconscious aggression in academic life. All that is true, but blaming the dwindling tenure-track faculty or youthful freedom for the decline of the university is to refuse to look neoliberalism in the eye. Take away academic freedom (which rests on tenure) and youthful explorations from university life and you have the darkly absurd and bleak scenario of Frank Parkin's (1987) novel, *The Mind and Body Shop*, where faculty rent classrooms, each lecture has to be sponsored by a corporate identity, and students prostitute themselves. It is a world in which the old devour the young and marketers decide what “product” should be brought to the “classroom.”

The assault on the autonomy of the university, that it is a business like any other or that there is no alternative to capital, is presented as a certain kind of pragmatism, which Mark Fisher (2009) has so well identified as “capitalist realism.” Basically, it calls upon individuals to be “realistic” by constantly adjusting to the ever-deepening crises of capitalism or in popular language, the “new normal.” For instance, in a widely discussed case, a Duke University student who worked in the porn industry to pay for her education claimed: “To be perfectly honest, I felt more degraded in a minimum wage, blue-collar, low paying, service job than I do doing porn” (Fernelius 2014). What this does is that it naturalizes student debt as a choice between two forms of exploitative labor, waitressing or porn. Ultimately, it absolves society and Duke University of its responsibility to empower the young to acquire an education. Meanwhile, we have returned in terms of gender to the days of the courtesans, our first women poets and writers who essentially self-taught themselves, acquiring literacy as a by-product of sexual exchange. Porn for a degree? Why are we not appalled at this apparently “rational” and “realistic” choice?

Pierre Bourdieu's (1993) analysis that as the autonomy of a field (art, education, journalism) shrinks, the greater is the lack of mobility between post and habitus, i.e., the ability to transcend one's background, is very helpful here. As the neoliberal logic continues to flood the university we should expect to see even fewer working class students make it into faculty or administrative ranks. Raising the price of entering the university is part and parcel of the same process that is shrinking the middle class; and defunding the humanities and liberal arts is the accompanying stunting of its attributes of independent thinking.

Similarly, blaming tenure for the university's financial problems naturalizes precarity as a general condition. Instead of questioning tenure within the university, we should be asking why every job is not tenured and calling for socialized access to health, education, housing, so that one's job is not a matter of life and death. In fact, postmodern cynicism, which combined compliance with irony without arousing any internal dissonance, is the subjective manifestation of

capitalist realism. Mark Fisher (21) characterizes it as “reflexive impotence.” My friend Jim Bigogno, a survivor of the downsizing in the health industry who now works in the university, diagnoses this state as “adaptive apathy,” a calculated indifference to others and a narrow self-interest focused on survival from one crisis to another. Such a subject refuses to look deeply for explanations—social, psychological, ideological or political—because they are all merely discursive anyway and the point is to find the explanation that serves one best in self-promotion. Calling it the “abyss of the free will,” Slavoj Žižek (2002, 137) explains that its declarative statement is, “I did it because I did it.” One may add: I did it but I did it ironically. What has been lost, Sarah Brouillette (2013) notes, is the “desire for and faith in collective attempts to form, manage and shape the institutions within which our creativity unfolds.”

All this shows up, now speaking of the humanities, in an over-emphasis on presentation and impression and disavowal of any real meaning. Research statements are intended to shock rather than make a claim based on evidence; grades are inflated to soothe angry customers; and administrators are more concerned with adding resume lines through “new” initiatives rather than building on existing strengths. One of the most Kafkaesque examples I have heard in this regard is of a professor who presents himself as a mad genius, speaking jargon, making wild connections across disparate materials, all to impress undergraduates with his vast knowledge—so vast that they cannot understand him and will surely fail his class. Many drop. But then he grades easy and some students seeing the As and Bs flatter themselves that they must have indeed “got it” and start mouthing the provocative gibberish that they have come to associate with university education. If that is not the production of stupidity, then what is?

Kafka Returns: The Micromanaging of Time

The naturalization of homo-economicus in academia has brought with it perverse repressions that recall Adorno and Horkheimer’s thesis that the culture industry had displaced aesthetic sublimation with the repressive homogeneity of mass-produced homogeneity. If works of art could offer meaning and thus sublimate the desire for freedom from suffering, the culture industry, Adorno and Horkheimer (2002) claim, represses such desires, drowning them in a clichéd culture which relentlessly stamps the power of capital on our consciousness. Something similar is at play in the neoliberal university where elaborate techniques of micromanagement break up academic work into the minutest measurable units of time measured against output, not the value of the work itself. Adorno (1977 (1991)) would find the situation quite changed from his description of academic life, where life and work could be integrated such that you could literally lose yourself in your work.

