

What is Left in the Neoliberal University?

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The neoliberal university exploits intellectual labor under a veneer of liberal-humanist values — a false consciousness which the emerging working-class academics must overcome.

The role of intellectuals in class struggle has been a key topic in the history of left thought. Most famously perhaps, this topic was discussed by the iconic Italian Marxist philosopher and educator Antonio Gramsci.

Gramsci rejected the idea that intellectuals are mere observers in the class war. Whether they are conscious of it or not, he argued, intellectuals contribute either to the capitalist class or to the working class.

Gramsci also dispensed with the idea that the working people need to be led by an intellectual vanguard elite, trained in academic philosophy and theory. A union activist, for instance, is in its Gramscian sense an “intellectual” of the working class, in that her organizing work produces “counter-hegemony” and advances the social struggle against the ruling class.

Thus, Gramsci differentiated between what he called “traditional intellectuals,” who falsely consider their intellectual pursuit as independent from any social class, and “organic intellectuals” of the working class, who consider their work as inherently tied to class struggle.

Historically, the university has been a bastion of “traditional intellectuals.” Scholarly work has been, and is still often, understood as “objective,” “detached,” and “disinterested.” Accordingly, academic professionals tend to consider their work as a sacred practice, a “vocation,” free from any bonds to the interests of a particular social group.

Although academics often understand their work to be “disinterested,” the underlying assumption in doing scholarly work has been always that it somehow advances “the collective good.” This liberal-humanist assumption continues to shape academic workers’ self-image, even though the neoliberal university relies increasingly on “working-class academics.”

What is a working-class academic?

For many, the phrase “working-class academics” is synonymous with “academics from a working-class background.” This is for good reason.

Pursuing an academic job these days requires a graduate degree. Graduate programs are expensive, and hence less accessible to students from working-class backgrounds. As a result, working-class students are less likely to end up in academic jobs.

For decades, activists have tried to make higher education more accessible to the working class. Under public pressure, some institutions of higher education have tried to incentivize students from a working-class background to pursue an academic career by introducing quotas, just as they have tried to create incentive for minority groups.

It is indeed immensely important to continue fighting for a more accessible higher education. But to organize for systemic change in higher education, we must go beyond considering class as only a matter of “diversity” and embrace a broader definition of “working-class academics.”

In the past two decades academic labor has been increasingly carried out by contractors and gig workers. According to a 2020 report from the National Center for Education Statistic, about one in every two academics in the US works on a part-time contract, graduate student employees not included. These workers often live in precarious conditions. A survey from the American Federation of Teachers found out that 40 percent of adjunct faculty struggle with covering basic household expenses.

The precarious condition of adjunct faculty as well as graduate student workers is by no means limited to the United States. A study by the University and College Union found that more than half of all academic staff in the UK are employed on insecure contracts. Or in Germany, which is more of a welfare state, about eight in every ten academic workers are employed on a fixed-term contract, according to a survey from the German Trade Union Confederation. Of the junior academics surveyed, about 80 percent work on average 10 hours per week more than what is stipulated in their contracts.

These precarious workers in academia, contingent faculty members and graduate student workers, are what I take to be “working-class academics.”

This proposition may raise an objection: Isn’t the phrase “working-class academic” a contradiction in terms? How can academics as “professionals” be classed with the so-called “unskilled” workers? To answer this objection, we need to take a step back and look at the very concept of “class.”

“Class” is a notoriously difficult concept to define. Class is an objective economic category, a tool of sociological analysis, but also a matter of culture and identity, and of political organization.

In its broadest definition, the working class includes those who do not own the means of production; those who must sell their labor in exchange for a wage. In our twenty-first-century capitalist economy, there is a wide variety of people with extremely different occupations who fit this definition: a construction worker with no higher education, an artist who sells his work on Etsy, a social media content moderator with college education whose workplace is her home, an auto industry worker who provides for a household of five, a culture worker who has to work part-time as an Uber driver — all of these people sell their labor to survive.

The extreme heterogeneity among the working class is a serious obstacle to the development of class-consciousness, the first step towards building social movements. This problem was anticipated by Marx.

In his article for *Jacobin*, Matt Vidal shows that one of Marx's concerns in his mature writings was how "the fragmentation of the working class along lines of skill and authority" impedes the formation of a class-conscious proletariat: "Rather than seeing a universal process of deskilling resulting in a homogeneous, unskilled working class, as is commonly attributed to Marx, he argued that capitalism would require a complex division of labor including unskilled workers, skilled workers, and a hierarchy of managers to coordinate it all."

In order to overcome the fragmentation of the working class, we must go beyond the stereotypical image of the blue-collar worker. Identities associated with the working class must be inclusive of all the diverse social groups who actually belong to the working class.

