

# Academic Labor - The Race and Struggle Against Proletarianization

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Field of Study: Political Science. The idea came from an undergraduate course on Marx's Capital by Dr. Sean McMahon. Dr. McMahon and his course deeply inspired me to engage in Marxian analysis.

*This paper uses a Marxian-inspired analytical framework to analyze academic laborers inside the institution of the university; It argues that academic labour does not fall astray from the mechanisms of domination and exploitation the capitalist mode of production. Professors and students are obliged to abide by the rules of the factory to increase and facilitate the accumulation of capital, namely through the imposition of piecework, quality control and overwork. Even though academic laborers perpetuate the values of the capitalist mode of production, their struggle against capitalist domination and exploitation inside the social factory has not gone unnoticed. The paper concludes with the ways in which professors constantly fight to achieve on the one hand, a more critical pedagogical experience and on the other, means of going against the rules prescribed by capital. This is elucidated through interviews conducted in a liberal arts university in Cairo. The institution of the university does not need further reforms, it needs to be revolutionized.*

*Keywords: Academic Labor, Critical Pedagogy, Marx, The University, Struggle*

## 1 Introduction

Given the current historical moment, institutions emulate the model of a corporation. One of the fundamental institutions that emulates this corporate model, is the university. The university has always been of prime importance to the reproduction of variable capital. For Althusser, the educational system formulates the ideological state apparatus whose function is to perpetuate the dominant system of values, most importantly, the values of the capitalist mode of production (Harvie, 2006, p. 2). The university incorporates both the wage work of administrators, staff and professors alongside the unwaged work of undergraduate students (Clever, 2017, p. 116). Concomitantly, there is a strict hierarchy of academic labor, composed of both: waged and unwaged labor.

In this paper, I argue that academic labor does not fall astray from the mechanisms of domination and exploitation the capitalist mode of production deploys to develop its production process. The university transforms the knowledge seeker to an appendage of the machine. I will do so in three sections. The first section examines the increasing process of proletarianization of academics. The second section discusses the relation between academics and piecework, quality control and over work. The final section presents the necessary synthesis of negation and creation as a struggle against our current neoliberal moment by empirically analyzing the forms of academic struggle that take place in a neoliberal institution. Throughout this research I deploy an Open Marxist inspired framework—it is essentially a theory of class struggle. Class struggle here understood as the constant contradictory movement between capital and labour. Most importantly, the theory emphasizes struggle *against* the various forms and categories imposed by the capitalist mode; not only is it a lens through which one can see the contradictions embedded in the capital-labour



relationship, it is also a lens through which one analyzes the ways in which this relationship can be transcended. Hence, my paper is divided into a theoretical part that analyzes contradiction and an empirical part that analyzes struggle and subversion.

## 2 The Proletarianization of Academic Labour

One of the interesting concepts Marx discusses is the different forms of the relative surplus population. The three-forms Marx discusses are: floating, latent and stagnant. What is of primary concern when talking about the university is the latent form. Even though the latent form varies historically, it is mainly comprised of yet to be proletarianized women and children, peasants, and the “displaced petty bourgeois” (Harvey, 2012, p. 278). It is important to note that the inner proceedings inside the university is not at all distant from any other institute that is subject to the same dynamics that drive down wages and increase unemployment (Powelson, 2011, p. 10). As a matter-of-fact David Harvey expresses the deep crises of proletarianization going on inside the academy (Harvey, 2012, p. 279). Consequently, professors are losing their sense of autonomy inside the university.

The relative embourgeoisement of the academic credentials of a professor does not give them immunity from the new working conditions which include various forms of political and economic exploitation, nor does it prevent new forms of struggle based on conflicting interest of work (Barrett & Meaghan, 1998). Increasingly, professors are becoming more and more proletarianized. Often the concept of proletarianization is accompanied by a relative loss of skill, however that does not seem to be the case here. One difference between the 19th century farmers who were repulsed from their land due to various developments in capitalist agriculture, and the proletarianized professor is that the academic is expected to have more skills and expertise than their counterparts in past generations (Powelson, 2011, p. 12). As a matter of fact, they are expected to maintain high levels of training and skills, even though their wages have substantially decreased and their workload increased (Powelson, 2011, p. 12). However, often celebrated attributes that are ascribed to professors such as skill, competence, and professional commitment, do not guarantee working conditions that include job security, adequate salaries and relative autonomy. Those ‘professional attributes’ are undermined by the daily activities of “cost-conscious academic managers”; salaried professors are after all wage-laborers, and hence, constantly in conflict with their employers (Barrett & Meaghan, 1998). According to Powelson, forty years ago, it was quite common for universities to give tenure track positions to academics who have not finished their terminal degrees; today however, an academic could not really hope for tenure unless she/he has an extensive teaching experience, a record of conference presentations, published articles and books (Powelson, 2011, p. 12). As a result, while the wages of academics have considerably declined, the requirements for a secured university position has substantially increased and the number of adjunct members increased. One of the reasons why the proportion of adjunct faculty members is relatively high, is because of the simple fact that they hold all the necessary professional qualifications that other tenured professors have, if not more, but are **paid less**.

