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ANTONIA DARDER & TOM G. GRIFFITHS

**LABOUR IN THE ACADEMIC BORDERLANDS:
UNVEILING THE TYRANNY OF NEOLIBERAL POLICIES**

Abstract: The article examines the current conditions of labour within the neoliberal university, particularly with respect to the labour of borderland academics. Borderland is used in this instance to refer to the political space embodied by radical intellectuals across disciplines engaged in examining questions of class, race, gender and other social formations of inequality, through materialist perspectives. This work sets out an appeal for an emancipatory pedagogy and praxis by politically engaged academics, based on well-established foundations of revolutionary pedagogy, including Paulo Freire’s notion of social consciousness as an imperative of educational practice in higher education. Toward this end, a concrete use value of academic labour is discussed, promoting such commitments in our practice with students and colleagues to support possibilities for the emancipatory reshaping of academic work, institutions, and society.

In all forms of society there is one specific kind of production which predominates over the rest, whose relations thus assign rank and influence to the others. It is a general illumination which bathes all the other colours and modifies their particularity. It is a particular ether which determines the specific gravity of every being which has materialized within it.
—Karl Marx (1972)

The *specific kind of production* that historically has shaped academic labour has always functioned in the interest of capitalism, despite contradictory ideals that have informed past discourses of academic freedom and liberal sensibilities. Today, however, the overriding imperatives of neoliberalism within universities have not only more fully disfigured academic labour, but have in its wake eroded any semblance of liberal ideals, conveniently relegating social welfare concerns to the cultural wasteland of university life. Hence this phenomenon is not only an ideological one but one that has also transpired in clear and well-documented ways: intensified workloads, casualization (or adjunct labour), competition for internal and external resources, and the privileging of Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM), in sync with metrics based Key Performance Indicators (KPIs), tenure requirements, and performance management. Despite some recent (e.g. Venezuela, Bolivia) and brief (e.g. Greece) breaks with the neoliberal project, these and associated trends within universities continue as part of a “particular ether” or broad consensus amongst educational pundits, policy makers, and university administrators on how the 21st century university ought to function, produce knowledge, and participate in the formation of future intellectuals. In this paper we focus on the intensified alienation of academic work under these conditions, as

a general phenomenon and one that is intensified in particular ways for borderland academics (Darder, 2012).

The term ‘borderland academic’ is used throughout to refer to those within the neoliberal university who consciously labour to enact revolutionary pedagogical principles that seek to raise students’ critical consciousness of current conditions, crises, and the need for alternatives (Darder, 2015; Freire, 2012; Allman 2010; McLaren 2010). Borderland is used here metaphorically to signal that political space within the neoliberal university where radical intellectuals across disciplines engage questions of class, race, gender and other social and material formations of inequality (Giroux, 2008). We conclude by setting out an appeal for an emancipatory pedagogy and praxis by politically engaged academics, based on principles linked to a revolutionary critical pedagogy (Allman, 2010; McLaren, 2010; Darder, Baltodano, & Torres, 2008; Darder 2012b), including Freirean approaches to the consciousness raising potential of education (Darder, 2015; Freire, 2012). Insisting on the concrete use value of academic labour and promoting such commitments in our practice with students and colleagues can support possibilities for the emancipatory reshaping of academic work, institutions, and society.

One of the central features of contemporary capitalism as a global system and intensified under the neoliberal offensive and underpinning these sorts of policy orthodoxies is the reduced capacity of the state to provide core public services. This phenomenon can be seen just about everywhere, to varying degrees, based on particular histories, including constructed social, cultural and political traditions, and nation-state locations within global production chains embedded in the capitalist world-economy. In broad terms, this involves state revenues struggling to keep up with costs of publicly funded services due to reduced tax revenues from capital, and in many cases political pressures to lower income tax rates under the neoliberal logic of individuals choosing and purchasing services rather than relying on public provisions (Wallerstein, 2013). This pressure on public expenditure is made worse by capital’s demands for increased public spending on projects that subsidise its activity and profits. Immanuel Wallerstein (2011, 2013) elaborates this tension as one of several ‘secular tendencies’ of the capitalist world-economy approaching asymptotes or absolute limits, contributing to systemic pressures on capitalism’s intrinsic requirement of the endless accumulation of capital.

Under conditions of seemingly permanent budget crises of national governments, impelled and reinforced by market-inspired ‘solutions’ to problems that the neoliberal offensive to restore profits has created, the provision of public education is also flung into permanent crisis. Neoliberal educational ‘solutions’, thus, include the application of market principles to the provision of education, which in policy terms favour ostensibly diverse and competing, public and private, and increasingly specialised educational providers. The firmly established market premise put forward is that such diversity and competition will lead to more efficient and higher quality universities. Berman et al. (2003) described this underlying principle of neoliberalism in terms of the “the identification of commodity forms of education, learning that can be bought and sold,” and where “Greater competition among educational purveyors is meant to enhance consumer ‘sovereignty,’ increase choice in school placement, minimize government influence in educational provision, force-feed efficiencies, and maximise market principles” (284).

