



Winn, J. (2015). Writing about Academic Labor. *Workplace*, 25, 1-15.

JOSS WINN

WRITING ABOUT ACADEMIC LABOR

In a letter from Marx to Engels on the 24th August 1867, the year that the first volume of *Capital* was published, he wrote:

The best points in my book are: 1. (this is fundamental to all understanding of the FACTS) the two-fold character of labour according to whether it is expressed in use-value or exchange-value, which is brought out in the very First Chapter; 2. the treatment of surplus-value regardless of its particular forms as profit, interest, ground rent, etc. This will be made clear in the second volume especially. (Marx 1987, 402)

Marx first elucidated the ‘two-fold character of labour’ in *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859) and then seven years later reworked it into the first chapter of *Capital Vol.1*. There, Marx unfolds his new scientific discovery, one that he regarded as “the pivot on which a clear comprehension of political economy turns” (Marx 1996, 51).

Marx’s discovery shows how the role, character and measure of labour is central to political economy and therefore to the total ‘logic’ of capitalism’s social world. Marx’s discovery was not simply that labour is useful and can be exchanged like any other commodity, but that its character is “expressed” or “contained” in the form of other commodities. What is expressed is that labour in capitalism takes on the form of being *both* concrete, physiological labour and at the same time abstract, social, homogenous labour. It is the abstract character of labour that is the source of social wealth (i.e. value) and points to a commensurable way of measuring the value of commodities and therefore the wealth of capitalist societies. Marx called this measure ‘socially necessary labour time’:

the labour time required to produce any use-value under the conditions of production normal for a given society and with the average degree of skill and intensity of labour prevalent in that society (Marx, 1976, 129)

Arguably, there have been no further scientific discoveries regarding the fundamental character of labour since this “important point” upon which “a clear comprehension of political economy turns” was elucidated by Marx over 150 years ago. Harry Braverman recognised this in the 1970s, when he stated that, “there simply is no continuing body of work in the Marxist tradition dealing with the capitalist mode of production in the manner in which Marx treated it in the first volume of *Capital*.” (Braverman 1998, 7) Indeed, when I read articles and books concerning my own labour: ‘academic labour’, Marx’s foundational discovery appears to be largely unknown or neglected among the very profession where I would expect to find it well understood. More often, the study of academic labour is the study of ‘academic work’ i.e. the changing nature of our profession (Smyth 1995; Tight 2000; Fitzgerald *et al* 2012), the impact of policy and bureaucracy on our work (Slaughter and Leslie 1999), the politics of the workplace (Martin 1998), and, increasingly, a concern with our identity and what it subjectively means to be an academic (Herman and Schmid 2003; Barcan 2013; Whitchurch and Gordon 2010). Such accounts generally respond to an acknowledged decline in the conditions of academic labour across the world and

the increasingly instrumentalised role of higher education in national economies (Molesworth *et al* 2010; Shattock 2012; Brown and Carasso 2013). Yet, despite repeated calls for increased unionisation (Johnson *et al* 2003; Krause *et al* 2008; Mattson 2000; Nelson 1997), the trajectory remains the same: individual autonomy is decreasing (Wilson 1991; Willmott 1995; Hall 2013), contractual conditions are worsening (Cross and Goldenberg 2009; Bérubé 2013; UCU 2013;), individual mental health issues are rising (Kinman and Wray 2013), and work is being intensified (Bryson 2004; Gill 2009; Ogbonna and Harris 2004). In retrospect, the gains of the 20th century labour movement are diminishing and one might question whether the critical, intellectual tools developed by academics today are adequate for understanding what is actually happening to us.

So, I recognise that for several decades, academics have written critically about our profession producing a variety of individual monographs, edited collections and journals (notably, *Workplace: A journal for academic labour*) dedicated to analysing the process and conditions of labour inside the academy. Yet, despite much having been written about academic *work*, there is relatively little critical engagement with *labour* itself as the object of critique. It would seem this “avoidance of labour” (Neary & Dinerstein, 2002, 25) as the object of critical enquiry is widespread in the social sciences and not just in the study of academic labour. Instead of a critical theoretical engagement with the *category* of labour, greater attention has been given to the *conditions* of labour and the subsequent “corrosion of character.” (Sennett, 1998) As the Historian, Moishe Postone has argued, the outcomes of such approaches tend towards an undialectical resistance to our own material conditions and an overwhelming sense of helplessness (Postone 2006).

In response, this essay calls for a return to the labour theory of Marx, or rather to Marx’s *negative critique* of labour and its role in the political economy of capitalism. In what follows, I draw not only on Marx, but am influenced by Postone’s reading of Marx, whose seminal book, *Time, Labour and Social Domination*, and subsequent work, has revitalised our understanding of the role and character of labour in capitalism and points to a fundamental error in the position taken by labour activists and ‘labour studies’ in general. That is, a critique of capitalism and its apparent complexity must be undertaken through an immanent critique *of* labour, rather than from the *standpoint* of labour as has been the case with the tradition of labour studies, whether Marxist or not. As Postone has concluded, “both the concrete and abstract social dimensions of labor in capitalist society are dimensions of capital, according to Marx; neither of them, in their existent form, represents the future.” (Postone 1993, 358) In essence, the two-fold character of labour must be abolished, transcended and overcome rather than dignified and sustained.

To ground this approach, I want to outline a different method of writing and therefore thinking about academic labour. One that starts from a rigorous engagement with the fundamental categories of Marx’s theory and a better appreciation of the method he employed in the development of those categories. By doing so, I want to be clear about the utility of Marx’s insights when studying the work of research, teaching and learning and the political economy of higher education in general. In understanding the university as a capitalist institution, I want to steer other academics towards Marx’s “total critique”, an approach that is “at one and the same time methodological, theoretical and political” (Clarke, 1991 51). This is at a time when it seems to me there is increasing confusion and mystification about how and whether ‘immaterial labour’, ‘intellectual labour’, ‘knowledge work’, ‘cognitive capitalism’ and ‘digital labour’ are categorically different to labour as conceived by Marx. (Dyer-Witthford 2005; Harvie and De Angelis 2009; Haug 2009; Peters and Bulut 2011; Scholz 2013; Fuchs 2014)

Overwhelmed by the real and complex conditions of our work, one reaction is to reify it further, rather than to analyse it rigorously through more simple abstract categories. The danger of the former approach is that we *further* hypostatise what *already* appears real and concrete and consequently we identify attributes of capitalism, or more often ‘neoliberalism’, with the way things *appear* to be rather than its more basic social categories. In effect, this is a type of fetishism that attacks the personifications of a given social form, while leaving its more fundamental abstract character to remain in tact. (Postone, 1980, 111) Consequently, we write about the apparent crisis of academic work, its so-called performativity, its

precarity, its Taylorisation, and in general its violation by a variety of neoliberal technologies. Next, I focus on one widely cited example.

