



## Charting the Terrain of Struggle in the Global University

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**review of:**

The Edu-factory Collective (eds) (2009) *Toward a Global Autonomous University. Cognitive Labor, The Production of Knowledge, and Exodus from the Education Factory*. New York: Autonomedia (PB: pp. 196, \$14.95, ISBN: 978-1-57027-204-2).

The Edu-Factory's project began on the basis of a simple tenet: "What was once the factory, is now the university". Starting with analysis and critique of the rise of "cognitive capitalism" and the commodification of education, the Edu-Factory Collective took shape around the need for action against these trends. It emerged as an organization seeking to create a community of "struggle and exodus, for the political composition of differences in a space-time of class, just as the factory was for the working class" (8).

This project – and, subsequently, their recent collection – is fraught with tensions. And these tensions may constitute the volume's greatest assets. The clear focus in this volume is on generating analysis of the contemporary conditions of higher education; connecting struggles on the ground; and creating a language with which to find commonalities and articulate important differences. This was the goal when the Edu-Factory opened up a series of online discussions around several themes: conflicts over knowledge production in the global university, processes of hierarchization in the educational marketplace, cognitive capitalism and labour, and the constitution of autonomous education projects. These discussions gave birth to many of the essays in *Toward a Global Autonomous University*.

One of the benefits of such a forum is that it provides space for creating common languages. Much to their credit, the Edu-Factory approach to organizing forums for communication did not presuppose the terms and conditions of the critique they offer. Instead of policing language, the Edu-factory has created a "space where struggles connect, a space of resistance and organizational experiments" (3). To describe and affirm this benefit, the Edu-factory collective has used the concept of "heterolingual translation", which they define as "the construction of the common starting from the multiplicity of forms of resistance and from movements of living knowledge" (6), and

which Sakai and Solomon see “as a social movement of ‘permanent translation’... devoted to producing the multitude of foreigners we can become” (137-8).

The result is a series of essays that are often disjointed and at times at odds with one another; the arguments and perspectives expressed in the book’s 24 chapters reveal tensions inherent to such a project. But contrary to expectations, such tensions serve to constitute the volume’s coherence: each of these chapters appears as a piece of a well-informed and passionate conversation.

The essays that comprise this volume – and the tensions that characterize the spaces between them – speak toward the socio-political commitments of the Edu-Factory more broadly. By beginning with the incommensurable forms of resistance and living knowledge, many of these essays invert the dominant, capitalist narratives of higher education that portray progress as driven by bureaucratic or capitalist decision-makers and the market. This inversion is evident not only in the authors’ analyses but also in the Edu-factory’s selection of essays: much of the book is devoted to narratives of the productivity of struggles around the university. These include: resistance to neoliberal retrenchment in South Africa by unions of university staff, Greek students occupying hundreds of universities to protest marketizing reforms, student resistance in France against the precarization of the labour force, “open source unionism” in the US among contingent faculty, the Counter-Cartography Collective’s mapping the terrain of precarious university labour and life, and autonomous education experiments in India, the US, and Argentina.

These narratives of struggles, as well as the volume’s more theoretical pieces, are interlaced with tensions between some of their key concepts. Some conflicts emerge over the question of the most effective language for describing the antagonisms in these struggles. Here we focus our review around just a set of these tensions: the relative efficacy of the concepts of cognitive capitalism, the common(s), and the public vs. private dichotomy. We conclude by highlighting the essays’ contributions that move beyond critique and toward reimagining higher education in the form of a “global autonomous university” or otherwise.

## 1. Cognitive Capitalism

The use of “cognitive capitalism” – a concept that emerged as central to the Edu-Factory’s project – is both further developed and interrogated in the volume’s section devoted to that theme. Carlo Vercellone defines it as:

a system of accumulation in which the productive value of professional and scientific work becomes dominant and the central stakes in the valorization of capital relate directly to the control and transformation of knowledge into fictitious goods (119).

Writing on the anti-CPE movement in France, Vercellone contends that, in “cognitive capitalism”, with the increasingly collectively shared character of knowledge:

it is this intellectual quality of the labor force which, breaking with industrial capitalism, led to the assertion of a new primacy of living knowledge, mobilized by workers, in contrast to the knowledge incorporated in fixed capital and the managerial organization of firms (120).

The response of capitalism to this development of collective labour's capacities was to deploy neoliberal policies, a model of regulation that entailed processes of precarization: "the multiplication of precarious forms of work (fixed term contract, interim, apprenticeship, subsidized employment, non-voluntary part-time labor, etc.) and a break from standard Fordist full-time and stable employment" (122). Similarly, in Greece, "a wave of neoliberal reforms came to push the university even more towards the direction of the market" (106).