Even though professors’ skills have not been deteriorated, their autonomy and discretion has been considerably fractured by the administration (Barrett & Meaghan, 1998), with the



ever-increasing requirements to subordinate their personal values to “organizational loyalty” or research institutes that fund professors’ research (Wilson, 1991, p. 251). According to Jennifer Washburn, university deans and provosts don’t really care about instructional quality and substance; they mostly care about the surplus value being generated from professors’ work. University administrators won’t be willing to defend subversive academic research, ones that directly challenge the neoliberal totality in the face of corporate donors (Seybold, 2008, p. 121). That is not to mention universities that are increasingly apprehensive about external State politics; such organizational loyalty in research universities per se, might be expressed in subordinating one’s research proposals and pedagogy to the institutes they are supposed to fund their research and secure their employment (Cleaver, 2016). Those circumstances profoundly infringe upon any professors’ “academic freedom,” if there are any.

### 3 Fetishisms and Struggle

The current neoliberal moment strives on dehumanizing people, on making people forcibly and systematically focus on the production of capitalist relations which are spewed with individualism, anti-community, metrics and alienation. It is because capital is very susceptible to ongoing crisis and very fragile to the effects of labor, that it is currently deploying all methods to subordinate people. As bell hooks would argue, education is the practice of freedom. I attempt to empirically analyze the ways in which university professors struggle against the neoliberal university inside and outside their classrooms i.e. their politics of resistance.

## 4 Methodology

### 4.1 Ethical Standards of Research

Throughout this research, responses are kept confidential to protect the identities of the interviewees. The names of the participants are replaced with pseudonyms. This research has all the required IRB approvals from the institution, and all documentations are safely handled in a password protected computer. The participants of this research were given enough information concerning the purpose of this study and they all had the option to participate or refuse.

### 4.2 Participants

The participants were four university professors. They were initially 5 professors, but one of them was laid off, so it was difficult to interview them. The participants were from different backgrounds in academia, yet highly informed on the subject; they were selected based on prior knowledge of their subversive politics and via snowballing method whereby each interviewee suggested others. The participants were asked through e-mail to have a face to face interview.



### 4.3 Methods and Procedures

The interviews were semi structured because I wanted to listen to the participants' experiences without constraint; they were free to express their experiences however they deemed fit. There were three interview questions, conducted in English in a neoliberal university. The interviews took approximately 30-60 minutes and were not recorded in order to make participants more comfortable about confidentiality; the information was gathered in a notebook.

## 5 Findings

I will categorize my findings into two diametrical themes: predatory neoliberal managerialism and myriad forms of academic struggle within the neoliberal University; these were the two key concepts that were predominant throughout the interviews. Each theme has different subsections within them that further exacerbate the dialectical relation between the negation of neoliberal institutional rules and the ways in which professors produce different alternatives.

### Neoliberal Managerialism inside the Egyptian Liberal Arts University

Throughout the interviews, the participants emphasized the **metric based system of productivity** prevalent in the Egyptian liberal arts institution. For instance, Dr. Mona said that there is a hegemony of discipline whereby faculty members are rewarded based on citation machines that determine the quality and variety of their research; this often results into favoring specific types of research over others. She also emphasized that the administration and provost office are filled with scientific oriented individuals who are typically STEM or Business majors; for Dr. Mona they seem to have a more tactical approach than a critical one. Similarly, Dr. Hannah highlighted the push for accountability that is done in a peculiar manner where faculty members in administrative positions are spending a lot of time doing reports and assessments instead of focusing on their teaching and research. She also mentioned that the administration measures productivity based on how many students took a course and not how proficiently the course was taught. As a professor who is responsible for some administrative procedures within her department, Dr. Hannah spends each semester justifying to the administration why specific advanced level courses have to continue being offered, even if they have less than 10 students enrolled. Dr. Hannah then said, "when you want students to get an education, efficiency should not be the right word," she then quotes "it's hard to mention the change in the human soul" and hence it is difficult to quantify what students absorb in the classroom. In similar fashion, Dr. Sarah emphasized that the decision making process of hiring new faculty is not the decision of already hired faculty members but is the decision of "headhunting" firms who are seeking to regulate who gets hired; she said "governance related capacities are taken over by consultancy and corporate managers." In terms of the relationship between professors and students, Dr. Noha suggested that the metric based system dilutes it; she mentioned grade inflation being a factor whereby high grades are given undeservingly so that professors could get better teaching evaluations. Dr. Noha also emphasized that with all these metric based measures, it's hard to measure **citizenship**, or the quality of being politically active and aware. Furthermore, Dr. Noha said that the University replaced the current fixed cleaning staff with a



subcontracted cleaning group that takes no benefits such as education or healthcare. She also talked about the new policies that prevented current staff members from “overworking” because it diverts their focus from their original role; this policy resulted in staff members not getting paid for their previously finished overwork. Dr. Noha also emphasized that even if they’re not getting paid for the overwork, some staff members would still choose to overwork so they could get good appraisal reports that potentially increase their salary.