Performing academic labour

In *The Teacher's Soul and the Terrors of Performativity*, Stephen Ball (2003) defines 'performativity', as one of three "policy technologies" of education reform, the other two being 'the markets' and 'managerialism'. Performativity is

a technology, a culture and a mode of regulation that employs judgements, comparisons and displays as means of incentive, control, attrition and change – based on rewards and sanctions (both material and symbolic). The performances (of individual subjects or organisations) serve as measures of productivity or output, or displays of 'quality', or 'moments' of promotion or inspection. As such they stand for, encapsulate or represent the worth, quality or value of an individual or organisation within a field of judgement. The issue of who controls the field of judgement is crucial. (Ball 2003, 216)

According to Ball, these reified technologies of reform are "unstable, uneven but apparently unstoppable". They are becoming "embedded in the 'assumptive worlds' of many academic educators". They change what we do and who we are. This reform has created "institutional schizophrenia", characterised by a "devolved environment", managed through "monitoring systems and the production of information". In this "advanced liberal" environment, de-regulation is a process of re-regulation, de-control is a new form of control, a less visible state regulates through the self-regulation of new subjectivities: "enterprising subjects" who "live an existence of calculation" and undertake "intensive work on the self".

This "form of ventriloquism" is surveilled by "appraisal systems, target-setting, output comparisons", etc. and leads to "security seeking tactics", "existential anxiety and dread". The "neo-liberal professional" performs within and as part of a regulatory environment where "value replaces values." It is an "inauthentic", "contradictory" existence that is "ontologically insecure". The teacher's "purposes are made contradictory, motivations become blurred and self worth is uncertain." The schizophrenia of the institutions leads to "a kind of values schizophrenia" with "a potential 'splitting' between the teacher's own judgements about 'good practice' and student 'needs' and the rigours of performance." It leads to "guilt, uncertainty, instability and the emergence of a new subjectivity". It leads to struggles that "are often internalised and set the care of the self against the duty to others." "Performance has no room for caring... these are things we do to ourselves and to others."

Ball concludes that by being commodified, knowledge is "exteriorised" and consequently "de-socialised". As a result, teachers are struggling with and against the effects of commodification, which "involves a profound shift in the nature of the relationship between workers and their work". It results in a "corrosion of character" and no space of an autonomous or collective ethical self."

In my view, what Ball describes in this rich polemical essay, is capitalist work as "a form of living death". (Dinerstein and Neary, 2002, 11) For me, the value of his article is that it eloquently extends the vocabulary that I have used to describe my own work in conversation with others: "Schizophrenic"; "intensive work on the self"; "de-control as a new form of control"; "an existence of calculation"; "purposes are made contradictory, motivations become blurred and self worth is uncertain."

Ball's article describes, and to some extent, analyses capitalist work as it appears in universities, colleges and schools. What appears is indeed a performance, but this is insufficient as an explanation for what is actually going on backstage and keeps the show running. Ball is right to point to an "epidemic" of reform ideas "'carried' by powerful agents, like the World Bank and the OECD". However, what his article doesn't extend to is a recognition of the performative nature of those agents, too. Who are they agents for? What are they agents of? What is *their* role in the "game"? In fact, what *is* this "improvement game"? The problem with Ball's article, despite all its descriptive and emotive power, is that his analysis in this paper does not extend to a discussion of the economic categories which have set the "unstoppable" technologies

of reform in motion, and the “agents” are reified as the World Bank and OECD, rather than being understood themselves as “personifications of economic categories”. (Marx 1996, 10) He does not indicate that the capitalists themselves could be personifications of capital and that the “assumptive world” of “new kinds of teacher subjects” and their subjectivities, is the world and subjectivity of *value*, “an automatic subject” (Marx 1976, 255) and the “self-moving substance” (Marx 1976, 256) of social life. If this movement really is “apparently unstoppable” as Ball states, we have to uncover the “historically determinate logic” (Postone, 1993, 285) behind this “game” or else live with the helplessness instilled by Ball’s essay: a form of living death.

Throughout his critique of political economy, Marx makes frequent reference to the language of performance. We learn of “masks”, “personifications” and “*dramatis personae*”, of which the key characters are the capitalist and the worker, each of whom perform a role in capital’s “self-valorisation of value” (Marx 1988, 84). These references to performativity are not simply a matter of literary flourish but relate to Marx’s method of critique, which aims to distinguish between the appearance of things in their concrete form and their real nature as abstract social categories that dominate us. As Ball rightly argues, education has become a commodity, but we know from Marx that the commodity form is a fetish; it is a historically specific form of wealth made manifest in the capitalist mode of production and so to understand how academic labour appears as a commodity we must leave the “sphere of circulation or commodity exchange” and analyse the “hidden abode of production”. (Marx 1976, 279-80)

The important point here, I think, is that while the commodity is what Marx called, the “economic cell form” of capitalist society from which everything else can and should be analysed (Marx 1976, 90), there is a “special”, “peculiar” commodity: that of ‘labour power’. It is special because, Marx argues, it is “a source of value” (Marx 1976, 270), the only commodity that can *create new value* for the capitalist either by extending time i.e. lengthening the working day – which has its natural limits or by compressing time i.e. increasing the productivity of labour through various methods of efficiency. It is this, I believe, that is key to understanding what lies behind Ball’s observations around the imposed performativity of academic labour. In our performativity, teachers are enacting and gradually embodying what, in the end, amounts to capital’s compulsive and relentless drive to increase ‘surplus labour time’, over and above ‘necessary labour time’; that which Marx described technically as ‘exploitation’. Capital’s imperative to exploit labour, its only dynamic source of surplus value, is at the heart of this performance and the “schizophrenia” of performativity that Ball describes can be understood as an acute manifestation of capital’s relentless need to subsume, level, and valorise all aspects of human life. Reflecting on the “terror” of this madness, labour in capitalist society finally recognises itself as what it can only be: “fuel for the living fire.” (Rikowski 2002)

