



Moten, F. and Harney, S. (1999). The academic speed-up. *Workplace*, 4, 23-28.

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The Academic Speed-Up

Academic Labor

What does it mean to say there is a crisis in academic labor? Most commonly it seems to mean that there continue to be far too few full-time, tenurable positions in universities and colleges, and a growing contingent labor force of part-time teachers without security. But beneath this sense of crisis is also a crisis of belief. Graduate students watch in disbelief as many faculty fail to support their unionization. Adjunct professors watch in disbelief as the university fails to offer them tenurable positions or even tolerable conditions. Communities watch in disbelief as universities attempt to break unions of service employees. Students watch in disbelief as universities increase class sizes and loan requirements. And perhaps not disbelief, but certainly disappointed rules as all of us watch full-time, tenured faculty unable or unwilling to address this sense of crisis felt by so many at both the material and ideological level.

But are we deceiving ourselves by falling into this language of crisis? What is the cost of thinking this crisis? And what might be the gain of finding a new way to analyze academic labor today? These are the challenges of this paper. Let us begin with the crisis. The first danger of thinking about our moment as a crisis is that we risk casting an earlier moment in academic labor history as a moment of peace and contentment. There are two reasons we might want to avoid doing this, one a matter of politics and the other a matter of method. As a young academic one often hears stories of how colleagues twenty to thirty years one's senior were hired. They just walked in and got the job. They had several choices. The university was desperate for teachers. These stories can be even more exasperating when told in some cavernous old house bought by such a colleague for a song in the Sixties. The present crisis after such an evening can seem even more our own and not theirs.

Now we are creating a generational periodization for the sake of argument here. And in so doing we are not only flattening time but also labor conditions in this flattened time. Neither today nor then did academic labor mean one thing. But such stories should prompt some questions. The very plenitude of these positions in this past golden age calls into question the way we value them so greatly today, in an economy where value, demand, and scarcity are tightly bound by time. Simultaneously it eclipses the limits of this plenitude. People were denied jobs, purged, and simply jobless in this golden age. When we put these two conditions together we can ask if in our language of crisis we have accepted a picture of the ideal labor condition that is one-sided, that simply presumes this was the best way to produce academic knowledge. Now if we were to add to this the central and telling flaw in this ideal labor -- the subsequent inability of full-time, tenured faculty, as a class, to reproduce themselves -- we can begin to question how ideal was this structure of academic labor. And in turn we might see the need to rethink a politics based on its recovery.

Such a politics might begin by asking what such an image of the golden age has to do either with the industrialization of the university that made these jobs possible or the increased proletarianization of that same university today that seems to make these jobs rarer. In other words, as is often asked of economists,

if you're so smart, how come you ain't rich. That putative golden age was at least more flawed than we might at first suppose, and we might even say literally fatally flawed since it precisely could not find a way to reproduce. In this article we are going to suggest that the idyllic past is not simply a product of our crisis thinking, but also of the consciousness of those professors who walked into jobs, and perhaps more generally now a condition of what we might call after the Italian political theorist, Antonio Negri, the general intellect in our society.

But left there, such a politics would be both ungenerous and liable to resentment. We do not mean to suggest a false consciousness either on the part of our generation or the previous one. To avoid this it is first necessary to think about what we might call the methodological problem with thinking the crisis today. The very failure of tenured faculty to preserve this labor or pass it on at least suggests that this previous generation may have faced its own challenges. In fact, crisis might prove to be a good way to explain the Sixties and Seventies, as many full-time professors failed to see the promises of that time fully realized and were unable to overcome the structural changes in capitalism that were let loose in the Seventies and policed into regularity in our own time. In this line of reasoning the previous generation did not just fail to reproduce a world, they fought and lost one. In many ways their crisis seems greater than ours, easily articulated with the society around them. We on the other hand sometimes face a society uncomprehending, unaware of the damage being done. But most importantly looking at their crisis can help us see academic labor differently. First it can help us realize that academic labor is perpetually in crisis and flux. It can help us generalize crisis and therefore seek to build a politics on it not against it. Perhaps what this earlier generation lost was a world itself in the crisis of upheaval. From there we can take two steps that depend on each other. First we can ask why academic labor lost. Second we can begin to address our own crisis, what we will call the crisis of the speed-up, with this general knowledge. It may be that it becomes more useful to stop thinking of this as a unique crisis and start thinking of it as another battle in an ongoing struggle.

