



Class action or class struggle?

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review of

Perlin, R. (2011) *Intern nation: How to earn nothing and learn little in the brave new economy*. Verso: London & New York. (PB, pp. 258, £9.99, ISBN139781844676866)

Starring Georgia Institute of Technology, as well as Owen Wilson and Vince Vaughn, *The Internship* was presumably intended as the Hollywood blockbuster of Summer 2013. The movie portrays a couple of interns who arrive at the corporation in the hope of securing a job in the creative industries. While their experiences are arguably somewhat less traumatic than those the hapless intern protagonist of *The Devil Wears Prada* has to endure in a similar scenario, the two are nevertheless forced to compete with an army of other prospective employees (i.e. interns) in fulfilling various office and non-office related tasks, some more pointless than others, in order to literally *win* the possibility of the future employment. The movie offers a fascinating glimpse into the inner working of the tech giant – or perhaps it's a feature length advertorial – with its Google-branded blurring of work, play and life. This provides the backdrop for the protagonists' quest for promised future possibilities, golden opportunities and (in)valuable life-experiences.

Almost three years after the publication of *Intern Nation*, Ross Perlin's important exposé on the world of unpaid work, the fact that the film's humour remains somewhat lacklustre throughout may have something to do with the fact that the plight of such interns has hardly ever been a laughing matter. Indeed, in the three years since Perlin shed some much-needed light upon the world of the

intern, there have been many important developments in both the US context, the main focus of his study, but also beyond. Perlin's generally well-received investigations, published in 2011, directly addressed the situation of many real-life interns, locating their plight within the wider frame of a new workplace paradigm and larger shifts in the overall culture of work. I would like to consider Perlin's contribution here, but also, given the time that has elapsed since the publication of this work, to take this opportunity to map out some of the developments in the struggles over internships that have transpired in the interim.

Perlin's book, which remains timely and relevant, is based on an extensive series of one-on-one interviews, conducted by the author over the two years prior to its publication. This means relying on a 'convenience sample', as Perlin himself admits, rather than a full ethnography or what might be considered a sociological sample proper. However, in terms of the data and evidence – even if at times appearing as purely anecdotal – it still makes for a crucial contribution to an area of study in which finding hard data and statistics and employers and employees willing to be named, identified or cooperate is notoriously difficult. The book is not intended as a 'serious' academic text or treatise, though it quotes some academic papers, therefore does not venture a systematic political or theoretical analysis of the intern phenomenon. Rather it is an extremely readable foray into an increasingly important, if often overlooked area of the labour market which weaves together personal stories with media examples, historical snippets, newspaper reports, as well as numerous pop-culture references, including snippets from *Seinfeld*, *The Onion*, and *The Life Aquatic with Steve Zissou* – 'Do the interns all get Glock's? – No, they all share one!'

The book consists of eleven punchy chapters, each examining one aspect of the internship phenomenon, bookended by a passionate preface ('This book is meant as a step towards sanity and towards justice', xviii) and appendices – 'The Intern Bill of Rights' (Appendix A – '... a common standard by which to evaluate and improve internships for the benefit of interns, employers, and society as a whole', 239). This forms something of a call to arms, demanding a better definition of, and respect for, internships as a category of work. Along with this, in a welcome practical intervention, it also includes a general guide to relevant employment rights (Appendix B) in the US, Canada and the UK (241-4).

Where Perlin does attempt to situate his research theoretically he turns, among others, to Eve Chiapello and Luc Boltanski (2005), whose account of the 'new spirit of capitalism' and its transformed managerial practices, can be seen as usefully describing the changing characteristics of contemporary employment in an era of decentralization and the self-disciplining subjects. This is an

employment paradigm to which the mode of internship seems particularly fitting, indeed a logical outgrowth. As Perlin notes, ‘What structured training programs were to the bureaucratic firms of the mid-twentieth century, internships may well be to the new network capitalism of firms dealing in intangible goods’ (95). In this sense he casts the internship as a disciplinary structure perfectly befitting of a more precarious, networked and responsabilized workforce.

This condition of the increasing, disciplinary normalization of precarity is drawn out in his discussion around the issue of access to various professions and the growing gap between the working-class and elites (Chapter Nine). Here Perlin engages David Graeber’s discussion of the proliferating structures of exclusion that characterize many sectors of the job market (165) to illuminate the way in which internships have become a means to police access to certain professions to the destruction of earlier promises of social mobility. Andrew Ross and Alex Foti help further inform Perlin’s discussion of precarity and its relation to interns, but on a more general and more global level (Chapter Ten). This works effectively alongside the chapter focussing on the economics of internships (Chapter Seven), which draws on literature considering the future of employment, mobility in the job market, as well as the minimum wage debate in the US.