Rising from the abstract to the concrete

A search for ‘marx*’ across all 24 issues (250+ articles, reviews, interviews, etc.) of *Workplace: A journal for academic labour*, discovers 53 items. Of these, only 14 formally cite Marx’s work, five directly engage with his work on a theoretical level (Caffenzis 2008; Gulli 2009; Moten and Harney 1999; Pekkola 2013; Wexler 2008), and just two are attentive to his method (Caffenzis 2008; Moten and Harney 1999). For a journal primarily concerned with academic labour, this suggests a forgetting – perhaps even an avoidance – of its critical, theoretical base.

Across 24 issues of the journal, the most sophisticated use of both Marx’s social theory and method is an article by Moten and Harney (1999). In *The Academic Speed-Up*, they point to four approaches (pp. 24-5) to the study of capitalist societies:

1. There was the practical knowledge of businessmen about how the market worked, a knowledge that proved true because it made them rich.
2. There was the vulgar propaganda of 19th century economists and politicians, who spun theories out of this practical knowledge to defend it, and whose knowledge was also true to

- the extent they were able to dominate this society with their (to Marx) crude schematic of how the market worked.
3. There was theoretical work of classical economists like Smith and Ricardo, whose more sophisticated and in-depth analysis of the human conditions produced by the market Marx admired as a truer picture of the historical moment of capitalism from the market's vantage point.
 4. There was Marx's own truth, that human conditions under the sway of this market could only be understood by going beyond the market, historicizing it and completing it with a picture of the production process off-stage that made the market possible.

The point that Moten and Harney make is that most critical analyses of academic labour (and I would include Ball's example above), identify the problem somewhere amidst the first and second levels of analysis; that is, the problem is (1) the conditions of the labour process (e.g. its precarity and expressions of performativity); or (2) the ideologies which support and maintain that labour process, i.e. 'neoliberalism'.

This suggests that any author whose argument rests on a critique of 'neoliberalism' simultaneously reveals the limits of their argument. As Moishe Postone has argued, the existence of different historical configurations of capitalism (e.g. liberal, Fordist, neoliberal) "indicates very strongly that capitalism's most basic features cannot be identified completely with any of its more specific historical configurations." (Postone 2005) The point he makes in much of his work is that our critique must rest on categories that are fully adequate to our historical condition i.e. capitalism. Traditional Marxist influenced critical analysis of the market and the distribution of private property has clearly proved an inadequate foundation on which to base an emancipatory critique. Such critiques were drawn from the *standpoint* of labour and its reification, rather than aimed at its *abolition* or over-coming (the word Marx uses in German is *aufheben*). That is, labour, although recognised as a key category in critical social theory, was never subjected to a rigorous *negative* critique in the same way that other features of capitalist social life have been.

Similarly, Simon Clarke has described 'neoliberalism' as "a reassertion of the fundamental beliefs of the liberal political economy that was the dominant political ideology of the nineteenth century." (Clarke 2004, 57) His point is that despite a variety of periodic expressions, the problem that our critique must always be mindful to address is the problem of 'capital' as a fundamental and historical category. When the problem is deemed to be 'neoliberalism', attempts to critique it are likely to remain as superficial, unscientific and moralistic as neoliberal theology itself. Clarke's short article on neoliberalism can be read as an attempt to shift the critique away from these relatively superficial levels of analysis, to a more foundational understanding of the problem, (which can be aligned with point three of Moten and Harney's argument) and its revolutionary, scientific critique (point four). Likewise, Moten and Harney argue that it "fall[s] to us then first to avoid our talk of a crisis becoming the vulgar knowledge of these conditions. We should avoid taking this practical knowledge and trying to translate it straight into a theory of conditions. Instead we have to take the further step of exploring the theory of conditions already constituted for us." (Moten and Harney 1999, 25)

This section in their article is titled 'Abstracting Academic Labour' and I think it should be read as a reference to the method undertaken by Marx: that of "rising from the abstract to the concrete" (Marx 1973, 101). In my view, it is essential that we try to understand what this entails.

When Marx writes about labour in his work, he is writing about capitalist labour; that is, a conception of labour in the historical context where the capitalist mode of production has been generalized across society. His analysis of labour is intended to scientifically demonstrate how capitalist labour is distinct from labour prior to the emergence of capitalism and in non-capitalist societies. In this way, capitalist labour is both explicitly and implicitly set against a past historical and a future possible form of labour. In his early work such as *The German Ideology* (1845), Marx reflected deeply and extensively on his critical approach as uniquely dialectical, historical and materialist. In practice, what this means is that he seeks to uncover contradictions or antagonisms between things (i.e. ideas, practices, subjectivities, social

structures) that we can determine from recorded history and observations in society. Marx asserts that people and the way we interact with each other are the outcome of real, social, historical forces of production. The way we think is influenced by our actions and the actions of others in the world, through history, in society. Rather than being determined by some kind of external power, such as God, we are of our own making: in the process of creating history we create ourselves. Marx's view of history is that there are tendencies which amount, on the face of it, to laws, but that they are in fact contingent on human action and therefore cannot be used to justify the status quo. Everything is open to critique and is always in motion.

Marx considered his method to be rational and scientific and share similar methodological characteristics to that of the natural sciences. In his research, he employed various techniques such as detailed observation, logic, reference to literature, and the use of documentary evidence (e.g. the English 'Blue Books') to explicate social 'laws' and tendencies. In seeking to explain the concrete features of our lives, he identified a realm of *real abstraction* (Sohn-Rethel 1978; Jappe 2013) that is often contradistinct to what appears to be real and natural. In doing so, his analysis is systematically and simultaneously abstract and concrete; he acknowledged the material reality of our lives and the world we live in but is sceptical of manifest surface appearances and especially commonsensical ideas which we take for granted as trans-historical and natural, such as the idea of 'labour'.