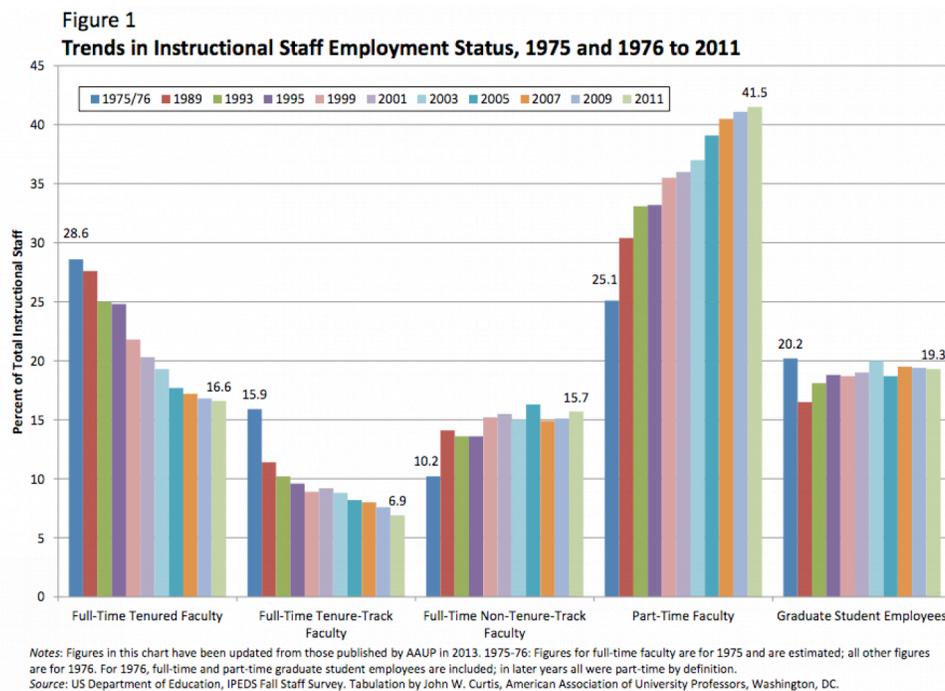
The Casualisation of Labour

The worker becomes all the poorer the more wealth he produces, the more his production increases in power and size. The worker becomes an ever cheaper commodity the more commodities he creates. —Karl Marx (1844)

The funding crisis of the modern nation-state manifests itself in multiple ways, based on the general principle of reducing public expenditures on so called ‘non-essential’ (and frequently on essential) social services like university education. While there may be general popular support for the public provision of education, advocates of cuts to the university sector cite individual benefits from university qualifications, in

the form of higher wages, to argue that individual users should meet more, or all, of the cost of their degree. One of the most pervasive manifestations of the neoliberal university is the ensuing alteration of the academic labour force as university management and administrators seek to balance budgets or, in many cases, maintain surpluses for future capital works expenditure. These changes prioritise precarious, short-term contracted and part-time /casual employment. Universities have long employed a mix of permanent, tenured and tenure-track academics, and contracted, part-time and casual labour, particularly using adjunct and casualised labour to cover unmet teaching needs. The shifting emphasis in favour of relatively cheaper and more ‘flexible’ and precarious casual employment has intensified to the point that Universities have been fundamentally transformed.

For example, in the case of Australia, half of all academic staff in universities were recently reported to be employed on a casual basis, double the rate for the entire Australian labour force (May, Peetz, & Strachan, 2013). The National Tertiary Education Union in Australia has added, using Federal Government figures, that the percentage of casual staff in Australian Universities has risen to 86.5% of “teaching only staff”.¹ In the U. S., according to Department of Education data, trends in university instructional employment show a steady decline in tenured full-time faculty over the last 40 years, while part-time (or casual) faculty employment rose from approximately 25% in 1975 to almost 42% in 2011 (see Figure 1).



Source: DePillis, L. (2015). “Adjunct professors get poverty-level wages: Should their pay quintuple?” in *The Washington Post*.

The data also shows that part-time instructional faculty comprise now over 60% of the university teaching population. Conditions created by academic underemployment have become so difficult that, according to an analysis of recent census data by the University of California–Berkeley's Center for Labour Research and Education, 25% of part-time faculty and their families now receive some form of public assistance (See Figure 2). In February 2015, adjunct labour conditions prompted the first-ever National Adjunct Awareness and

¹ See: https://www.nteu.org.au/policy/workforce_issues/insecure_work

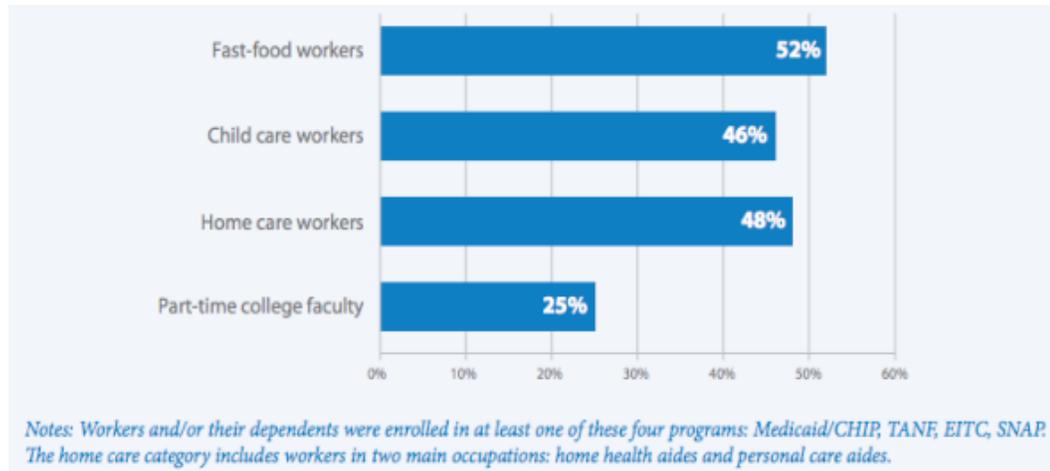


Figure 2. Low-Wage Occupations and Public Assistance Rates. Source: UC–Berkeley's Center for Labour Research and Education