Perlin’s understanding of the systematic proliferation of internships appears informed by a tentative engagement with Gary Becker’s human capital theory (127-8) and Michael Spence’s signalling theory (130), to a degree situating Perlin’s account of the rise of unpaid, aspirational labour within the wider development of a neoliberal economic consensus in the US. The generalization of Becker’s theory of human capital, with its ‘investment approach’ to human resources and the burdens and costs of investments in oneself, clearly appears to mirror the ideology of internships. Short-term sacrifice for the accumulation of, not only direct job skills, but importantly contacts, social networks and insider knowledge in the hope of future payoffs, is the honed to a fine art in the practice of the intern (128).

In the short, focussed chapters, regularly presented with an identifiable black-humour, Perlin skilfully covers the origins, subsequent rise, and the current epidemic of internships. This includes the historical origins of the nomenclature (War zones! Internment camps!) and the history of apprenticeships and medical interns. He goes on to describe the subsequent explosion of this form of work and how it is increasingly supported by a fast-growing network of commercial agencies, offering to match interns to positions and vice versa. He also discusses the implication of colleges and universities in the internships’ growing popularity, the legal landscape, as well as two ‘case studies’ – of the internship

programmes at Disney (experts, one would imagine, at offering young people fairytales!) and in the political sector in both the UK and US (Monica!). Perlin likewise endeavours to provide a brief overview of the global rise of the practice, with discussions ranging beyond the US labour market to include China, Germany, and France. Having engaged with the above, he draws inexorably towards the seemingly logical conclusion – a call to action, complete with a proposed manifesto.

Although focussed mainly on the US context, Perlin makes some brief links with the UK landscape, including the grim estimation that the UK's 'internship problem' remains five years behind that of the US (200). The book's pertinent analysis has seen its timely necessity vindicated by significant press coverage on both sides of the Atlantic and on both sides of the political spectrum. In the UK both the right-wing Daily Mail and liberal-leaning Guardian reprinted sections of the book, hosting lively exchanges in their comments and blog sections. Yet public debate of this topic was already taking place, evidenced in an interesting exchange between Prime Minister David Cameron of the Conservative party, and his Liberal Democrat deputy, Nick Clegg, regarding social mobility – an aspect also highlighted by Perlin throughout the book. Just as Clegg criticized the idea of 'unpaid internships, which favour the wealthy and well-connected' and announced a new scheme promoting the maxim of 'what you know, not who you know', the PM candidly announced that he was fine with the idea of giving internships to friends and neighbours (Stratton, 2011).

In other developments, a minor scandal of MPs being exposed for using free labour in their parliamentary offices (Davis, 2010) was followed by the 'Let's get our house in order' campaign by Labour MP Hazel Blears with the support of the Intern Aware campaign group (Blears, 2013). The Trade Unions Congress and the National Union of Students launched a year of campaigning for fair internships in February 2012 with a 'Rights for Interns' smartphone application and the claim that: 'In popular career destinations like journalism, advertising, film, television and public relations are becoming an exclusive domain for people from affluent backgrounds' (TUC, 2012).

Both before the publication of Perlin's study and increasingly afterwards – if not necessarily to imply a correlation – a lively range of campaigns and organizations, with a diversity of perspectives and approaches, have focussed on struggles around internships. Such groups include Intern Aware, a campaign focussing on promoting fair access to the internship system, Internocracy who self-describe as a 'youth-led social enterprise passionate about changing the culture of internships for the better in the UK' and Interns Anonymous, a forum for interns to share their experiences and discuss the ethics of unpaid

employment. Beyond this, another example active example is found in the Carrotworkers Collective and the Precarious Workers Brigade who amalgamated to form a London-based group of current or ex- interns, cultural workers and educators, primarily from the creative and cultural sectors, who regularly meet to think together around the conditions of free labour. Other similar groupings include the Ragpickers and the Devil Pays Nada campaigns. Also noteworthy is the Pay Your Interns campaign, with their claim ‘Cheapskate employers named and shamed’.

Partially in response to the rise of activism over this issue, Arts Council England recently published its own set of intern guidelines (ACE, 2011), acknowledging the fact that the legislation making unpaid work illegal has been in place – and was often ignored – for a number of years now. In fact, the UK context into which Perlin’s book arrived was one in which some sporadic legal victories for interns perhaps indicated a turning of the tide, or at least a qualitative development, in the practice of offering unpaid internships. In November 2009, Reading Employment Tribunal ruled that Nicola Vetta, a film production intern who received expenses only, should have been classified as a regular employee and paid at least the minimum wage. In May 2011, Keri Hudson, a web journalism intern, won five weeks’ pay from a Central London Employment Tribunal for the same reason (ACE 2011:9). Together with these employment tribunal rulings has been the promise of other legal action – such as the ongoing NUJ Cashback for Interns campaign (NUJ, 2013), or BECTU interventions (BECTU, 2011).