Abstracting Academic Labor

Why did this generation fail to reproduce itself? This is of course a complex question and by focusing on academic labor subjectivity we risk excluding other forces at work against the freedom of producing knowledge according to any imperative but that of capital. Nor was this failure complete or uniform. But we can say that a look at this subjectivity forces us to say today, consequently, we should not be looking either to the image or the actions of this generation for the decisive movement against the present crisis. We think a closer look at this labor can help answer these questions, especially bearing in mind Marx's notion that the first thing a worker produces is herself. Once we examine this subjectivity we may come to see that this past does not really represent a model for the free and associated production of knowledge. We may also come to see that academic laborers that have been able to recover this model in the reduced proportion of tenure-track and newly tenured jobs will not be the vanguard of workers who will take us in to this world.

Let us take a minute to look at the real conditions of labor in the golden age. At one level for the many of us who are currently working as adjuncts, working on contracts, teaching as graduate students, or looking for teaching as PhD's, these conditions look attractive. There was real security, real time to do research, and even real money for conferences if one found a job at a big state school in the Sixties and early Seventies. Even for those of us who have had the good fortune to land tenure-track jobs, the lack of pressure to publish and the open curriculum and small classes look good. Of course, as we have hinted, it was a different story in community colleges, for radicals, for people of color and women, even in this golden age. But bound up with this different story are different levels of the real in which these conditions of labor yield other readings. We might follow here Stuart Hall's unpacking of the multiple readings at work in Capital. He suggests that Marx was aware of different ways to "read" a society based on the exchange of commodities and labor in the marketplace. There was the practical knowledge of businessmen about how this market worked, a knowledge that proved true because it made them rich.

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. Then 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. And finally 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. Now thinking of these multiple readings it might be useful to compare that dinner in the cavernous house of a senior colleague to that practical knowledge of the businessman of labor conditions in the golden age. It would fall 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. This is what Marx, according to Hall was trying to do with Smith and Ricardo. From there we may be ready to give our own reading. What is important about looking at labor conditions in this way is that we can avoid suggesting that these subjectivities are based on false ideas, and instead see them based on different ways of thinking these conditions. But at the same time, we can avoid building our own politics on folkloric or customary images and practices of the previous generation.

The theory that awaits us suggests we grasp what this previous generation experienced vulgarizing the phenomenon--the culmination of the expansion of the American welfare state and the concomitant apex of the liberal arts education as the appropriate form of preparation for the citizens of this state. Buoyed by good economic times the professoriate became recognizable strata within the professional classes in the United States. Moreover the steady expansion of citizenship under the influence of the liberal arts led to the opening up of the university to working class people, people of color, and women, in the student population, the professoriate, and the administration. These new populations in turn contributed to a new expansion in the liberal arts themselves. Conditions of labor bloomed. Professors were hired to contribute to this citizenship and not to some narrow pre-professional training. Good teaching was enough in this regard, because society valued education for its own sake. Great Society programs and social movements demanding public goods combined to increase the non-commodified space in American life, and the rise of the professoriate was a part of this expansion. A few strayed into area studies work for the CIA or chemical research for the Defense Department. But most of them were just naive.

Today we must avoid vulgarizing this historical conjuncture by saying the statehouse or the private university or the professoriate or social movements have failed to reproduce these conditions, this safe area of non-market life. Or worse still, we must avoid building a politics based on demands to these "sectors." From yet another theoretical perspective, from off-stage, from history, we might say that these sectors were not the authors of these conditions. Or rather, these were not the conditions of which these sectors were authors. 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. We might understand the expansion of the university as a key component of the kind of central planning undertaken by the United States in the Cold War, as several recent books make clear. This involved turning the university from an elite support system for American ideology into a central factory for the mass production of that ideology hand in hand with mass production of social and scientific knowledge utilized to further American imperial aims in this period. This meant in turn, the massifying, that is the proletarianization of the workforce involved. And this system proceeded apace despite serious challenges not to its institutional open-ness but to the very foundation of its justified existence, challenges that came as people threw up alternatives to this centrally planned industrialization of daily life in the United States. The jobs that became available as a result

seemed, like Henry Ford's jobs, to be pretty golden, but they were mass production jobs nonetheless. And like Henry Ford's jobs, they could leave people at any moment as easily on the wrong side of challenges to this state central planning as on the supporting side of these challenges.