Walkout Day.² Campaigns against the casualisation of academics and zero-hours contracts have also sparked academic labour dissent in the United Kingdom. One such protest, for example, centered on the move by Warwick University to use Teach Higher to outsource hourly paid academic staff. This move would have eliminated the university's official status as employer and, therefore, relieved them of responsibility to these university workers. Thus, “marked by radically reduced wages, frequent lack of access to benefits, limited access to professional support and opportunities for advancement, and institutional disrespect” (Maisto & Street, 2011), the casualization of labour constitutes one of the most alienating conditions of the neoliberal university.

These developments have been well documented, but their trajectory and effects are so significant that they need to be raised and contested at every opportunity. Perhaps most importantly, making academic labour primarily casualised, and so fundamentally insecure and precarious, has systemic effects on the content and nature of work undertaken by academics. As Schwable (2015) observed in a recent essay, the contingent nature of work, and the resultant competition for permanent/tenure-track positions, or even for slightly less precarious short-term contracts, acts as a conservatizing political force on academics' research and writing. Thus the majority of the academic labour force face relatively easy dismissal via the non-renewal of contracted work, or withdrawal of even less certain opportunities for casual work. Those on the tenure-track are directly and indirectly disciplined to focus their attention and energy predominantly on a narrow and politically mainstream research and writing trajectory. This includes getting published in ‘high-quality’/‘high-status’ academic journals, lifting their public profile within established academic circles, and securing research grants (Darder, 2012), all of which are said to lift the reputation/status of their employing institution, within international ranking regimes.

All of this also points to the manner in which the university has become more openly an agent of social and economic stratification, in the interest of the wealthy and powerful. Of this, Del Gandio (2010) posited the following example:

...the percentage of high school graduates attending college rose from 42 percent in 1970 to 70 percent in 2009. The socioeconomic worth of a college degree also increased during this time period. In 1980, the weekly salary of college graduates was 40 percent higher than that of high school graduates. By 1997, that gap had risen to 73 percent. These statistics could be interpreted as a progressive shift

² See more at: <http://www.labournotes.org/blogs/2015/03/adjuncts-hundreds-campus-rally-simultaneously#sthash.VGXrIfK6.dpuf>

toward a more educated and prosperous society. But economic inequality actually increased over these years. In 1979, the top 1 percent of Americans owned 20.5 percent of the nation's wealth, while the bottom 99 percent owned 79.5 percent. By 2007, the top 1 percent increased its share to 34.6 percent, while the bottom 99 percent declined to 65.4 percent. In 1980, the pay ratio between the average American CEO and average American worker was 40 to 1. As of 2007, the ratio was 364 to 1.

What is made highly apparent from these numbers is the manner in which the university promotes the social mobility of the few at the expense of the many, widening social and economic stratification in all spheres. In essence, the more educated the population, the more unequal that material conditions become for the average worker. It is precisely the neoliberal university's unabated focus on, and warped allegiance to, private interests that stand in the way of more progressive efforts to democratize the economy and promote greater political participation within the larger society. The consequence, of course, is an intensification of those social and material conditions within the university that breed alienation.

Alienation in the Neoliberal University

The alienation of the worker in his product means not only that his labour becomes an object, an external existence, but that it exists outside him, independently, as something alien to him, and that it becomes a power on its own confronting him. It means that the life which he has conferred on the object confronts him as something hostile and alien. —Karl Marx (1844)

It is within the generalised context described above that we need to examine, and understand, the nature and alienation of academic labour today, with particular emphasis on the labour of borderland academics (Darder, 2012). This examination rests on the central contradictions of social life under capitalism—namely the multifaceted alienation of people's labour, a phenomenon that has clearly intensified for academics with the proliferation of neoliberal university relations. In broad terms, we can understand the alienation of academics along classical Marxist categories. Marx (1927) identified four types of alienation that affect workers who labour under a capitalist system of production. Briefly, the alienation of workers occurs as they become 1) alienated from one another; 2) alienated from the products of their labor; 3) alienated from the act of labor; and 4) alienated from humanity or what Marx called our *species-being*.

Within the context of the neoliberal university, these forms of alienation arise in a variety of ways. For example, in the process of casualization, university workers are more likely than not to be provided specific syllabi, texts, and materials they are expected to use in their classrooms. This standardization of university curricula relies less and less on the ability of professors to engage students in grounded and critical ways. Similarly, this instrumentalization or marketization of knowledge functions as a means to alienate both instructors and students from their classroom labour—namely that of teaching and learning together. Casualised (or adjunct) university workers, in particular, are rendered mere technicians, who have little influence or control over the curriculum. As a consequence, these pedagogical forms, which alienate university workers from both the product of their labour and from the act of labour, function to conserve what Freire (1971) termed “banking education.”

