



## No Future

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### The Productive Centrality of the University in the Age of Cognitive Capitalism

Today we often use the concept of ‘Cognitive Capitalism’,<sup>1</sup> or, indeed, Post-Fordist production, to denote a profound breakdown that has occurred during the last few decades. And when we speak about a ‘society of knowledge’ we point out that today knowledge is the new tool of capitalist accumulation. Asserting this doesn’t mean hiding the fact that in the complexity of the contemporary world, we cannot observe completely different productive regimes co-existing, as we do within the metropolis. Indeed, the majority of work done in a metropolis certainly isn’t immaterial work: cleaners, janitors, salesclerks and storekeepers do not properly perform conceptual or symbolic manipulation.

The assertion of the ‘hegemony’ of cognitive labour and immaterial work therefore means something else, something very different from a quantitative measurement of this or that employment sector. The term, indeed, refers to *all the work that is done within the metropolis*. So even though the majority of work done in the metropolis is not strictly speaking cognitive, it is nonetheless *oriented* and *addressed* by the sector of cognitive labour. That is to say, the more prevalent forms of work are themselves organized as a function of cognitive labour. And it is in this sense that we can speak of the hegemony of cognitive labour. It is also in this very same sense that Marx wrote about hegemony within the *Grundrisse* (1993: 106-107).

This term: ‘hegemony of cognitive labour’, underlines the inherent arbitrariness of criticisms made concerning the supposedly questionable validity of the conceptual differentiations made between cognitive or immaterial labour and material or non-cognitive labour. These criticisms are to be understood as arbitrary precisely because cognitive and immaterial labour is *always* made up of a material and bodily component. And material labour, for its part, is also always made up of a cognitive and immaterial

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1 ‘Cognitive Capitalism’ is the literal translation into English of the term ‘capitalismo cognitivo’, a concept born out of European (and particularly Italian) ‘post-operaismo’ thought. See, for example, Vercellone (2003) and Negri (2008).

content. In this light it is the category of material labour, rather than the category of immaterial labour, that is problematic.

The concept of 'cognitive capitalism' therefore presents us with the inherent difficulty of proposing any sort of systematic dichotomy between intellectual labour and manual labour, the very dichotomy which nonetheless typifies Fordist factory work. It presents us with the great challenge of explaining the nature of the new productive contemporary metropolitan space.

To accept this concept of 'cognitive capitalism', I suggest, is to simultaneously accept the assertion that many traditional conceptual divisions are no longer adequate to the task of understanding the new division of labour within knowledge society. To accept the concept of 'cognitive capitalism' therefore means that we must find the role of capital's command in some other way. And with such a framework in mind, we can also see that the function, role and mechanism of many contemporary institutions have become completely different.

In this note I want to consider the case of the university. What is the university today? Well, if the productive tool is knowledge, if immaterial labour and cognitive labour define the hegemony of the productive world today, then the university is now the centre of the productive realm. Within such an era the university becomes the factory,<sup>2</sup> the realm within which economic wealth is produced, much in the same way that the manufacturing factory was just such a realm decades ago.

You have not misunderstood: the university today produces.

*At the spatial level*, we can say that the university is inside the productive process of modernity, with its circuits of teaching, learning, research (and its financialization), copyright management, and so on. Such centrality is accompanied by an increasing 'becoming corporate' of the university itself. More and more today we can speak of the corporate university, namely, the public institution that has to manage itself in accordance with the efficiency and productivity standards of the entrepreneurial world. The rhetoric of new public management, investment, accountability, stakeholders and so on, is more and more infiltrating the university mechanism. Despite widespread resistance to such evolutions, we are faced with a pervasive and relatively unchallenged adoption from inside the university of this managerial rhetoric.

The question is why? How is this possible? I suppose it is because in recent years, corporations are becoming more and more like universities, because the Post-Fordist factory has a similar refrain to the living substance of the university. The ability to learn and to adapt through learning is precisely what the contemporary labour market requires. To be able to learn today is to be able to be productive today.