In a preface to *Capital* he compares his task to that of the Physicist, Biologist and Chemist, explaining that for the study of society, "the power of abstraction" must take the place of the microscope and chemical reagents (Marx 1976, 90). Although he discusses capital in detail using the examples of certain types of labour such as that of tailors, weavers, farm and factory workers, in doing so he is also abstracting to an "ideal average" (Marx 1991, 970), so as to offer an "analysis of capital in its basic structure." (Marx 1991, 379) As such, his analysis of labour was intended to be applicable to all forms of labour engaged in the capitalist mode of production, thereby offering a systematic, penetrating and multi-faceted analysis and re-conception of labour in its temporal, historical and de-naturalised forms.

In the *Grundrisse* (1857), Marx described his critical approach as "the method of rising from the abstract to the concrete" (Marx 1973, 101), going to some length to explain what he means by this, using the concept of 'population'.

It seems to be correct to begin with the real and the concrete, with the real precondition, thus to begin, in economics, with e.g. the population, which is the foundation and the subject of the entire social act of production. However, on closer examination this proves false. The population is an abstraction if I leave out, for example, the classes of which it is composed. These classes in turn are an empty phrase if I am not familiar with the elements on which they rest. E.g. wage labour, capital, etc. These latter in turn presuppose exchange, division of labour, prices, etc. For example, capital is nothing without wage labour, without value, money, price etc. Thus, if I were to begin with the population, this would be a chaotic conception [Vorstellung] of the whole, and I would then, by means of further determination, move analytically towards ever more simple concepts [Begriff], from the imagined concrete towards ever thinner abstractions until I had arrived at the simplest determinations. From there the journey would have to be retraced until I had finally arrived at the population again, but this time not as the chaotic conception of a whole, but as a rich totality of many determinations and relations. (Marx, 1973, 100)

Shortly after this passage, he clarifies the relation between the abstract and the concrete:

The concrete is concrete because it is the concentration of many determinations, hence unity of the diverse. It appears in the process of thinking, therefore, as a process of concentration, as a result, not as a point of departure, even though it is the point of departure in reality and hence also the point of departure for observation [Anschauung] and conception. ... the abstract determinations lead towards a reproduction of the concrete by way of thought. (Marx, 1973, 101)

In this text, Marx is keen to distinguish his approach from Hegel's idealism, arguing that his own dialectical use of abstractions are reliant on, and grounded in, the concrete, material, social attributes of

human life. These real abstractions have a determinate force as they reproduce the concrete, which is the concentrated *result* of real abstractions. (Ilyenkov, 1982, 32-34) He gives an example of the abstraction of ‘exchange value’, which can only exist in a dialectical relationship with the concrete social relations found in society, such as the family, commune or state.

Further on in his notebooks, Marx discusses how an abstraction can change in relation to the concrete world. Simple abstractions might appear to presuppose the more complex reality of the world, but in fact, he argues, they express the historical development of the social conditions and relations at particular times and places. “To that extent”, says Marx, “the path of abstract thought, rising from the simple to the combined, would correspond to the real historical process.” (Marx 1973, 102) In effect, this is a warning not to methodologically employ concepts such as ‘money’, ‘exchange’, or ‘labour’, etc. to all people at all times across all places. It is an argument for grasping the contingent basis of theoretical concepts prior to their application in the concrete world. (Marx 1973, 105) It is not simply a *mistake* to apply existing categories to all of history but also a *constraint* because it limits our ability to understand the present as well as the past. Marx argues that categories such as ‘money’ and ‘labour’ express both “what is given, in the head as well as in reality”, and therefore “the characteristics of existence” but from specific, limited points of view (Marx 1973, 106). Thus, rejecting Positivism, Marx argues that it is a mistake to think that society “begins only at the point where one can speak of it *as such*; this holds *for science as well*.” (Marx 1973, 106)

Marx’s starting point of analysis is the dominant, ruling, mode of production in contemporary society i.e. ‘capital’, rather than what he argues are related but secondary categories such as ‘population’ or ‘landed property’. (Marx, 1973, 107) Although there may appear to be a ‘logic’ to starting with a specific point of interest (e.g. ‘population’, ‘higher education’, ‘science’, ‘academic labour’, etc.) and then developing one’s analysis from there, Marx argues that the mode of production (i.e. capital) dominates – “rules” – the body and mind to such an extent that without starting from an examination of capitalism’s fundamental categories (and therefore one’s own abstractions) is to approach one’s analysis (e.g. of ‘academic labour’) more-or-less blind. In effect, he is saying that we are born out of capital – we are capital – and must begin our analysis with an adequate understanding of what this means to be human.

In the final passage of this section of his notebooks, he succinctly demonstrates the method of “rising from the abstract to the concrete” using the example of ‘national wealth’. (Rosdolsky 1977, 27) Having explained how the term came into use and over time came to uncritically justify the conception of the modern state, he then concludes by outlining this particular methodological approach (Marx 1973, 108). If we apply this same method to an analysis of academic labour, (i) we start with general categories that seemingly apply to all people at all times e.g. ‘labour’; (ii) move on to an examination of contemporary forms of those categories e.g. ‘capital’, ‘wage labour’; (iii) next, examine the inter-relation of the categories’ abstract character in their concentrated, concrete social forms e.g. the ‘workplace’, the ‘State’; (iv) examine the concrete/abstract dialectic developed so far in the more expansive, global setting e.g. global labour market; (v) and examine the dialectic developed so far at a systemic level e.g. the inter-relation between global production, exchange, unemployment, crises, etc. Thus, we’ve started from the seemingly simple category of ‘labour’ and moved dialectically to locate it temporally both in terms of its abstract character and its appearance at a local, social level, and its role in international politics, markets, war, etc. To conceive of ‘labour’ or any other simple category in any other way is to fall short of understanding it.