Conditions of alienation are also deeply entrenched in the university labour of those who supposedly enjoy the protection of tenure and academic freedom. This is evidenced within the neoliberal university through sundry efforts to discipline both faculty labour and their knowledge construction—just as students too are disciplined in the process. As research grants and fellowships have become more tightly bound to neoliberal imperatives of the marketplace, access to research funding is often tied to accountability approaches and instrumental directions in knowledge construction. In concert with the hyperbolic rhetoric of “evidence-based” research, the labour of critical researchers in the academic borderlands has been increasingly marginalized, as classes have been cut, programs rendered obsolete, humanities departments closed, and

tenured positions eliminated when university workers retire or exit the system. Not surprisingly, these conditions have led to unprecedented job competition for faculty positions, as well as cutthroat politics in a contest for economic resources. All in all, this has led to a work environment that, overtly and covertly, promotes not only the alienation of university workers from the product of their labour, but also from one another. Moreover, such conditions ultimately result in what Marx & Engels (1978) termed *estranged labour*, in that university workers can too easily become alienated from our humanity and, thus, our collective potential to transform the world.

One of the ways that alienation in the university manifests is directly tied to the *erosion of community*. For example, Maisto and Street (2011) assert,

Clearly, the contingent faculty crisis is simply the most obvious manifestation of the steady erosion of community in higher education. The faculty (in part, through its own doing) has moved, or been pushed, away from its role as a full partner in higher education to a literally “adjunct” position—peripheral, disempowered—in terms of either numbers or function. Tenure-stream faculty, who have authority over the curriculum and at least a nominal role in governance, are now too small in number or too cowed to initiate or resist change effectively, while faculty off the tenure track, though the majority in number, must risk their livelihoods to do so.³

Under neoliberal policy settings, rafts of structural and procedural changes have placed the exchange value of academic work as the primary character of our labour. As such, academic labour has become valuable only in terms of its activity in the marketplace, as Deresiewicz (2015) notes in *The Neoliberal Arts: How College Sold its Soul to the Market*.

Helen Raduntz (2007) has similarly described how in this focus on the exchange value of our work, even what formerly might have, in the liberal sense, been considered “inalienable, organic relationships surrounding productive activity [have] become alienated and converted into discrete ‘things’ related only incidentally” (239). In contexts of job insecurity, casualization, and the intensified use of quantifiable performance-based systems, the so-called ‘outputs’ of academic labour – student completions/graduations, publications, grant applications and income – are all considered in terms of their exchange value. Indeed, management approaches to academic work increasingly see these ‘outputs’ primarily in terms of the quantifiable income they bring to the institution, and so their capacity to meet, or at least significantly offset, the financial cost of their labour to the university. This is an intensified alienation, whereby such neoliberal priorities promote a dehumanizing sort of *economic Darwinism* (Giroux, 2007).

As noted earlier, there is little question that higher education is deeply mired in an alienating culture of economic rule, shrouded by conservative rhetoric that seeks to delimit emancipatory struggles within the university and the larger society. Wendy Brown (2006) has argued that the American nightmare today constitutes an indefensible alliance of neoliberalism, conservatism, and the undoing of democratic life. She rightly asserts that neoliberalism and neoconservatism are two distinct and contradictory political rationalities that have converged in their devaluation of political liberty, equality, substantive citizenship, and the rule of law. This has resulted in market driven governance and institutional policies on one hand; and the valorisation of state power for moralistic ends, on the other. This convergence has resulted in undemocratic institutional forms that, despite social justice or diversity claims, are indifferent to veracity and accountability or to political freedom and equality, defying any semblance of liberal ideals within the university. So much so, that Brown (2015) has warned, “neoliberal reason...is converting the distinctly political character, meaning, and operation of democracy’s constituent elements into *economic ones*. Liberal democratic institutions, practices and habits may not survive this conversion. Radical democratic dreams may not either (17).”

³ See: <https://www.aacu.org/publications-research/periodicals/confronting-contingency-faculty-equity-and-goals-academic>

The reconstruction of academic labour in terms of its exchange value compounds academics' alienation from the products of their own labour and its use value. David Harvey (2014) has clearly articulated how the shift from public to private provision of services, characteristic of neoliberal policy settings, involves a shift in emphasis from the use value of public services to their actual and potential exchange value, both for private providers and, perversely, for the public purchasing of these services as commodities. Rather than movement toward building a democratizing arena for academic freedom, independent thought, and genuine civic participation, the university today, more than ever, exists as an extension of market activity and, thus, an accomplice of corporate profit.

The average college campus is ground zero for licensing agreements; construction contracts; outsourcing of bookstores, vendors, concessions and food, laundry, traveling and printing services; corporate sponsoring of buildings, events, speakers and campus programs; patenting of intellectual property rights; and corporate funding, ownership and direct influencing of research" (Del Gandio, 2010).

This intense process of corporatization is heightened in contemporary university education, whereby students are commonly required to effectively purchase educational credentials, whether through up-front fees or deferred loan schemes, that can be exchanged later for enhanced employment and income earning potentials. The dominant logic at work here reduces the purpose and value of education to the measurable return to individual credential holders, as a justification for reducing public investments in and provision of education. This phenomenon pushes us further from the use value of our labour, in its multiple social forms, entrenching both alienated relations of abstract labour and political isolation. Academic labour is, thus, similarly alienated from the wider university processes, decision-making, and indeed from the very purpose of university education.