In addition to these analyses of the socio-economic patterns of the reforms, some authors examine their effects on the subjectivities of individual students. Jason Read's essay fleshes out how, under cognitive capitalism, subjectivity becomes a key terrain of struggle. Such struggles emerge "between different practices, practices that ultimately produce different modes of living and thinking; that is, different formations of subjectivity" (151). Vercellone's discussion illustrates this point, detailing how precarization makes the majority of students in France need to work in order to finance their studies, and how many of them occupied their schools to oppose proposed regulations that would intensify this precarization. Similarly, in the US context, cognitive capital, marketization and increased student tuition have restructured students' subjectivities into market-oriented, indentured, precarious forms. Jeffrey Williams narrates how student debt is "not just a mode of financing but a mode of pedagogy", teaching students the lessons that "higher education is a consumer service", that career paths are constrained to those most lucrative for paying off the debt, that the capitalist market is "natural, inevitable, and implacable", that the state's role is to help capital, that citizens should pay their own way rather than lazily leeching off the state, that a person's worth is measured "according to one's financial potential", and that the appropriate attitude toward life is a continually stressed-out "fear of falling" from one's social position (94-6).

The making-precarious of university life affects teachers as well. In the US, Eileen Schell's describes how for-profit educational institutions make profits by "outsourcing" their entire faculty labour to "to contingent faculty or they employ a few big name professors to design online courses (course ware) that are then facilitated by online contingent faculty" (116). Marc Bousquet details administrators' "cybernetic management model" that "teaches the utility of maintaining a large disposable faculty both for meeting financial targets and for quick restructuring to meet new presidential priorities" (102).

Despite the work that the concept of cognitive capitalism does for these authors, George Caffentzis and Silvia Federici take the concept's analytical and strategic application to task, arguing for the importance of paying attention to the contexts in which such concepts are deployed. At stake, they argue, is the possibility of recreating the very hierarchies that these authors and others involved in the movement seek to dismantle. Capitalist accumulation has thrived through its capacity to create and exploit disparities between developed and underdeveloped areas, waged and un-waged labour, and thereby, to create sexual, racial, and geographic divisions in the working class (127). "In other words, a leap forward for many workers, has been accompanied by a leap backward by many others, who are now even more excluded from the "global discourse", and certainly not in the position to participate in global cooperation

networks based upon the internet” (128). The disparities of access to the internet represent an obstacle for the Edu-factory project, an obstacle that some of the articles take up through interrogating processes of hierarchization across different modes of knowledge production.

Caffentzis and Federici are also concerned “that by privileging one kind of capital (and therefore one kind of worker) as being the most productive, the most advanced, the most exemplary of the contemporary paradigm, etc., we create a new hierarchy of struggle, and we engage in form of activism that precludes a recomposition of the working class”. Against any assumption of the working class’s recomposition automatically happening through a homogenization of work along “cognitive” lines, Caffentzis and Federici argue that such re-composition must be contextually sensitive. Any strategies for the working class struggle must be constructed across different forms of labour from their different situations in the international division of labour, while aiming to overcome those divisions (129).

## 2. Private vs. Public vs. the Common(s)

Many of the aforementioned authors see the distinction between “public” and “private” to be breaking down under new regimes of “cognitive capitalism”. However, other writers find the “public vs. private” binary to still be useful from the perspective of their struggles. In Franco Barchiesi’s account of restructuring the University of Witwatersrand in South Africa, he criticizes the “corporate university”, “privatization”, and “marketization” for making the university “public” in name only: “a far cry from the notion of the university as a public research institution promoting a diversified, general, and critical knowledge” (69). Considering the continuation of the legacy of apartheid in the systemic academic exclusion of black students “due to outstanding debts and the inability to pay admission fees”, South African unions’ and student movements’ demands for a more public, egalitarian university could be useful for combating that racist legacy.

A similar argument could be made in the context of the US, because of its own legacy of apartheid from centuries of slavery, segregation, and institutional racism.<sup>1</sup> Christopher Newfield highlights intertwined race and class disparities in American education: with increasing tuition, increasing student debt exacerbates these inequalities, such that “Latinos and African Americans are more likely to have unacceptable levels of student debt and to default on their debt later, which can create havoc in their personal lives”; likewise, they are increasingly excluded from elite universities, thereby entrenching race and class hierarchies (182). In the face of such systematic inequality, and against conservatives’ attacks on public education, Newfield argues for the potential effectiveness of appeals to a “public” ideal: “a new democratization movement that sees the public university as a cornerstone” (182-3).

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1 On contemporary racial, economic, and linguistic segregation in and through the American education system, see Kozol (2006).

Caffentzis and Federici, based on their history of the work of the Committee for Academic Freedom in Africa, also see strategic value in the “public” ideal, while recognizing its drawbacks: “we agree that we should resist the dismantling of public education, even though schools are also instruments of class rule and alienation” (126). Rather than assuming that we can simply step outside of capitalist relations, they argue that we should follow students’ movements in seeing universities as “not just nurseries for the leaders of a neoliberal elite, they are also a terrain for debate, contestation of institutional politics, and reappropriation of resources”; and, it is through engaging on this terrain, and “connecting the struggles in the campuses to the struggles in other parts of the social factory, that we create alternative forms of education and alternative educational practices”.