As I summarised in the first part of this essay, the dual character of commodities in capitalist societies expresses the dual character of human labour in capitalist societies. The use-value or utility of a commodity expresses the concrete, physiological, useful aspect of labour and the exchange-value or value of a commodity expresses the abstract, social, homogenous aspect of labour. In the first chapter of *Capital*, Marx introduces the key theoretical categories which his scientific critique of political economy has revealed: the commodity-form (use-value and exchange value); the corresponding dual character of labour (concrete and abstract labour); the value-form (relative and equivalent values, resulting in the money-form) and the measure of value (socially necessary labour time). A key, though neglected category

conceived by Marx is ‘abstract labour’ (Bonefeld, 2010). Abstract labour is the “substance of value”; it is “human labour power expended without regard to the form of its expenditure” (Marx, 1976, 128). It is “congealed”, “jelly”, a reduction into “a definite quantity of equal, general, undifferentiated, social, abstract labour” (Marx, 1988, 71); or, “labour pure and simple, abstract labour; absolutely indifferent to its particular specificity.” (Marx, 1973, 296)

The coat is value only to the extent that it is the expression, in the form of a thing, of the human labour-power expended in its production and thus insofar as it is a jelly of abstract human labour – abstract labour, because abstraction is made from the definite useful concrete character of the labour contained in it, human labour, because the labour counts here only as expenditure of human labour-power as such. (Marx, 1978, 136)

In just this single analytical sentence, Marx starts with the abstract (value) to arrive at the concrete (labour), but of course in practice it is not a unidirectional process. As relative and equivalent forms of values in the exchange relation, all commodities (i.e. goods and services, including higher education) represent “human labour in the abstract” serving as the equivalent for the abstract labour expressed by another commodity. While at the same time, the commodity is also the product of “specifically useful concrete labour” such that the “concrete labour therefore becomes the expression of abstract human labour.” (Marx, 1976, 150)

‘Abstract labour’ is not a substance in the sense of a kernel or essence of a thing; it is a theoretical category for articulating a real, active social process that normally goes unspoken, so that we understand capital better.

From being to doing

The danger with starting from the concrete conditions of academic labour, as Postone, Clarke, and Moten and Harney point out, is that if we only remain attentive to the conditions of the labour process and their ideological counterpart, then we are likely to build a politics which responds to the “vulgar” propaganda of ‘neoliberalism’ and its apparatus rather than being grounded in a more fundamental, immanent critique of “the production process off-stage”; what Marx referred to in his chapter on the ‘Buying and Selling of Labour Power’, as the “hidden abode of production”.

Accompanied by Mr. Moneybags and by the possessor of labour-power, we therefore take leave for a time of this noisy sphere, where everything takes place on the surface and in view of all men, and follow them both into the hidden abode of production, on whose threshold there stares us in the face “No admittance except on business.” Here we shall see, not only how capital produces, but how capital is produced. We shall at last force the secret of profit making. (Marx, 1996, 186)

Moten and Harney rearticulate this in the context of higher education:

Away from the public sphere where ideas of higher education, economic expansion and contraction, and citizenship rule, another way of interpreting conditions becomes possible. Those conditions are darker both because they are hidden from the airy world of the public sphere and because they include violent forces like industrialization, central planning, proletarianization, and struggles against capitalist relations. This is to say that another way of understanding this golden age is not so golden, but it may be a way to build a better theory of these working conditions. (Moten and Harney 1999, 25)

Moten and Harney make much of the distinction between individual and social production in their article. This distinction between individual and social, co-operative labour within the academy is at the heart of the problem of capitalist work in that through the division and socialisation of labour, we become alienated from that which we produce and from each other. Social relations have been turned into the relations of private property. Moten and Harney develop a critique of the “dream” of ‘intellectual craftsmanship’ and the ‘Golden Age’ it increasingly represents by discussing craftsmanship as a mode of

production in which the individual brings his wares to the market, “where a student or the public could see directly the value of his work, where the author stood behind his work.” In opposition to this view of the academic, Moten and Harney focus on the *actual* practice of academic labour in capitalist society as a “social world of making and sharing knowledge” where both academics and students co-operate in the “production, circulation, and realisation” of the knowledge commodity (Moten and Harney 1999, 26).

Moten and Harney are critical of the “vulgar” theorisation of academic labour which views the university as a market, either a romanticised one in which “a special and limited brotherhood” of individuals offer their wares, or that of a centrally planned factory which produces and circulates knowledge as a commodity so as to realise exchange value (Tancred-Sherrif 1985). Both market-led perspectives, they argue, reveal an internalisation of a production line, “from that golden age when we cared not to see we were part of a centrally planned knowledge factory, to what we might call the internalization of a cybernetics of production.” (Moten and Harney 1999, 28)

In their related book chapter, “Doing Academic Work” (1998), Harney and Moten reiterate their argument that academics speak critically about the conditions of their work but also set themselves apart from most other workers in that they disavow both the “mutual interdependence and the sociality of her or his product.” Their position is that “most professors in the United States are part of the service sector proletariat in this country.” (Harney and Moten 1998, 155) In short, they suggest that the subjectivity of academics is one that tends to view academic work as a *position*, rather than an *activity* and this leads Harney and Moten to focus not on what it means to *be* an academic worker but what it means to *do* academic labour. This focus on the doing or activity of academic labour is the starting point for understanding academic labour as a particular expression of social production that extends both across and outside the academy.

Harney and Moten’s argument points to a possible reason why most critiques of academic labour reside at the level of the labour process fetish, within the discourse of vulgar theory, and concerned with the minutiae of our conditions rather than abstract determinate forces. It is because of the absence of a collective agency among academics, one that is grounded in the common production process of the university as a social, co-operative endeavour, that we remain preoccupied with our individual position in the ‘marketplace of ideas’ (Marx’s ‘sphere of circulation’), over and above the way we reproduce ourselves through an active dependence on other workers and students.

This emphasis on the social, co-operative character of work in the university/factory is not to say that it somehow defies the capitalist mode of production, but rather that it *exemplifies* it. Recall Marx’s chapter in Capital on ‘Co-operation’, where he states:

When numerous labourers work together side by side, whether in one and the same process, or in different but connected processes, they are said to co-operate, or to work in co-operation... Co-operation ever constitutes the fundamental form of the capitalist mode of production. (Marx 1996, Chapter 13)

Harney and Moten draw from Burawoy’s concept of the “social relations in production” rather than the “social relations of production” to underline this point. What is especially interesting about their argument is that this social labour is not simply constituted by academics, but by both academics and students labouring together. They argue persuasively that academics are continually “repelling” the embodied “threat” that the student’s labour power is ultimately equivalent to their own in the production of knowledge, and this resistance is undertaken by “holding steady” the moments of circulation and realisation “as categories of individuality.” (Harney and Moten 1998, 174) To assert one’s individual identity as an academic is to try to assert one’s dignity. To extend an analysis of academic labour only so far as the conditions of that labour is an understandable outcome of trying to preserve some dignity within an inhumane process of real abstraction.