Human Capital and the Use Value of Academic Labour

[The framework of human capital theory] provides, in short, a good ideology for the defense of the status quo. But it is a poor science for understanding either the workings of the capitalist economy or the way towards an economic order more conducive to human happiness. —Samuel Bowles & Herbert Gintis (1975)

Globally, the primary purpose of university education is defined in economic terms as an investment in human capital with a measurable future return for both the individual and the nation. This human capital logic is not new (see for example Griffiths, 2013a, Fagerlind & Saha, 1983). From the 1930s to the 1970s, a liberal neoclassical economics discourse predominated human capital discussions. This discourse, more in line with Keynesian economics, was built on recognition of the inequalities inherent in capitalism and the need for corrective government interventions to address the problem. However, since the 1980s, neoliberal assumptions have fiercely driven the human capital discourse. In the process, neoliberal policies and practices have placed emphasis on market solutions for all social problems, ignoring the deepening inequalities that persist in their wake. The relentless conceptualisation of all education in these terms, at all times, reinforced by international agencies like the World Bank's positing of education for poverty reduction (see for example Klees, Samoff, & Stromquist, 2012), has come to define and fundamentally reconstruct the contemporary university.

In the process, neoliberalised human capital theory has not only tightly bound together education and capitalism, but it has effectively dismantled any semblance of responsibility for the public good. Instead, educational debates almost inevitably circle back to individual responsibility, despite conditions of increasing inequality. Holborow (2012) describes human capital, as "a complex ideological construct which, in the educational arena, gives voice to two specific interests of capital: the provision of a workforce ever more narrowly suited to the current needs of employers and the intensification of competition between individuals in the labour market" (p. 93). Moreover, the insertion of neoliberal human capital theory in

university discourses has contributed to an increasing subordination of labour to capital. This has included the erosion of faculty control of their labour and their personal lives. First, faculty governance and control of their labour has dramatically declined in the last two decades, given the restructuring of the academic workforce (as discussed earlier). Second, the personal space and time of faculty has been considerably eroded by institutional practices that normalize 24/7 access to academic workers. This is manifest, for example, in the mandatory requirement that academics have active institutional email accounts that are shared liberally with administrators, co-workers, students, and the general public visiting university webpages. As in other industries, this is accompanied by unspoken expectations that university faculty be at work or on-call around the clock, seven days a week, to respond to the needs of students or the institution.

The human capital discourse transforms university workers into commodities, whose value is to be used or exchanged in the labour market or the marketplace of ideas. In the process, it “encapsulates this binding together of knowledge and expertise with their function and value in the economy. Knowledge is reclassified as an economic category and human endeavour linked to productivity: the greater its outcomes, the greater its value. Where workers become human capital they are reduced to the level of commodity to be sold to a willing buyer” (Holborow, 2012, 101). This unrelenting process of human commodification intensifies the process of alienation by undermining the use value of academic labour in diminishing questions tied to the fulfilment of human needs.

There is, of course, a wide range of use value for academic labour and, as is characteristic of capitalism, there is a perverse tendency for the exchange value that university education labour produces to increasingly dominate the use value aspect of our labour. Even fully public universities’ reliance on student numbers, timely completions, government funding, and combinations of government and industry funds for research, experience this phenomenon. Academic labour is accounted for against income attached to both students and the research outputs of academics. The partial or full privatisation of university education exacerbates this tendency to commodify university education credentials, compounding the already present double-bind of students being disciplined and conditioned to view the value of their university experience solely in terms of a credential facilitating their individual, upward social and economic mobility. In this sense, Marx’s (1972) reflection that “labour in reality has here become the means of creating wealth in general, and has ceased to be organically linked with particular individuals in any specific form” succinctly characterises contemporary academic labour. Building on the now long and institutionalised logic of human capital theory, the university adds value to units of human capital through the labour power of its academics. This value is to be realised as future wages and conditions, and future surplus value for capital.

The alienation of academics from our own selves and from our colleagues often stems, as posited above, from the neoliberal emphasis on the exchange value of our work. This manifests in a multitude of ways, some of which have been well documented by Marxist scholars of education over the last two decades. For example, the dominant regimes of KPIs (Key Performance Indicators) measuring individual academics’ performance include student evaluations of our teaching performance, measures of the quantity (and dubious measures of the quality) of publication outputs, and extend to crude measures and targets of average annual funding to be brought to the university by individuals. Canaan (2010) has explored one of the striking consequences of these regimes, the resulting internalisation, even embodiment, of these limiting markers of academic work and success by academics themselves. These systems encourage a shift in attention to increasing measurable outputs, as defined by the institution, over the underlying intellectual projects, including politically engaged transformative projects and commitments to advancing knowledge and its use. In some cases, this sees individuals labouring in programs, courses, and research projects that are far from their primary interest, reducing the potentially rich labour of even liberal intellectual curiosity and enquiry, as championed by scholars like Nussbaum (2012), to a technical process of maximising the efficient production of outputs.