A graduate student worker or an adjunct faculty member who earns little more than the minimum wage and a university service worker belong to the same class — and they should be able to perceive themselves as such. By valorizing academic labor as "vocation," however, the neoliberal university mystifies the employer-employee relationship between itself and the working-class academics.

Valorization of academic labor

While the class war is moving ever so irrefutably inside the walls of academia, the managerial elite of the neoliberal university, as well as academics complicit with them, continue to hide behind a liberal-humanist façade.

Here is an example. Before assuming the prestigious office of the President of Harvard University, Lawrence Bacow was president of Tufts University. At Tufts, Bacow had opposed graduate students' unionization. As reported in *The Tufts Daily*, Bacow had argued that "The relationship between faculty member to graduate student is not one of employer to employee," emphasizing that his opposition to graduate student unionization was not a matter of ideology.

Interestingly, Bacow's argument here is in fact purely ideological. He is drawing upon the valorized notion that there is something sacred in the relationship between teachers and students, as if a university professor who sees two hundred faces in a lecture hall every other day can relate to their students like Plato did to Socrates, or Scipio to his circle.

If the graduate students at Tufts had said that, through collective bargaining, they intend to determine their grades, then one could indeed object that they were trying to change a longstanding relationship between students and teachers. But it is the university — not the graduate students — that has changed the student-teacher relationship by employing them to fill its teaching needs.

Here is another example. A few years ago, a professor of political science at the University of Chicago sent a letter to graduate students in his department who were trying to organize a union, answering a public letter that the graduate students had written in support of unionization. Here is part of his email:

"... I found your co-signed letter to be naive, unconvincing, and, quite frankly, kind of offensive. It is naive in that you seem to really think a union would not change relationships between graduate students and the faculty. I don't know if either of you have ever been members of a union or worked in a unionized environment, but unions inevitably alter the relationships between union members and the people they interact with, be they management, clients, customers, or what not. The formalization of such relationships is, in fact, the central goal of a union"

Again, the supposedly sanctified relationship between students and teachers is used to "justify" the argument that academic workers should not unionize.

Neoliberalism has thus turned university into a profit-oriented organization, devoid of any meaning, that yet continues to sell its economic, instrumental values as liberal-humanistic ones: efficiency as “dedication”; polished CVs as “rounded characters”; specialization as “passion”; interdisciplinarity as “liberal education”; and ruthless, luck-based competition as “meritocracy.”

But the problem is not just the managerial class or those faculty members who are clearly complicit with them. Most academic workers have at one point accepted a false image of their profession, the very image which is used to exploit them.

Since its inception, the modern university was an institution designed to sustain a set of liberal-humanist values. It is difficult to get into this system, as a student, a teacher, or a researcher, without to some extent internalizing these values — most importantly, the notion that knowledge on its own can save humanity.

Many academics, especially in the humanities and social sciences, are often under the impression that since they study the injustices of the world, they are by virtue of what they study the most “progressive” stratum of the society. But the truth is that academic careerism will not save the world.

The idealization of what academics do as a profession, therefore, stands in the way of addressing the unjust hierarchies within the university itself.

What is to be done?

I opened this piece with a reference to Gramsci. Thinking of Gramsci, we may recall Joseph Buttigieg, a respected professor of English at the University of Notre Dame and a translator of Gramsci’s work, as well as father to the former South Bend Mayor and democratic presidential hopeful known as “Mayor Pete.” It is of course folly to say “Like father, like son.” Every individual is responsible only for their own actions. Yet, we can still ask: what happens that one of the most vapid politicians in recent US history was raised by a man who made his living by teaching and researching Gramsci? This is either very tragic, or it tells us something about the limits of upper-middle class academic life.

The university might well be beyond saving, unless a larger social movement addresses the root causes of economic injustice. But there is surely something “left” to do in the university.

As working-class academics are becoming the new faculty majority, the university, the natural habitat of what Gramsci called “traditional intellectuals,” can for the first time be conquered by “organic intellectuals” of the working class. If this happens, the university can play a key role in the next larger social movement for economic and social justice — not as a leader, however, but by joining the rest of the working class.

For this to happen, working-class academics must fight the false consciousness that what they do is “inherently” valuable, and like the rest of the working class, they must organize and fight back the ruling class.

We do not study and teach leftist theorists for “upward mobility,” to become part of “the elite,” and then bring about a top-down change. If you have good intentions, start by organizing for academic labor now, when you belong to the working class. And if, against all odds, you succeed in becoming part of the salariat, you can still be in solidarity with the working class. Remain committed to working at smaller universities which are more accessible to the working class and have a more equitable culture of research and teaching, rather than pursuing and glorifying “prestigious” universities. Many academics with a working-class background have already done that.

As much as academia pushes for narratives of individuality and success, only by working together can we achieve meaningful change. Helping your adjunct faculty colleagues to unionize could well be more virtuous an act than writing a state-of-the-art paper on Foucault.