In this way, academics define students as consumers in the exchange relation. It is, in effect, an act of ‘hypostatizing the concrete’, where academics isolate their work and fetishise it as an intellectual craft, in turn isolating the student as an individual consumer of the academic’s knowledge product. Turning the

student worker back into the student is an attempt at creating “distance and difference” between the two individuals (Harney and Moten 1998, 174), when in fact, in the capitalist university, both academic and student are relative and equivalent forms of the labour power commodity brought together for exchange, each with a concrete and abstract character. Harney and Moten discuss all of this using the example of affirmative action, but I think that what they are implicitly attempting to reveal is that Marx’s theory of ‘value-form’ can be discovered at the heart of the teaching and learning relationship, between academics and students (Marx 1976, 138-162; Marx, 1978). In this relationship of “productive consumption” (Postone 1993, 383), the labour power commodity of both teachers and students exists as “two poles of the expression of value” (Marx 1976, 139), each relative and equivalent to one-another in the moment of exchange. As such, the exchange relation is also a productive relationship, where production and consumption is “immediate” to one-another (Marx 1973, 90). If we conceive teaching and learning as the expenditure of student and teacher labour power in the production of the knowledge commodity, we begin to recognise that the exchange relation between teacher and student, where each consumes the labour power of the other, is a productive relation, too and not simply one where knowledge is being distributed to consumers in a market for higher education. (Neary and Winn, 2009)

Conclusion

Central to Marx’s conception of the overcoming of capitalism is his notion of people’s reappropriation of the socially general knowledge and capacities that had been constituted historically as capital. We have seen that, according to Marx, such knowledge and capacities, as capital, dominate people; such re-appropriation, then, entails overcoming the mode of domination characteristic of capitalist society, which ultimately is grounded in labor’s historically specific role as a socially mediating activity. Thus, at the core of his vision of a postcapitalist society is the historically generated possibility that people might begin to control what they create rather than being controlled by it. (Postone 1993, 373)

There is an understandable tendency among critics of the current crisis in higher education to want to restore the university to what it once was, to defend the university from changing into something else, to *resist* the real subsumption of academic labour under capital. I think this misunderstands the university as a means of production and its historical role.

Throughout the twentieth century, there was a gradual process of turning non-productive academic labour power into productive labour by incorporating it into the process of valorisation. (Cleaver 2006; Harvie 2006; Neary 2012; Winn 2013) It should be no surprise that the experiment of neoliberalism has led to the marketisation of higher education, nor that efforts to resist this have been largely impotent. We should recognise that attempts to resist the valorisation of higher education so as to restore an earlier configuration – when the university was not widely perceived as an engine for growth – are misguided.

When critically approaching the university as a means of production for the valorisation of capital, an emancipatory project must first focus on re-appropriating the means of knowledge production through efforts to control the substance of value: the labour process. This, I think, requires new models of democratic higher education organised directly through the co-operation of academic and student labour; models of practice which aim to re-appropriate the ‘general intellect’ (Marx 1973, 706) and which recognise “the existence of a growing gap between the sort of labour people continue to perform in a society mediated by labor and the sort of labor they could perform, were it not for this ‘necessity’ of capitalism.” (Postone 1993, 370) This effort must be grounded in a thoroughgoing critique of the political economy of higher education that starts from its most simple, immanent categories. It would recognise and develop the significant productive capacity of our existing historical conditions in a way whereby human knowledge or “mass intellectuality” (Dyer-Witheford 1999, 488) is seen as the emancipatory project rather than a resource for valorisation.

In his article, *History and Helplessness, Mass Mobilization and Contemporary Forms of Anticapitalism*, Moishe Postone (2006) discusses the notion of resistance in light of the historical development of

capitalism. He regards the notion of ‘resistance’ as expressing “a deeply dualistic worldview that tends to reify both the system of domination and the idea of agency.” (Postone 2006, 108) For Postone, ‘resistance’ is “an undialectical category that does not grasp its own conditions of possibility.” (2006, 108) His argument implies that the agency of academic labour should not be measured by the extent that we are able to resist or abolish the system of domination, but instead an immanent, dialectical approach would recognise that a post-capitalist university would be developed out of the conditions of possibility that the capitalist university has produced. In other words, an ‘anti-capitalist’ approach misses both the objective of resistance and its object. What is required is the *overcoming* of the capitalist modes of valorisation. (Postone 2012, 30)

Postone’s analysis of capitalism, based on his ‘re-reading’ of Marx, is useful to us for a number of reasons. He shows that capital is a historical mode of production, which structures all social life; it is dynamic and heteronomous. As the ‘logic’ of all social life, capital is both determinate and appears as a historical necessity. As such, capital renders within and among us a feeling of powerlessness, and contingency is limited to processes of reform or amelioration within the constraints imposed by capital. The achievements of, for example, social democracy, suggest to us a degree of historical indeterminacy and the possibility of freedom, yet they consistently occur within the constraints imposed by capital. For Postone, actual historical indeterminacy (i.e. freedom) can only be realised in a post-capitalist social form of life. An immanent, dialectical critique of capital as a form of social relations (not a material thing as conventionally understood), reveals that what appears as an abstract, mysterious, governing totality, is essentially contradictory and it is the internal tensions of its ‘logic’, which offer the historical basis for overcoming capitalism. The possibility of overcoming capitalism lies within the contradictions of capitalism itself i.e. within the commodity form. Anti-capitalist efforts typically fetishise the abstract logic of capital in an effort to perceive something to oppose e.g. American hegemony, the State, Bankers. Postone considers this turn from the abstract to the concrete as “an expression of a deep and fundamental helplessness, conceptually as well as politically.” (Postone 2006, 102)

Taking this view, our understanding of the mode of knowledge production in higher education and its conceived role and purpose in public life over the last century must start from a categorical understanding of capitalism as the historical mode of production that reproduces the university. This critical, intellectual effort must be combined with practical efforts to gain control of the means of knowledge production so as to question, through praxis, the existing social form of wealth that is mediating our lives on a catastrophic trajectory. By doing so, the character and purpose of academic labour would necessarily change and our existing conditions of work rendered obsolete. The relationship between teacher and student might then be one of direct recognition (i.e. abundance), rather than mediated by the equivalence of value (i.e. scarcity). Through this new pedagogy of excess (Neary and Hagyard 2010), ‘academic labour’ as we currently understand and experience it would be abolished and its conditions overcome; giving rise to new institutional forms for the satisfaction of human needs that have yet to be designed.