The tyranny of student evaluations and their impact on academics has also been the subject of recent attention (e.g. Lorenz, 2012; Hil, 2015). At one level, this reduces assessments of teaching quality to a vulgar sort of Roman colosseum inspired thumbs up or down evaluation. At Griffiths’ current workplace, for example, students are urged toward such binaries via online and physical posters ostensibly aimed at

increasing student response rates, urging students to: ‘Love It? Hate It? Rate It. The Student Feedback on Programs Survey Gives You A Voice ... But Only If You Take The Time To Complete It’. Under regimes like this, academics are called to account for low student ratings, whether against an arbitrary cut off point; an average score for a course, program, unit, institution; or a shifting median score that ensures ‘underperformance’ for many. Student response rates are typically low, and on a downward trend, as we are over-surveyed by institutions anxiously seeking ‘evidence’ of high performance and levels of student satisfaction that can be incorporated into their marketing.

Hil (2015) labels this current phenomenon the “Great Student Surveyathon”, observing that low response rates of below 30% nationally suggest “something less than urgent interest, perhaps reflecting survey fatigue and the fact that students were probably getting on with their lives” (59). Prizes are offered for completing surveys, computer labs are made available during class times specifically for this purpose, and efforts are made to identify the optimum time to survey students to maximise responses, such as during end of course/program/degree celebrations, perhaps even with a glass of champagne. Meanwhile, academics note correlations between student grades and recorded levels of student satisfaction. These are seemingly borne out in studies finding positive correlations between SET measures and student grade inflation (Love & Kotchen, 2010). The alienation produced by these sorts of mechanisms rests firmly on the insidious and superficial representations of individuals and our labour, as determined by crude quantitative terms. Similarly, the status of these measures, invoked frequently to identify staff to be sacked in periods of so-called ‘change management’ or ‘restructuring’, and the almost inevitable and often actively promoted comparisons made with one’s colleagues, coupled with the rampant and insidious competition for resources within institutions, intensifies the sense of alienation from our academic colleagues.

The alienation of academics from each other rests also in the growing precariousness of academic work and the associated competition for positions, particularly for relatively more secure, permanent, or tenured university posts, as we outlined above. Various versions of internal league tables, comparing individuals’ measured outputs against those of our colleagues across the University, encourage a sort of dehumanizing competitive and educationally discredited norm-referenced approach to assessing our performance. The competition intensifies in contexts like Australia and the U.S., where university management view all (tenured and non-tenured) academic positions as ‘contingent’ on varying levels of public and private funding, while the performance measurement regimes provide an additional mechanism for managers to rid themselves of any member of staff considered problematic, or “not a good fit”, or “not fit for purpose” with current neoliberal priorities. How do we quantify the endless discourse within the university education sector, from governments and university managers, and frequently from academics and other university education workers themselves, about budget shortfalls and crises, restructuring, or the need for austerity measures, and its effects on our sense of self, our relationship to our work, our everyday interactions with colleagues, or the limited opportunities available to us outside the mythical panacea of STEM research?

Estrangement in the Borderlands

Alienated labour has resolved itself for us into two elements which mutually condition one another, or which are but different expressions of one and the same relationship. Appropriation appears as estrangement, as alienation; and alienation appears as appropriation, estrangement as true enfranchisement.... —Karl Marx (1844)

To varying degrees, with particular emphases tied to local histories, cultures and struggles, university education across the world is under pressure to restructure its operations in accordance with neoliberal principles of a globalizing educational agenda and its priorities on the marketplace. The bleak consequences are the source of large amounts of research, moving institutions, systems and nations further away from what can be characterised as relatively modest, liberal ideas of education generally, including the idea that university education should function as a public good, and something that ought to be made universally

available given its intrinsic and its wider social and economic benefits (Nussbaum, 2012; Tomasevski, 2003). These policies and their appropriating and alienating impact can be generalised, including those processes of estrangement experienced by borderland academics within contemporary universities, as sketched out above. For borderland academics the alienation associated with these processes is experienced both in a common but intensified form, and in some distinctive ways.

In talking about ourselves as borderland academics, we are referring to radical, politically engaged, academics/intellectuals who consciously and explicitly hold onto a materialist understanding of social inequalities under capitalism, and some form of a revolutionary political project that aims to transcend capitalism and its inherent inequalities. It is, moreover, within the terrain of the academic borderlands that radical university faculty are found who deliberately and strategically utilize their intellectual labour as a means for countering economic and social structures of inequality tied to racism, sexism, homophobia, disablism, and so on. Darder (2015), in *Marxist Scholarship in Neoliberal Times*, links this counterhegemonic space to an overt revolutionary praxis, based on a “powerfully dialectic *and* materialist understanding of history” (140), as the basis for thinking about our labour as Marxist scholars. This approach stresses action over abstract theorising, noting that “a focus on abstract theorization, rather than social revolution, can unfortunately result in a tendency to over-ideologize our subject of study, which can deaden the impact of our contribution and can alienate us, despite our best intentions” (144). Griffiths (2013b), similarly, draws on world-systems analysis to also advocate for this sort of praxis, acknowledging Wallerstein’s (1986) argument that “utopia is a process, always defining the better in a way that is critical of existing reality”, realisable by “eradicating the vulgar, brutal, unnecessary consequences of material inequality”, but only through action “by the many on behalf of themselves” (1307).