Although the law has changed recently, the terms ‘intern’ and ‘internship’ do not appear in National Minimum Wage legislation, and while unpaid internships can still be advertised, an individual with worker status must be paid full NMW for their age range. However, in practice at least, the law remains opaque, allowing employers to avoid prosecution and continue using free work. While HMRC promises to investigate instances where it is being broken, it admits that ‘during 2012/13 it ordered nine firms to pay £200,000 to people who had worked for them as unpaid interns’ (Blears, 2013), this figure seems somewhat low, and HMRC refuses to identify any of the companies involved. Meanwhile, there are continuing daily reports of illegal internships being advertised and only recently, an anonymous magazine editor admitted in an interview with *Graduate Fog*, a portal campaigning on behalf of young journalists, that the large-scale, ongoing and organised exploitation of interns continues in that industry (Greenslade, 2013).

To return to the Hollywood context briefly mentioned at the beginning of this review, the fact that as a filmic portrayal *The Internship* hardly raises a smile is

made conversely somewhat amusing – in a sardonic sense – by the movie’s own obliviousness to the potential bleak irony inherent in its own double exploitation of the intern phenomenon. It mines the proceeds of the interns’ unpaid labour, not only on the level of content, but likewise from within its own ‘hidden abode’ – after all, the Hollywood movie industry is systematically reliant on the labour of unpaid interns. What adds the element of humour, however, is that finally the joke might be on the production companies and the big studios. A recent court ruling in the US has stated that two interns working on the production of last year’s hit movie, *The Black Swan* were ‘classified improperly as unpaid interns’ and are in fact ‘employees’ covered by the the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA), as well as New York’s labour laws and are thus entitled to minimum wages for the time that they worked for Fox Searchlight (Greenfield, 2013). The ruling also gave the green light for a possible class action suit, meaning that it might, at best, put an end to such practices, and at the very least, force corporations to urgently re-examine their internship policies (Hananel, 2013; Weissman, 2013). A similar class action suit against Hearst Publishing unfortunately failed, but with former interns at *Harper’s Bazaar*, and *Cosmopolitan* among others now pursuing separate cases (Greenfield, 2013), these examples demonstrate a significant shift in the debate and in the political organizing around this issue that has taken place since Perlin published his study. If one cannot claim that Perlin’s book brought on these somewhat welcome developments, then struggles around the issue have nevertheless likely been aided, inspired and indeed anticipated, by its publication, the above being just one example of the positive, for the interns at least, developments since the book first emerged.

Primarily in a US context, what Perlin certainly attempts and albeit tentatively, somewhat succeeds in doing, is to relate the continual drip-feed of legal developments, emergent loopholes and the steady flow of coverage and commentary to wider debates about the future of work and the wage in general (recently centered around authors such as, for example Kathi Weeks or Michael Denning). In a UK context, the (post?-)crisis economy remains particularly marred by high youth unemployment and the state’s disingenuous response in the form of the increasing introduction of workfare. The workfare debate, though dressed in the moralizing rhetoric of training, ‘bettering oneself’ or being deserving of social support can of course be seen as an attempt to drive down costs in terms of both government spending, but also those of employers, following an internship-style trajectory. Workfare however, inverts the intern, producing a direct disciplining of the labour-force, rather than incentive-led or aspirational approach. In this sense workfare might be the stick to the carrot described by the Carrot Workers’ Collective.

Perlin's text presents an important intervention into wider debates around precarity, for example the work of Guy Standing (2011), describing a lost generation of well-educated youth. Yet Perlin's offering not only shines some light on a world where unpaid labour is normalised and exploitation often goes unchallenged, it also serves as a reminder that systematised and generalised precarity is not simply a generational issue. Such a situation remains capitalism's default position and in a sense the internship simply represents one of a number of fronts upon which the uneasy consensus between organised labour and capital reached over the course of the twentieth century is being systematically rolled back by the now discredited, and yet still rampant, neoliberal agenda. However, in this sense it also admits a tiny glimmer of opportunity into the debate. In reminding us that internships are of concern beyond a generation of often somewhat affluent youngsters, and that they are in fact very much a class issue, Perlin at least points up a direction of travel. This is to say that in considering how to fight back against the abuse of interns, one might also start to think about class, exploitation and struggle alongside, but also beyond, the limitations of the wage-relation and the increasingly played-out discourses of its attendant labour movement.

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