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2 See the edu-factory Manifesto [[http://www.edu-factory.org/index.php?option=com\\_contentandtask=view&id=5&Itemid=6](http://www.edu-factory.org/index.php?option=com_contentandtask=view&id=5&Itemid=6)].

And *at the temporal level*, we can say that the contemporary university is oriented towards the present. Universities no longer look towards the future since the shaping and training of the workforce is not for the future, but for the here and now.

The present is the time of university and education. Here and now.<sup>3</sup> In this way, when one speaks about life-long learning it doesn't mean postponing the result, the 'final date' of the educational process until who knows when. The student is therefore no longer an unproductive figure that goes to school today and one day, in the future, will enter into the labour market. No. The student today is an immediately productive figure, and his or her productive time is within the here and the now.<sup>4</sup>

The central role of the university today insofar as the valorization of capital is concerned is a paradoxical one. For the goal of the university nowadays, is to earn well and hence to devalue knowledge. The contemporary university is therefore a space which devalues and discredits some forms of knowledge over others insofar as potential wage and remuneration is concerned. What does this apparent paradox of contemporary society mean? Speaking about wealth production, we refer to capitalist production. This is a production based on command. So we must ask: how is this command over cooperation, the productive capacity of the work force, exercised today?

This question is asked because the modern university is by no means a free zone, it is certainly not a place where the cooperation and productivity of the subject is free. It is also asked because, when the university becomes like the factory, we could say the 'edu-factory', it simultaneously adopts the goal of redefining the command of the workforce and of productive power itself. The factory is not only a space of production, therefore, it is also a mode of commanding production and the work-force. It is not a free space, but rather a space where one makes struggles. To say the university is a central space of the productive mechanism means, therefore, that it is a space where the command of productive power is articulated – the space where it is put to work. The modern university, therefore, is the point of application for the forms of command and control which characterizes cognitive capitalism. Such is the argument which I will try to make here.

## **Fordist Productive Power and the Distinction between Manual and Intellectual Labour**

Within this note what I am trying to do, insofar as I am writing about the role of the modern university, is to pinpoint the relationship between capitalistic command and productive forces. For what is capitalism if it is not a social relation? And within this

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3 The slogan of Italian university movement of 2005 was: 'our time is here and starts now' [<http://www.globalproject.info/art-6049.html>].

4 A document of the Paris VIII University meeting written during the students' struggle in France in November 2007 was suggestively entitled 'we don't want a future, we want a present!' It continues: "the project is to postpone existence in a future, in a post. We refuse this permanent updating. We want a present in which to extract something decent [...]" (Trans. by the author). [[http://www.globalproject.info/art-13859.html?var\\_recherche=cpe](http://www.globalproject.info/art-13859.html?var_recherche=cpe)].

section I want to consider the classical distinction between manual and intellectual labour characteristic of the Fordist period. By doing this, I want to pave the way towards a drafting of what might be called a *genealogy* of capitalism's commanding *dispositif*. By taking such a retrospective leap, therefore, I think that we can put ourselves in a position to better understand the nature of the space which the university occupies today insofar as what I will go on to call the 'political economy of knowledge' is concerned.

From the perspective of the Fordist firm and the Taylorist system of work geared towards the mass production of standard commodities, one can outline what might be called the real polarization of knowledge. Inside of this system of production we encounter a formal separation between manual labour, on the one hand, and intellectual labour, on the other. This separation, for its part, was accompanied by the incorporation of knowledge into machines: the standardization of manual labour led to the becoming machinic of labour. The system of machines came to take on an almost trans-individuality reality, a reality which was at the same time the triumph of fixed capital. This triumph is a response to the capitalist's need to assume greater control over the productive process, to become free from any sort of reliance upon the knowledge possessed by labourers. The gradual process of gaining such control was at the same time the process which saw the transformation of worker knowledge into a set of mechanic processes. Industrial capitalism was born *de facto* within this dual process of the disembodiment of knowledge and the becoming knowledgeable of machines.