The entrenched neoliberal notion of university education in terms of preparing human capital for success in the market alienates students, as they are initiated into greater and greater abstraction, where number crunching and book theories are privileged over human sensibilities, meaningful relationships, or humanizing practices that nurture social and political consciousness. Revisiting his credential inflation thesis, Randall Collins (2013) highlights how “the mass inflationary school system tells its students that it is providing a pathway to elite jobs, but spills most of them into an economy where menial work is all that is available unless one has outcompeted 80% of one’s school peers. No wonder they are alienated” (53). A similar critique can be applied to university education with the reduction of its expressed value to students in terms of future employment and income, and the likelihood that many graduates will not find meaningful employment. Their alienation compounds that experienced by borderland academics with deep political and ideological commitments to alternative primary purposes of education, which is only intensified, as alluded to earlier, by calls to make university programs and courses more aligned to employers needs and, therefore, the production of ‘job ready’ graduates.

As borderland academics, we see the use value of our work and labour primarily in terms of its contribution to the struggle for a non-capitalist future. This is a particular and revolutionary use value, which exacerbates the alienation associated with the exchange value emphasis of the neoliberal university. Our work unapologetically seeks to create conditions that radicalize students’ consciousness of social life under capitalism, its inherent material inequalities within and between nations, and their interaction with oppressive forms of class, gendered, and racialised exclusion. It is through such revolutionary praxis that we seek to also confront false forms of enfranchisement, while we diligently mine the potential for action to transform social and material conditions that perpetuate such oppression. This normative stance is much inspired by Marx’s (1852) often cited reference to “men [sic] making history”, within the realities and constraints of their social and material conditions.

This Marxist spirit informs Freire’s (2015, 2012, 1989) critical discussions of unfinishedness and his affirmation that “It is certain that men and women can change the world for the better, can make it less unjust, but they can do so only from the starting point of the concrete reality they ‘come upon’ in their generation...What is not possible, however, is to even think about transforming the world without a dream, without utopia, or without a vision” (Freire, 2015, 31). From this position, we are compelled to resist policy frameworks and institutional practices of capitalist appropriation and estrangement that prioritise the

exchange value of our labour. In particular, as the prospect of up-front fees, deferred debts, and an increased likelihood of unemployment for many graduates effectively denies the multiple use values of university education for many, even advocating for a renewed emphasis on the intrinsic use values of university education in its broadest, humanistic sense, becomes a ‘radical’ and necessary act.

The neoliberal university, however, works intensely against borderland academics in ways that can provoke insecurity and doubts about the validity of our scholarship, as well as our anger and frustration, when seeking to navigate the many obstacles generated by our unwillingness to acquiesce to neoliberal mandates. This often can result in debilitating forms of estrangement that fuel and intensify hostilities, distrust, and disaffiliation, even among those who labour within the borderlands. In addition to the general alienation from oneself, our colleagues and the product of our labour, borderland academics must then also confront attempts to either appropriate or delegitimize and devalue both the explicit use value, *and* the exchange value, of our ideas, methods, and scholarship. Alienation here is also linked to the constant and pervasive, generalised intellectual dismissal of even the idea that there is a viable, and substantively better (more equal, more just, more ecologically sustainable, more democratic, more peaceful), non-capitalist way of organising human society that can be created, and to which our labour can contribute.

Žižek (2010) gives a good sense of the hegemonic discourse and climate which our focus on the critique and transformation of capitalism must contend with, noting “the virtual disappearance of the very term [capitalism] in the last two or three decades” (211). He observes that, despite the generalised critique of Fukuyama’s ‘End of History’, “most people today *are* Fukuyamaean: liberal-democratic capitalism is accepted as the finally found formula of the best possible society, all one can do is try to make it more just, tolerant, etc.” (Žižek, 2010, 211). Two decades earlier, Wallerstein (1998a) expressed the sort of heretical nature of our position, which rejects these sort of conclusions:

It is simply not true that capitalism as a historical system has represented progress over the various previous historical systems that it destroyed or transformed. Even as I write this, I feel the tremor that accompanies the sense of blasphemy. I fear the wrath of the gods, for I have been moulded in the same ideological forge as all my compeers and have worshipped at the same shrines. (98)

As borderland academics, the use value of our labour involves public advocacy for more democratic action and participation for historically excluded groups, within the university and broader community. We position our politics and our work as explicit social critics and comrades within broader emancipatory struggles. In this respect, the particular alienation we experience stems from such political commitments being considered misguided or irrelevant to the political and economic objectives of the neoliberal university, and misguided or irrelevant to the broader political, social and economic trajectory of the world. The emphasis on the radical use value of our labour with students is thus most easily identified as contrary to the emphasis on exchange value, such that both the use and exchange value of our labour is marginalised.

Advocating for the transformation of capitalism from within the core of the capitalist world-economy has always been a minority position. Yet, it is precisely the sense of a credible, utopian future that underpins our critique of capitalism and its crisis and transition. To draw on Badiou’s (2008) intervention outlining the ‘communist hypothesis’; the idea of socialism, or communism, with its utopian force to inspire action, is grounded in the idea that “a different collective organization is practicable” (35) and thus, attainable. Under current times of unprecedented financial and environmental crisis (e.g. Bellamy Foster, Clark, & York, 2010; Klein, 2014; Wallerstein, Collins, Mann, Derlugian, & Calhoun, 2013), borderland academics remain marginalised, but arguably with a growing public openness to such alternatives. The potential opening to critique that current crises provide is, however, qualified by the changed nature of the institutions in which we labour and indeed by their precarious position in many parts of the world, as public institutions contributing social goods. Just as the crises of capitalism as a world-system create new possibilities and generate new anti-systemic social movements, we see the crisis of conditions for academic labour reaching new extremes that both work directly and more acutely against borderland academics, while creating potential opportunities for the particular use value of our work to be taken up within the broader struggles in these times of crisis.