Another aspect of neoliberal managerialism that was quite prevalent throughout the interviews was the tenure system deployed as a tool for pitting academics against each other. Dr. Mona mentioned that “getting tenured is harder than getting a Ph.D.”; she said that tenure is historically about free speech but as a repercussion, it denies all other people the privileges that tenured professors enjoy. Furthermore, for Dr. Mona tenured faculty can engage with their academia while other adjuncts are bombarded with overwork with little to nothing in return. She mentioned an article about how academia resembles a drug cartel where there are a lot of people at the periphery (adjuncts) who are willing to work endlessly with little benefits just so they can one day reach the core (tenure), which is of limited supply. When talking about the criteria of tenure, Dr. Mona emphasized that “with the neoliberal turn, it’s not clear whether they want quantity or quality, they’re using both the subjective and the objective criteria to limit tenure.” In her view, this could be subject to various procedural assaults. Similarly, for Dr. Sarah there is an increasing precarity of labor whereby there are less tenured faculty and more on short term contracts which undermines the faculty’s overall ability to produce scholarship and decreases affiliation with the institution. Concomitantly, Dr. Sarah mentioned that the board of trustees shouldn’t be the ones to determine who gets hired or fired because they often have political and academic agendas, and don’t have the same stake in the University as faculty members do. In similar fashion, Dr. Noha expressed that tenure is very exploitative; she alluded to the “dual exploitation of students and faculty” whereby the University is hiring more adjuncts on low salaries while students are paying so much money to get full time faculty who are presumably better qualified.

### **Academic Struggle inside the Egyptian Liberal Arts University**

The neoliberal moment is characterized by an increasing sense of atomization and alienation. Throughout the interviews, one of the ways in which professors in University struggle, is through an increasing sense of collectivity that is antithetical to neoliberal individualism. For Dr. Sarah one of the most important things she can do is be as loud as possible by objecting to things that may seem irrational and involving herself in questions of collective governance. However, Dr. Sarah emphasized that if one is too busy struggling against a predatory administration, there won’t be enough time dedicated to academia. The professor also said that being able to speak out with other faculty members is empowering and reassuring; Dr. Sarah mentioned that when faculty members voted no confidence in the University president and he still remained in office, it shows the concealed power relations because it is clear who has the ultimate decision making capacities. Furthermore, Dr. Sarah said that she was obliged as a tenured faculty member to speak out for other relatively disempowered employees. Similarly, Dr. Noha also pressed the importance of fighting for the rights of staff and adjuncts who are often mistreated or abused by the administration. The professor also emphasized the notion of collegiality; she knows a lot of faculty members



from other departments and hence feels the need to constantly struggle against the administration. In similar fashion, Dr. Hannah and Dr. Noha talked about their involvement in the aaup (American Association of University Professors) chapter that pertains to this University. Dr. Hannah emphasized that acting collectively is the only way anything can change. Concomitantly, Dr. Hannah stressed that in this University there are concerned faculty who are the group of faculty members who are appalled by the idea of unionizing because it disrupts their class status; they don't want to resemble blue collared workers. However, nowadays Dr. Hannah said that tenured people who are used to people listening to them are realizing that they have to cooperate and not just depend on their class status because technically the University can make tenured professors' working environment quite deplorable. Dr. Hannah pressed the need for a collective fight, but she does acknowledge that not everyone is willing (concerned faculty) nor able (adjuncts and staff whose jobs are on the line) to fight an administration that does not respect them. In terms of faculty governance, Dr. Hannah makes sure that full timers all get a vote on decisions pertaining their department and, that adjuncts are also incorporated by asking them about their research preferences and their options.

Given that one of the university's primary functions is to educate students, the classroom is often a space of struggle. Throughout the interviews, there were different conceptualizations on how the classroom is a site of struggle. For Dr. Mona, the only way she can struggle is through her classroom; she described the internal satisfaction she got when she felt that students "got it" and critically understood the world around them. Similarly, for professors like Dr. Sarah the classroom is about discussing politically sensitive topics. Moreover, she expressed that exams are quite "stupid," but the notion of grades in and of itself doesn't really matter because there will always be some notion of hierarchy that divides students. However, Dr. Noha seemed to have another conceptualization of the whole process of grading; the professor lets students self-assess their performance and then negotiate the grade with her throughout the semester. The professor further explained that grades are normally set according to one of three standards: standard relative to some specific benchmark, relative to other people and relative to yourself and your relative improvement; Dr. Noha attempts to incorporate all three into her system of grading.

## 6 Conclusion

The knowledge factory is subject to the process of marketization and financialization; academic laborers are constantly being produced and reproduced for the purpose of capital accumulation. They become increasingly abstracted; the prime focus is not on the exchange of knowledge, but on the appropriation of the form of payment. Academics are alienated from their labor power commodity that is, literally and figuratively, sold. Through my research I was able to draw the conclusion that we need to conceptualize another model of the university, one that reinforces collegiality and collectivity—that can ultimately be done by revolting and struggling against the rules dictated by capital.





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