Such absorption or sublimation is not possible under a regimen in which academic labor is codified and subdivided, producing a speed-up of work under artificially produced scarcity of time. Its symptoms may be observed on students who simultaneously pay tuitions and work in unpaid internships; graduate students with serious teaching loads; adjuncts on poverty wages; and sleep-deprived teachers coping with increased workloads in the ongoing “hiring freezes” that have become even more severe since the 2008 recession. Time management techniques that mimic capitalist time-consciousness, i.e., aim to maximize productivity and efficiency as a race against others and the clock, have become dominant in academic life.

For instance, programs like “Write or Die” enforces a race against the clock as users set a goal of writing a certain number of words within a block of time. This elevates quantity over meaning. At my university, a group of students have established a filmmaking group modelled after CrossFit, a fitness program which defines success as “measurable, observable, and repeatable” and imposes a regimen in which participants are asked to arbitrarily switch between tasks on command. While this is certainly compatible with job training for a market that demands an agile, flexible, and yet distracted temporary workforce ready to respond to external orders, it is the very opposite of internally driven, passionate concentration that characterizes struggling with an intellectual and creative problem. But to do so, you need to have autonomy over your time, what we also call free time. But such free time is hardly empty or wasted time. As Marx (1857-58, 611), described it, “Really free working, e.g., composing, is at the same time precisely the most damned seriousness, the most intense exertion.” It is the opposite of responding to speeded up, externally-driven, disjointed demands for multi-tasking that are the conditions of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, which Fisher and others have identified as the pathology of late capitalism.

Exacerbating and reproducing the breakdown of academic labor into units of time is an exponential increase in the demand and apparatuses to collect data. These include: assessments; mid-term grades; red flags on students who are doing well or failing; tracking the time students spend online on classwork; multiple achievement reports and updates only to feed the university PR machine; and time-effort studies. All such practices naturalize the impoverished division of research and teaching, while elevating the bureaucratic functions within the university. Yet, as Mark Fisher recalling Kafka notes, the function of the bureaucracy is to disavow its role in the structure, to never let you get to the source. Rather than offer any analysis, let alone take responsibility, university administrators jauntily present themselves as “messengers of bad news.” Its most absurd manifestation is the forwarded email chain, sometimes sent down five levels of the hierarchical chain, until the last bureaucrat forwards it to faculty or students. Direct communication from above is left only to matters of PR.

Time and Labor

Finally, I want to take up here the concept of proletarianization as a key to understanding the logic of capital and elaborate on the pivotal role of the neoliberal university in expanding it. Excluded from ownership of wealth, the proletariat comes to the market, as Marx described it, with nothing to sell but labor-power or “labor time,” i.e., literally her life. The market values one person’s time in relation to another, turning individual life into units of time. To reiterate, Marx’s main point is that it is not time which is commodified but life itself which is bargained away and ultimately effaced. We, of course, experience it as a loss of time.

[T]he situation arises in which men [and women] are effaced by their labour; in which the pendulum of the clock has become as accurate a measure of the relative activity of two workers as it is of the speed of two locomotives. Therefore, we should not say that one man’s hour is worth another man’s hour, but rather that one man during one hour is worth as much as another man during an hour. Time is everything, man is nothing; he is at the most the incarnation of time. Quality no longer matters. Quantity alone decides everything: hour for hour, day for day... (Marx, 1847)

The process of proletarianization is quite simply the cheapening of life, to become a tool or weapon, to be used, easily replaced, and discarded. In *Grundrisse*, Marx satirizes the anomalous perspectives of labor and capital on what happens when life-time is turned into a market value. While for capital, labor is only one commodity amongst others, for labor it is life itself, un-exchangeable.