Reasserting the Revolutionary Potential

The ideological constructions of capital carry within them the seeds of revolution. Every idea carries within it its opposition. If an idea can be reconnected with its material origin and overcome its alienation, it use value has revolutionary potential. —Hans Arthur Skott-Myhre (2009)

It is precisely in the nature of radical and transgressive scholarship—which seeks to understand and intervene in order to reconnect ideas with the material, overcome our alienation, and change the world—that radical border academics can reassert the revolutionary potential of the use value of our labour as the primary and necessary character of our work. This is a classic dialectic in which the very contradictions of capitalism, intensified under current conditions, intensify the systemic requirement for our labour to deliver its exchange value for university managers and administrators, while heightening the receptiveness to this sort of radical and politically engaged labour and its ideas of social transformation amongst growing numbers.

We see this too in the core thesis of world-systems analysis: that as a world-system, capitalism has reached a point of terminal crisis and transition toward an uncertain replacement system, and that it is precisely under these conditions that our potential collective human agency is heightened. In this sense, Wallerstein (1995) has long correctly argued that the collapse of historical socialism must be interpreted not as a marker of the triumph of capitalism, but a marker of the demise of a particular and historically dominant cultural framework of ‘liberalism’. This arguably marks the end, or at least a phase in the discrediting, decline, and eventual replacement, of a global framework centred on ideas of linear and endless national economic growth, progress, and national development.

For radical, borderland scholars, the revolutionary potential for human action to transform social reality is at the heart of our practice, with all of the constraints, the need for “ongoing critical vigilance” (Darder, 2015, 45), and so constant individual and collective reflection on our theory, our understanding of reality, our practical concerns, and our concrete actions. Within this complexity, we affirm the idea that we are in a historical period in which authentic change is, perhaps, more possible as the result of our actions than in any other historical period. As Wallerstein (1998b) observed:

I do not believe that we can transform the world at every instant. We – singly, or even collectively – do not have this power. But we can transform the world sometimes, at the ‘right’ moment. It is precisely when structures move very far from equilibrium, when they are on the edge of bifurcation, that small pushes in one direction or another can have an enormous impact, and can in fact determine the shape of the replacement historical system that will come into existence (81-82).

We acknowledge of course that ideas like these are contested and subject to long-standing debates. We make no claims to the definitive reading of contemporary capitalism and its future. The weight of evidence around the trajectory of global climate change, for example, is a new and quite distinctive threat, and one that is intrinsically associated with the capitalist world-economy’s defining logic of endless capital accumulation and growth. About this, Magdoff and Bellamy Foster (2011) have elaborated the case that business as usual, “is the path to global disaster” (27), arguing that “it is necessary to understand more fully why ‘business as usual,’ as defined by capitalism, makes the journey to a sustainable society impossible” (35). What we are seeing here are critiques from distinctive theoretical traditions sharing a broad understanding that capitalism’s imperative for endless, compound growth, and capital accumulation underpins the current ecological crisis; hence, its solution requires a systemic alternative to capitalism.

The neoliberal project has fiercely mangled any democratic possibilities of the public university, its primary purpose, and the ways in which academic labour is perceived. Its debilitating impact on the work of borderland academics has been particularly sharp. Current institutional conditions and practices widely discourage such overtly political pedagogical practices, while highlighting, measuring, and rewarding the exchange value of our labour. Our central argument here is that the contradiction of this alienation of academic labour also creates conditions that potentially can make more receptive ideas of academic labour

centred on commitments to its use value, including commitments to a revolutionary praxis, which can contribute to the transformation of capitalist society. As Harvey (2014) writes, “The focus would then have to be on what really matters, which is the continuous creation of use values through social labour and the eradication of exchange value as the principal means by which the production of use values is organised” (36). For borderland academics committed to such a project, reasserting the critical use value of our work must also be understood as simultaneously discouraged and reinforced by institutional emphasis on the exchange value of our labour.

The particular critical use value of our labour as borderland academics may be interpreted here as precisely an attempt to detach our efforts from the commodity form. We see this as an overt strengthening of the connection between the particular social use-value of our labour and a normative project of social transformation, which includes goals of de-commodification of social welfare programs such as education. This revolutionary approach explicitly opposes the existing commodification of the products of our labour – e.g. published works, course materials, curricula, and lectures – as commodities whose sole value lies in their exchange for income via student enrolments and the commercialisation of research outputs. Instead we seek to re-appropriate the use value of such products in terms of their contribution to the creation and development of social alternatives, including open-access dissemination of publicly funded knowledge creation and alternative performance indicators connected to post-capitalist social change.

Insisting on the concrete use value of academic labour and promoting such radical commitments in our practice with students and colleagues can add to possibilities for the emancipatory reshaping of society, including the reshaping of academic work and educational institutions. In this sense our struggle to transform our workplaces, to challenge its definition of our labour and its primary value, rests in our insistence that human action can and does make and remake history. And, most importantly, it rests upon our embodied, collective efforts as borderland intellectuals and cultural workers to unveil the tyranny of neoliberal policies and to infuse our academic labour with the revolutionary politics and moral purpose necessary for constructing a more just world.

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