REFERENCES

- Barcan, Ruth (2013) *Academic Life and Labour in the New University*, Ashgate Publishing.
- Ball, Stephen (2003) The teacher’s soul and the terrors of performativity, *Journal of Education Policy*, 18: 2, 215-228
- Bérubé, Michael (2013) ‘Among the majority’. *Modern Language Association*. ‘From the President’, retrieved on 2nd June 2014 from <http://www.mla.org/blog?topic=146>
- Bonefeld (2010) Abstract Labour. Against its nature and on its time. *Capital and Class*, 34, 257.
- Braverman (1998) *Labor and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century*, Monthly Review Press.
- Brown, Roger and Carasso, Helen (2013) *Everything for Sale? The Marketisation of UK Higher Education*. Routledge.

- Bryson, Colin (2004) What about the workers? The Expansion of higher education and the transformation of academic work. *Industrial Relations Journal* 35: 1, 38-57
- Caffenzis, G. (2008). From the *Grundrisse* to *Capital* and beyond: Then and now, *Workplace*, 15, 59-74
- Clarke (1991) *Marx, Marginalism and Modern Sociology. From Adam Smith to Max Weber*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Clarke, Simon (2004) The Neoliberal Theory of Society. In Saad-Filho, Alfredo and Johnston, Deborah (Eds.) *Neoliberalism. A Critical Reader*. Pluto Press.
- Cleaver, Harry (2006) *On Schoolwork and the struggle against it*. Retrieved on 2nd June from <http://la.utexas.edu/users/hcleaver/OnSchoolwork200606.pdf>
- Cross, John G. and Goldenberg, Edie N. (2009) *Off-Track Profs: Nontenured teachers in Higher Education*, MIT Press.
- DeAngelis & Harvie (2009) 'Cognitive Capitalism' and the Rat-Race: How Capital Measures Immaterial Labour in British Universities.
- Dyer-Witthford (1999) *Cyber-Marx: Cycles and Circuits of Struggle in High-Technology Capitalism*, University of Illinois Press.
- Dyer-Witthford, Nick (2005) Cognitivism Capitalism and the Contested Campus, *European Journal of Higher Arts Education*, 2: 71-93.
- Fitzgerald, Tanya and White, Julie and Gunter, Helen (2012) *Hard Labour? Academic Work and the Changing Landscape of Higher Education*. Emerald Books.
- Fuchs, Christian (2014) *Digital Labour and Karl Marx*, Routledge.
- Gill, R (2009) Breaking the silence: The hidden injuries of neo-liberal academia in Flood, R. & Gill, R. (Eds.) *Secrecy and Silence in the Research Process: Feminist Reflections*, Routledge.
- Guardian (2014) 'Dark thoughts: why mental illness is on the rise in academia'. Retrieved 2nd June 2014 from <http://www.theguardian.com/higher-education-network/2014/mar/06/mental-health-academics-growing-problem-pressure-university>
- Gulli, Bruno (2009). Knowledge Production and the Superexploitation of Contingent Academic Labor. *Workplace*, 16, 1-30.
- Hall, Richard (2013) Educational technology and the enclosure of academic labour inside public higher education, *Journal for Critical Education Policy Studies*, 11: 3, 52-82.
- Harney, Stefano and Moten, Frederick (1998) Doing Academic Work, In: Martin, Randy (1998) *Chalk Lines. The Politics of Work in the Managed University*, 154-180, Duke University Press.
- Harvie, David (2006) Value production and struggle in the classroom: Teachers within, against and beyond capital, *Capital and Class*, 30: 1, 1-32.
- Harvie, David and De Angelis, Massimo (2009) 'Cognitive Capitalism' and the Rat-Race: How Capital Measures Immaterial Labour in British Universities. *Historical Materialism*, 17, 3-30.
- Haug, Wolfgang Fritz (2009) Immaterial Labour, *Historical Materialism* 17: 4, 177-185.
- Herman, Deborah M. and Schmid, Julie M. (2003) *Cogs in the Classroom Factory. The Changing Identity of Academic Labour*, Praeger Publishers.
- Ilyenkov, E. V. (1982) *The Dialectics of the Abstract and the Concrete in Marx's Capital*, Progress Publishers.
- Jappe, Anselm (2013) Sohn-Rethel and the Origin of 'Real Abstraction': A Critique of Production or a Critique of Circulation?, *Historical Materialism*, 21: 1, 3-14