The proliferation of machines as the simultaneous disembodiment of knowledge finds its utmost rationality in the Fordist model of production where the firm's organizational mechanisms are reflected two-fold. On the one hand we have the assembly line, itself composed of nothing but un-thinking, manually labouring bodies. And on the other hand, we have the planning stage, itself composed of nothing but absolutely thinking intellectual labour. This division between a purely intellectual component, on the one hand, and a purely bodily component is described by Carlo Vercellone as a "control of the intellectual power of production" (2006: 41, trans. by the author). And this very division between intellectual and manual labour is the Fordist ground upon which capitalism's command over the power of human production most firmly asserts itself.

Capital's command within the Fordist organization was carried out through the control of productive power within this formal division between manual and intellectual labour. But this distinction could not be maintained indefinitely – it was a form of control which was permanently exercised but also permanently limited. The separation between manual and intellectual labour was continually broken by labour itself in its very materiality. A separation of the nature of labour therefore existed, and was operationalised, but this separation was an entirely artificial one. And it was this inherent artificiality itself which emerged for all to see during the cases of strikes and whenever the assembly line itself was subjected to sabotage. These moments portray the separation between intellectual and manual labour in all of its artificiality. They show it to be nothing but an attempt to control, rather than express, the sheer vitality of human labour power.

The hegemony of intellectual labour therefore emerges and asserts itself at the very point where control attempted to eliminate it. In the strike, within sabotage, emerges the reality of the knowledge of the worker, the knowledge to stop the machine, the knowledge to control the production cycle, the knowledge to subvert the supposed hierarchy between manual and intellectual labour. The worker therefore asserts his knowledge of the production process through sabotage. And this knowledge is shown, thereby, to be inherently political rather than purely technical.

The very frequency of such confrontations and struggles made it impossible to completely separate the categories of manual and intellectual labour in a material sense. The frequency of such confrontations therefore served to expose such a separation as nothing other than a series of attempts to control the power over production. This particular control is a parcelled-out specialization and repetition of the worker's task itself. It is, to be precise, a 'political economy of knowledge' something capable of transforming knowledge itself.

The university, under Fordist conditions, is therefore an institution that produces and reproduces this separation between manual and intellectual labour. But under Fordist conditions it is not yet a socially pervasive institution since it presupposes a sharp division between inside and outside, a division that reproduces the unsustainable separation between manual and intellectual labour. The university, in this sense, was not immediately productive but rather functional to the productive system. It was a site that served to reproduce the hegemony of command of the Fordist factory by presupposing and therefore perpetuating the formal division between manual labour, on the one hand, and intellectual labour, on the other.

## **Post-Fordist Productive Power: Differential Inclusion and the Mass University**

Today we are faced with quite another matter. The classical division between intellectual and manual labour is now posed differently, and the use of this classical category is less and less useful in understanding the new code of capital's command over productive power.

As I have already remarked, the category of 'cognitive capitalism' presents itself as a useful means of understanding the new division of contemporary work beyond this classical distinction between intellectual and manual labour. It helps us to understand how the old scheme is no longer sufficient. Thereby, it helps us to speak about a new geography of capitalist command, about a new device of command that starts at the point where the workers' movement had overcome Fordist organization, a device which comes into play precisely at the point where manual and intellectual labour become indistinguishable from one another. We cannot understand the concept of cognitive capitalism unless we pass through this notion. Cognitive capitalism is not the hegemony of 'intellectual' over 'Fordist' labour. To repeat the point from which this note initially departed, the concept of 'cognitive capitalism' rather refers to the impossibility of separating and distinguishing between material and intellectual labour in the traditional, that is Fordist, way.

The workers' struggles of past decades have forced capital's command into a new space. From here, where it is more and more difficult to distinguish between what is manual and intellectual, one doesn't go backwards, that is, one doesn't attempt to nostalgically re-establish that which used to be. We rather progress on the basis of that which such resistances have produced. Resistance, after all, is that which produces such transformations. We might even say that resistance, understood in this way, is ontologically productive, that it is productive of the contemporary world of things. So today, if we are to understand capitalism's workings and its command after the victory of the workers' struggle against the factory organized upon the notion of the hegemony of intellectual labour, we have to see that the progressive intellectualization of work is no longer central. On the contrary, the downgrading and discrediting of the workforce itself inside of cognitive capitalism is what must command our attention.