This other way of seeing conditions exist with the others, creating a subjectivity in the full-time professoriate that is doubled, even tripled. By this we mean simply that as the full-time, research university or small private college professor went to work then (or in similar ways now) he worked with a practical knowledge of his labor and created himself in a practical way through his work. But he also worked in ways that supported these other and contradictory ways of understanding his conditions of knowledge production. These often played out their struggle in his practical consciousness, as indeed they do for all of us. On the one hand, the professor thought of himself as the author of his work, of his scholarship and teaching. He was given the academic freedom and the resources to produce in a way that recalled the individual craftsman, signing his wares and bringing them to the market, where a student or the public could see directly the value of this work, where the author stood behind his work. The fact of the student and the public told the craftsman that he had been gathered with other craftsman, as a kind of class, a class that was distinguished by being neither student nor public, and by the work he produced. And at the same time, that work was responsible for the health of both student and public. Each classroom, each office, and each book held the imprimatur of this individual's contribution to a healthy public sphere.

On the other hand, the way this professor worked also produced a certain sense of inadequacy or ineffectiveness, something we today might experience when we encounter his practical knowledge as resignation, wistfulness, or sometimes bitterness, but also occasionally in reaction to this, self-centeredness, egoism, and new found conservatism. His subjectivity here was built on a rather different view of conditions. In this view craftsmanship gives way to a collective endeavor. Here the tools of academic labor are only useable in common. Work is not only meaningless if others are not also engaged in it, but impossible, their being no tools to use. What is produced is produced as a commodity, it circulates and is realized in publishing, awarding grades, and getting and keeping jobs. Moreover the production, circulation, and realization of this knowledge is not provoked primarily by the professor, but by the students who do most of the work of academic production. And that production, circulation, and realization is itself difficult to sort out. Is a professor lecturing on the history of sociology producing knowledge, circulating it, or even realizing it? Is the student in turn only realizing that knowledge or in fact also producing new knowledge, and circulating this new knowledge. We might call this the disarticulation of knowledge production, and when we put it together with the way professors depend on each other to produce even the most singular work of scholarship we discover a social world of making and sharing knowledge. Now if we take this social world but also give it away, what do we have? This is to say if this social world is not under the control of those who make it social, what conditions obtain? If this world is centrally planned, then exposed to a price-making market, and then once again organized to support that central planning or that market, what kind of abused subjectivity does this produce in the academic worker?

That the professor of the golden age preferred the former theoretical framework to these latter conclusions, in general of course, makes him not so different from the rest of us then or now. The market is an overwhelming presence, a way to organize hopeful ideas, and a system of real rewards. Encouraged by a tradition of thinking in terms of individual craftsmanship and the stewardship of the profession, a professor might choose to comfort himself with the idea of being the independent and sole author of his work. And for those who chose to focus on this other theoretical understanding of their work and of themselves, there was punishment, isolation, and even betrayal. And eventually, there was the speed-up and the slow-down.

The Speed-Up and Slow-Down

If we understand the golden age as the period of industrialization and proletarianization in the American

university, than we can also suggest that the uncomfortable sense the academic worker had, but often chose to ignore, was that he was part of a kind of assembly line. This sense told him through his very conditions of labor that he was not just educating other (assembly line) workers in the liberal arts, but was himself part of a system of mass production. Like the assembly line studied by labor process theorists like Harry Braverman, this academic line de-skilled the worker and dispirited him at the same time. Specialization on the shopfloor led to doing a more specific, repetitive task, faster and more efficiently, usually with the help of a machine. Specialization did not mean becoming an expert. It would be carrying the analysis too far to say that the industrializing research university and community college also specialized academic workers in the golden age. Their expertise needs to be seen as more than a sub-field of a sub-field in research or teaching that was only about the consistency of a precise task, with the specialized jargon playing the role of the machine. But it is certainly true that it became more and more difficult to see the overall structure of academic labor in the specialisms, and that the disciplines acted precisely to de-skill and discourage a broader political view of labor conditions. But of course, the line in academic labor is not visibly pulled by chains, as it is in the Dodge Plant. Nor, because of what we have called the disarticulation of production, circulation, and realization in academic work, can we find the precise beginning and end of this line as we might in a computer-chip-making factory. And yet we can say it is there precisely because today we can feel its motion in new and jarring ways. For some, the motion feels like someone has cranked up the belts of the line, like a traditional factory speed-up. For others, the line has been slowed, painfully, not in the traditional form of a protest by labor, a work to rule for instance, but through new techniques of extracting surplus and controlling labor, like sourcing-out, just-in-time production, and flexibility. For all academic workers, these changes mean the line is present even less now as a continuous employment of time and space and more than ever as a series of sites of production that we are asked to link. We do this increasingly through our very subjectivities, teaching ourselves to labor in and between sites, creating directly in ourselves the social life that maintains the sites, that makes them work despite their different grids of time and space.