For capital, the price of labor varies like that of any other thing, although in reality it is only the commodities, which are sometimes dearer, sometimes cheaper. (1857-58, 614)

For the worker under capital, however, the price of labor is life itself:

The slaughter of the ox is always the same sacrifice, for the ox. But this does not mean that value of beef is constant. (1857-58, 614)

The price of a worker’s time depends upon class struggle. Subsequently, placing a value upon time plays a major part in labor struggles. I am reminded of our ongoing bargaining with our administration over credit for indirect teaching, i.e., independent studies, graduate advising, lab supervision, etc., which were earlier not counted as part of our workloads. Such teaching has increased in recent years with declining numbers of tenured and tenure-track faculty who typically undertake such advising (because the NTT (non tenure-track faculty) are supposed to spend all their time in classroom teaching, with no research or service, and the contingent terms of employment make them unreliable for the long-term nature

of student advising). So when we debate whether advising a doctoral thesis student should be equivalent to zero (the administration's starting point, obviously) or three credits, we are bargaining on capitalist terms, like the worker who Marx (1867, 343) quoted as saying: "I demand a normal working day because, like every other seller, I demand the value of my commodity." I remember a member from the administration team pondering aloud: it is hard to say what would be 100% of someone's labor. It is an interesting question only if the individual is imagined as some sort of tool or resource (like an oil well) from whom a full 100% may be extracted. Full extraction from a human being would mean the death of the individual because only upon death is the human incapable of further growth.

Human labor, Marx explained, was *sui generis* because not only is it, along with nature, the only living only element capable of regenerating and producing value, but it is the only element which, in combination with others, is capable of far surpassing its own individual capability. Human labor, in other words, creates by combining nature and the whole of human history.

The problem that academic labor poses for the capitalistic appropriation of labor as commodity is that it presumes the development of the whole individual in and with society. To break down academic labor in order to quantify and cheapen it, so as to extract the mythical 100% out of a human being, is to destroy its very nature. What, after all, is the product of academic labor? If it is teaching, how can you quantify the part each teacher has put in a student and measure it against the output, which is the unique expression of that particular student? Ultimately, teaching and creative work is non-alienable; an idea once understood and seen as logical cannot be taken away.

Marx and Labor

Labor is how we make concrete, manifest, our human essence. A work of art, a book or a meal—all these are the ways in which we externalize our inner selves, and some of what we create, especially in our students, will outlive us. Education transforms us, and should be an end in itself. But when it is produced under the force of the market it becomes an investment to be earned back in money for services rendered. For students, it means that the value of an education is measured in terms of the jobs that it is able to secure for you; for research the production of saleable knowledge. Our labor then becomes an evidence of our lack of freedom, loss of time, and ultimately our sense of reality. The pressures to add lines on the résumé in the increasingly competitive job market; garner research to whatever the higher bidder will offer; or inflate grades to avoid the ire of students who are paying through the nose to pay for college makes intellectual labor meaningless and unreal. Subsequently, anything goes and for all the numbers of publications

and students taught, we are left with the hollow question, what is the point of this all?

In the university, we still cherish the idea that in teaching we speak to the whole person and not just a future worker who must be trained or a customer who must be satisfied. We still think of thinking and creating as exercises in self-discovery and an attempt at making the world better. Rightfully, we should be indignant at the diminishing of our labor and our humanity. There is plenty to be done. In Illinois, where I teach, we have now gone without any allocation from the State for the academic year 2015-16 and universities and colleges are beginning to lay off workers and start to eliminate programs. Governor Rauner refuses to pass the budget unless his “pro-business” aka neoliberal plans to eviscerate union rights, lower taxes on the wealthy, and reduce social service spending are also passed. How we will come out of this is uncertain.

Yet, resistance is and has been building up. The Occupy Movement had put forth the demand to eliminate student debt. The Bernie Sanders campaign has called for free public higher education. Students in public universities across India, in JNU, HCU, Allahabad, Aligarh among others, are in the midst of an intense attack by the current BJP-led government, which has termed student protests anti-national. Where we work we must organize and retain the vision upon which the university was built—the full and free development of each and all.

To conclude with Marx, humans create, “not only in consciousness, intellectually but also actively, in reality” and therefore we contemplate ourselves in the world we have created (1844b, 77). The business model of Neoliberal U mirrors back to us repressed, anxious, competitive, and hyperactive students and faculty who are ultimately apathetic to “free conscious spontaneous activity,” Marx’s definition of human labor. The dictionary definition of stupid is slow, un-interested, dull, unable to think through or imagine—the very opposite of the purpose of education, which is where we will land if the neoliberal assault is not soon reversed.

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