- Johnson, Benjamin, Kavanagh, Patrick, and Mattson, Kevin (2003) *Steal This University. The Rise of the Corporate University and the Academic Labour Movement*. Routledge.
- Kinman, Gail and Wray, Siobhan (2013) *Higher stress. A Survey of stress and well-being among staff in higher education*. UCU. Retrieved 2nd June 2014 from http://www.ucu.org.uk/media/pdf/4/5/HE_stress_report_July_2013.pdf
- Krause, Monika; Nolan, Mary; Palm, Michael and Ross, Andrew (2008) *The University Against Itself: The NYU Strike and the Future of the Academic Workplace*. Temple University Press.
- Martin, Randy (1998) *Chalk Lines. The Politics of Work in the Managed University*, Duke University Press.
- Mattson, Kevin (2000) The Academic Labor Movement: Understanding Its Origin and Current Challenges. *Social Policy*, 30: 4, 4-10.
- Marx, Karl (1973) *Grundrisse*, Penguin Classics.
- Marx, Karl and Engels, Frederick (1975) *The German Ideology*, Marx and Engels Collected Works Vol. 5, Lawrence and Wishart Ltd.
- Marx, Karl (1976) *Capital Volume 1*, Penguin Classics.
- Marx, Karl (1978) The Value-Form, *Capital and Class*, 4: 130-150.
- Marx, Karl and Engels, Frederick (1987) *1864-68, Letters*, Marx and Engels Collected Works Volume 42. Lawrence and Wishart Ltd.
- Marx, Karl (1988) *Economic Works, 1861-1863*, Marx and Engels Collected Works, Vol. 30. Lawrence and Wishart Ltd.
- Marx, Karl (1991) *Capital Volume 3*, Penguin Classics.
- Marx, Karl (1996) *Capital Volume 1*, Marx and Engels Collected Works, Vol. 35. Lawrence and Wishart Ltd.
- Molesworth, Mike and Scullion, Richard and Nixon, Elizabeth (2010) *The Marketisation of Higher Education and the Student as Consumer*. Routledge.
- Moten, Fred and Harney, Stefano (1999) The academic speed-up. *Workplace*, 4, 23-28.
- Neary Michael and Dinerstein, Ana C. (2002) *The Labour Debate: An Investigation into the Theory and Reality of Capitalist Work*, Ashgate Publishing Company.
- Neary, Mike and Winn, Joss (2009) *The student as producer: reinventing the student experience in higher education*. In: *The future of higher education: policy, pedagogy and the student experience*, Continuum.
- Neary, Mike and Hagyard, Andy (2010) Pedagogy of Excess: An Alternative Political Economy of Student Life, In Molesworth, Mike, Scullion, Richard and Nixon, Elizabeth (Eds.) *The Marketisation of Higher Education and the Student as Consumer*, Routledge.
- Neary, Mike (2012) Beyond Teaching in Public: The University as Form of Social Knowing, In Neary, Michael, Stevenson, Howard and Bell, Les (Eds.) *Towards Teaching in Public. Reshaping the Modern University*, Continuum.
- Nelson, Cary (1997) *Will Teach For Food. Academic Labor in Crisis*, University of Minnesota Press.
- Ogbonna, Emmanuel and Harris, Lloyd C. (2004) Work Intensification and Emotional Labour among UK University Lecturers: An Exploratory Study, *Organization Studies* 25: 1185.
- Pekkola, E. (2013). Academic Work Revised: From Dichotomies to a Typology, *Workplace*, 22, 1-12.
- Peters and Bulut (2011) *Cognitive Capitalism, Education, and Digital Labor*, Peter Lang Publishing.

- Postone, Moishe (1980) Anti-Semitism and National Socialism: Notes on the German Reaction to "Holocaust", *New German Critique*, 19: 1, 97-115.
- Postone, Moishe (1993) *Time, Labour and Social Domination*, Cambridge.
- Postone, Moishe (2005) Interview with Moishe Postone by Salih Selcuk, *Krisis*. Retrieved on 2nd June 2014 from <http://www.krisis.org/2005/critical-theory-of-capitalism-today>
- Postone, Moishe (2006) History and Helplessness: Mass Mobilization and Contemporary Forms of Anticapitalism, *Public Culture*, 18: 1, 93-110.
- Postone, Moishe (2012) Exigency of Time: A Conversation with Harry Harootunian and Moishe Postone, *Concentric: Literary and Cultural Studies* 38: 2, 7-43.
- Rhoades, Gary (1998) *Managed Professionals: Unionized Faculty and Restructuring Academic Labour*, State University of New York Press.
- Rikowski, Glenn (2002) Fuel for the Living Fire: Labour Power! In Neary and Dinerstein (Eds.), *The Labour Debate: An Investigation into the Theory and Reality of Capitalist Work*, Ashgate Publishing Company.
- Rosdolsky, Roman (1977) *The Making of Marx's 'Capital'*, Pluto Press.
- Scholz (2013) *Digital Labour: The Internet as Playground and Factory*, Routledge.
- Sennett, Richard (1999) *The Corrosion of Character: The Personal Consequences of Work in the New Capitalism*, W. W. Norton and company.
- Shattock, Michael (2012) *Making Policy in British Higher Education: 1945-2011* Open University Press.
- Slaughter Leslie and Leslie, Larry L. (1999) *Academic Capitalism: Politics, Policies and the Entrepreneurial University*, John Hopkins University Press.
- Smyth, John (1995) *Academic Work. The changing labour process in higher education*. SRHE and Open University Press.
- Sohn-Rethel (1978) *Intellectual and Manual Labour*, Humanities Press.
- Tancred-Sherrif, Peta (1985) Craft, hierarchy and bureaucracy: modes of control of the academic labour process, *The Canadian Journal of Sociology*, 10: 4, 369-390.
- Tight, Malcolm (2000) *Academic Work and Life: What it is to be an academic, and how this is changing*. JAI Elsevier Science. London.
- UCU (2013) 'Over half of universities and colleges use lecturers on zero hours contracts'. News 5th September. Retrieved on June 2nd 2014 from <http://www.ucu.org.uk/6749>
- Wexler, Steven (2008) (I'm)Material labor in the digital age. *Workplace*, 15, 1-11.
- Whitchurch, Celia and Gordon, George (2010) *Academic and Professional Identities in Higher Education: The Challenges of a Diversifying Workforce*. Routledge.
- Willmott, Hugh (1995) Managing the Academics: Commodification and Control in the Development of University Education in the UK. *Human Relations*, 48: 9, 993-1027.
- Wilson, Tom (1991) The proletarianisation of academic labour, *Industrial Relations Journal*, 22: 4, 250-262.
- Winn, Joss (2013) Hacking in the university: Contesting the valorisation of academic labour, *Triple C: Communication, Capitalism and Critique*, 11: 2, 486-503.

AFFILIATIONS

Joss Winn is a Senior Lecturer in the School of Education at the University of Lincoln. His research extends broadly to a critique of the political economy of higher education. As such, his writing and teaching is now focused on the history and political economy of science and technology in higher education, its affordances for and impact on academic labour, and the way by which academics can control the means of knowledge production through co-operative and ultimately post-capitalist forms of work and democracy.