So what, then, in light of the above, is the role of the university today? Moreover: at the time of the internet which spells the breakdown of the university's relative monopoly over knowledge, what is the university now for? We can confidently assert that the demise of the centrality of the Fordist factory and its division of labour is replaced today with the centrality of a university which becomes the place of pure command, a place for the prioritization of certain forms of knowledge possessed by the workforce. The apparent paradox outlined at the beginning of this article has now lost its 'paradoxical' distinctive character: downgraded knowledge here means that the university, as it is today, is more and more a part of a world where access to knowledge is free and, therefore, in spite of the university itself. Within such a reality of abundant knowledge, the university therefore plays the role of authority, the role of discrediting some knowledge in comparison with others. In short, the university is the contemporary space of command, a site where division and control become imposed onto the workforce. The goal of the university today is to produce a new differentiation of the workforce and this is done through a process of progressively prioritizing sectors of the workforce in terms of the knowledge it possesses.

The role of the university has therefore changed quite profoundly for the university has become nothing short of a mass university. All around us we see an increase in the number of graduates and, therefore, an increase in the level of enrolment within universities. The number of registered students has been constantly increasing ever since the Second World War: this gives us a measure and an idea of how much it has changed, of how central it has become.<sup>5</sup> During the first half of the twentieth century, the university was the place of reproduction based upon a sharp and strongly defined border between inside and outside which was reflected within the already described division of the workforce. The university was therefore a device capable of exclusion. Indeed, it was an institution largely reliant upon exclusion. The effect of exclusions through closed entry requirements, for example, was to create a high level of stratification between those who are able to afford the costs of studying, and a lower stratification for those who were outside (the majority). This double stratification and its deep logic of exclusion was at the base of the classical distinction between intellectual and manual labour, hegemonic in the Fordist era, where the university was the place of its production and reproduction.

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5 [http://www.edu-factory.org/index.php?option=com\_contentandtask=viewandid=86andItemid=41].

Today's university has, to a large extent, lost this particular border between its inside and its outside by directing its mechanisms towards inclusivity. Yet this process of inclusion doesn't outline a homogeneous inclusion, it rather operates on the basis of a *differential inclusion*. The segmentation of the workforce happens not on the threshold of the university's inside/outside but rather within the university's inclusion process itself. It is here that the tools for producing hierarchy become cognitive, it is on the basis of these tools that we can distinguish between skilled and unskilled labour. The likes of the Bologna process therefore reveal to us the nature and characteristics of these new filters and borders. We can see within such differential inclusion techniques the multiplication and production of new and fresh borders inside the workforce and the labour marketplace, a sort of generalization of the policies of management of migrant labour which becomes extended onto the whole population through the Higher Education sector itself.

Put otherwise: as production becomes diffused and the Fordist organization's factory loses its hegemony, the command of the workforce and of its hierarchy is produced by the university. If the distinction between manual and intellectual labour has broken down together with its device of exclusion, the modern university's inclusion process is not linear but one of differential inclusion. Here we find an overlap between techniques of labour hierarchization and the tools that become cognitive.<sup>6</sup> The mass university becomes inclusive by segmenting and differentiating with respect to some disciplines but not others. This sort of differentiation reflects the labour world where a segmentation of the workforce is effected between those who can recognize their competences and knowledges as opposed to those who cannot. This disciplinary segmentation refers to the recognition (or lack thereof) on the part of the competences of workers.

Secondly, the working of the mass university involves a management of knowledge the quality of which is immediately connected with the relation of the workforce to the marketplace through the collapse of temporality in forms of life, work and education. We can easily point to internships and other situations where the value of knowledge is made null: when one works for free. The internship, widespread across Europe, is a clear example of how the university system works towards a segmentation that devalues knowledge in terms of wage and remuneration. Moreover, the university works as a mode for governing and managing an increasing quota of the precarious workforce employed in sectors of low skills: the so-called shit jobs of students who simply cannot afford their study.<sup>7</sup> This is a real workers' reserve army, an army which the university itself organizes and builds up. Far from being a beautiful soul outside of the hidden dangers of the market, the student is exploited even when not working.