In the Nineties, universities and colleges require harder work from some and less work from others. Assistant and Associate professors at research universities or community colleges are asked to do more research, more teaching, and more administration. Adjuncts and graduates are required to do more work, but also prevented from doing scholarly work. Other PhD's are prevented from work almost entirely. With this the university itself comes to appear to be both speeding-up and slowing-down. Subsequently, the university is imagined as alternatively imperializing, swallowing everything in its sped-up path, or dying as a center for the production of liberal arts, or being usurped by knowledge production, circulation and realization in the corporation, in the so-called corporate university. But for those who work in the speed-up or the slow-down practical knowledge is built on something else too, something that explains our complicity, or at least the struggle to avoid such complicity. For those who must work harder there are exactly the kind of pleasures to which they are vulnerable. It offers the pleasure of purity and reward. The scarcity of sped-up positions versus slowed-down positions plays exactly into the dream of craftsmanship, offering a special and limited brotherhood. At the same time, it exaggerates the market-influenced theorizing of these labor conditions, vulgarizing these conditions into a scaled down ambition of the public sphere, the public intellectual, and the individualized career.

To those who must slow down there is exactly the kind of punishment to which they are vulnerable. For as hard as they work, those in the slow-down are specifically denied the fantasy of the golden age. And the golden age of the past is coupled in some mock romanticism with the vulgar system of stardom among sped-up academic workers in our new golden age.

To all academic workers the speed-up and the slow-down, the disruption and recombination of time and space in labor discourage the formation of alternatives or even the alliance with alternatives to this multiple gridding of time and space in academic labor. And the instrumentalization of labor through the slow-down and speed-up means working harder within the assigned pattern cannot but feed both

conditions.

But the speed-up and the slow-down multiply the gridding of work in time and space at some peril. Few academic laborers now have the option of seeing their work as the sped-up workers do or the workers of the golden age did. And many academic laborers have a chance to see the flaws of this golden way of knowledge production. And if the time and space of labor can be so manipulated, then perhaps it can be manipulated in the direction of free and associated knowledge production. Finally, what is happening in the university is happening everywhere and indicates the academic laborer does not so much have a special mission in a public sphere as a common cause in a society of producers who are constantly seduced and abandoned by the market. Like our society in general we can sense ourselves getting smarter and poorer at the same time. In other words, the growth of a general intellect, of an economy that relies on our ability to intuit society, is accompanied by a relative immiseration. And to our society in general we have the lesson to teach of the limits of seeing knowledge production as individual authorship and as craft-like autonomy and status. This is to say, to return to Negri, we have the chance based on our experience to influence the general intellect toward another reading of itself.

We have moved in academic labor, through this speed-up and slow-down, from internalizing 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. Looking into any of our subjectivities it would be hard to say we contribute to a simple form of production on a simple time and space grid, like the old internalized factory. Instead we have become cyborgs of knowledge production. With this knowledge has become fully are because it has become fully us. If we can find a way to align ourselves now with others in society who are gradually experiencing the same embodiments of multiple productive tasks, then we can begin to talk about how we can use this intuition to found a new time, and with it a golden age that stays golden.

We wrote a piece two years ago prompted by the call for an alliance between what was being called the New Labor Movement and academics. It was to be a renewal based on a image of an even earlier golden age. Leaving aside the problems of that image, and indeed of the New Labor Movement, we wanted to say that academics though cannot help the labor movement in an alliance. We cannot at the moment even help ourselves. It is not incompetence, lack of commitment, or miscalculation. It is that we need to found a new politics not on nostalgia but on the power to organize the time and space of knowledge production that has been by an accident of history invested in us all.

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