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6 [http://www.uniriot.org/index.php?option=com\_content&task=view&id=204&Itemid=104].

7 See in particular Bousquet, 2008, wherein the author describes the exploitation of undergraduate students as cheap labour and as a docile and disciplined workforce. Students, argues Bousquet, are already workers. The progressive 'intellectualization' of the workforce, in this light, doesn't mean an increase in wages but, on the contrary, the reduction of minimal guarantees. This is the scenario where the promise of a better future is in reality a present made of exploitation and debt.

Finally we have the construction of a hierarchy of the university itself at a national and international level. This hierarchy sets up filters to process a differentiation inside of the workforce where a degree from 'x university' or 'y country' is worth less or more than the same degree from another university or country. This hierarchy of degrees is applied onto the same international workforce, inside a new international division of labour.

## **Listen to the Sound of Struggle: Self-Education as Autonomous Institution**

To conclude, I'd like to mention some of the recent struggles around Europe within the university context. These struggles are not simply student struggles. Within the ephemeral borders of the university and its productive centrality, the struggles of the past years have taken shape differently from the classical university struggles. Indeed, these struggles, from the anti-CPE struggle in France in 2006 and those against the reform of Sarkozy's government in 2007, onto the occupation of Greek and Italian universities in 2005, may be understood as the new configuration of a new cycle of struggles, a new cycle marked by the complete overcoming of the classical figure of the student.

On the one hand the university context becomes central to capitalist production. And on the other hand we can find its immediately metropolitan dimension.

This is a new cycle of struggles where the main characteristics are the common processes of the precarization of life on the one hand, and the constant processes of educational policy harmonization (read: the attempt to construct a common market for the workforce at the European level) on the other. The metropolitan dimension of these university conflicts are elements that allow us to read properly what happened in our university, our metropolis, to understand that they are the same. These battles reconfigure how the struggles for access are struggles against filters and blocks of differential inclusion inside the workings of the modern university. These struggles displace the contemporary production of capitalist command onto productive power today and shape the hierarchical process conflicts around the students' mobility as a workforce.

To sum up what I've been trying to say here in a few points: I've tried to show how today the centrality of the university in the productive process entails that a new exploitation of the workforce passes through knowledge. That means that knowledge itself is a new strategic battlefield of the productive process, that knowledge is the battlefield against new sets of exploitation and blackmail. And if knowledge has a new centrality with regard to the capitalistic production of conflict, we need to consider two matters further.

*Firstly*, that the quality and production of this knowledge itself becomes a strategic field of struggle. In this way the experience of self-education in many universities at a global level represents a decisive field of conflict: workers' management of their own knowledge, of production and of its socialization. This is synonymous with worker autonomy and therefore with exodus from contemporary command. The construction of

autonomy and the planning of ways for existing networks to increase these practices is what, for example, the 'edu-factory' project is all about. The demand for the autonomy of content and the modality of the research of self-education itself is the field of difference capable of threatening the new set of command.

*Secondly*, to speak about the university and the contemporary institutions of capitalist command and of self-education, is to try to find an adequate organizational level for the contemporary *dispositif* of power. It is to attempt to elucidate how it articulates, to attempt to hone in on its modes of governance. It is to attempt to read these modes of governance as process of power and command management and to attempt to find ways to react to the creative power of conflicts: this is the answer and advanced point of new forms of command.

How are we to articulate the organizational practice of self-education when a physical outside does not exist? From where do we organize the threat? We need to find a new and public line of escape: a way to invent new weapons as Deleuze and Guattari (2004: 445) said, in a scenario that is no longer physical but becoming more and more time bound. We need to organize self-educational practices and workers self-management at a new level: at the level of the institution. And it is in this sense that we come to the idea of an autonomous institution. We must organize the university space, from inside, as an irreducible outside: a place where we find material resources, funds and organizational resources for labour's management of knowledge, autonomy and production of critical knowledge. By critical knowledge I mean a sort of knowledge that is able to organize, to open up and manage the crisis of the command of productive power as it goes through knowledge.

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