In contrast, the Edu-factory collective and a number of other authors theorize the alternative educational ideal as an institution operating outside of a system that legitimates, and benefits from, a distinction between “public” and “private”. Using such concepts as “institutions of the common”, “living knowledge”, “knowledge as a commons”, and “autonomous educational institutions”, these authors seek to create the conditions to escape and exceed the status quo. In their introduction, the Edu-factory collective contends, “it is not simply a matter of public disinvestment and the growing private investment in the higher education sector: rather, it is the very dialectic between public and private that is breaking down” (8). They identify the “public” ideal with the State, and argue against recourse to the State, as it, “just like the “mandarin” government in universities, is in fact the guarantor of corporatization, going so far as to cease distinguishing between itself and private organizations”.

A reason they give for their move away from the “public” ideal is that, with processes of globalization, new relationships arise between spatial territory and the governance and labour of higher education. This is seen most obviously in the move from national to transnational forms of higher education reforms, such as the Bologna process at the Europe-wide level, as well as in the rise of a global market for higher education with universities competing for international rankings and revenue. Less obviously, Mezzadra and Neilson show how, simultaneously with the destabilizing of nation-state borders, new borders are recomposed and multiplied internally. In the proliferation of the internal borders of China, the division of labour “tends to function through a continuous multiplication of control devices that correspond to the multiplication of labor regimes and the subjectivities” (86). Within these internally divided spaces, labour exploitation intensifies through “a process of implosion by which previously separated actors are forced into interlinked systems of labor extraction”.

Another reason for moving away from an ideal of the “public” is observing the trend toward the disintegration of the distinctions between universities and global corporations. Marc Bousquet describes how the university, since the 1980s, becomes more corporate with the adoption of the strategies of the “new public management”. Likewise, Andrew Ross details the more recent trend of increased “offshoring” – establishing overseas locations – by all types of higher education institutions. Simultaneously, the other side of the blurring of universities and corporations has been “the migration of our own academic customs and work mentalities onto corporate campuses and into knowledge industry workplaces” (30). This convergence has



Against cognitive capitalism's attempts to harness this labour through "the creation of artificial units of cognitive measure", students and precarious workers have struggled to avoid "a continual reduction – a monolingual translation – of living knowledge's production times to time units of abstract labor" (11). Beyond labour unions' focus on organizing waged labour in spatio-temporally fixed workplaces, new forms of organizing try to expand affective relationships of care, solidarity, and mutual aid across all spaces and times of life, as a kind of "biosyndicalism".<sup>2</sup>

The project of self-organizing labour and education relations is also central for the Universidad Experimental in Argentina. Against subscriptions to the subjectivity of "consuming student", they call for permanently problematizing our own subjectivities and collectivities (163). Further, they thematize a key tension between their projects' ideals and the existing terrain of struggle: that any "resources" they receive or take from universities for their own projects must be treated as "poisoned gifts", recognizing their potentials to improve their capacities while simultaneously avoiding recuperation of their insurgent energies. Another approach to this tension is seen in the Counter-Cartographies Collective's mappings of the complex assemblages that compose the University of North Carolina. Mapping this terrain allows them to "see a set of distinct forces, each with its own logics and discourses, which at this particular moment have coincided to form an apparently coherent vision for the future of the university"; also, to consider potentials and obstacles to the university's becoming "a form that can incubate more and more counter-institutions within and despite of itself" (113).

The tension between the ideals and practices of autonomous education projects is theorized most explicitly in Stefano Harney and Fred Moten's eloquent essay. This tension is built into the concept of "undercommons", which raises the question of how the subversive intellectual can be *in* but not *of* the university, i.e., treating it as a "place of refuge" and a source of resources for subversive projects without losing one's ideals in the process of professionalization. They consider how, under conditions of increasing precarization, teachers can organize themselves from within those conditions, living for "the beyond of teaching ... allowing subjectivity to be unlawfully overcome by others" (147). To escape the professionalizing disqualification of the joys of their teaching labour, they can go "with hands full into the underground of the university, into the Undercommons". Along the lines of the recent motto of the Anomalous Wave student movement in Italy, "we won't pay for your crisis", Harney and Moten describe how the university tries to offload its crises onto students, making them "come to see themselves as the problem" (148). The university needs teachers to impose on students this "self-diagnosing" lesson. Yet, this increasingly precaritized "labour upon labour" creates risks for the university, because, "like the colonial police force recruited unwittingly from guerrilla neighbourhoods, university labor may harbor refugees, fugitives, renegades, and castaways", who can organize themselves into "maroon communities" (149). Against attempts to disqualify them as "unprofessional", Harney and Moten call on these maroons to see the Undercommons as a perpetual war

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2 On organizing 'biosyndicalism' in conditions of precarious life and labor, see Papadopoulos et al. (2008).

in which they must collectively “problematize themselves, problematize the university, force the university to consider them a problem, a danger”.<sup>3</sup>

With the exception of a few well-developed essays, the in-depth analyses and theories which feed into these discussions appear in publications elsewhere. But each chapter here is generative – the development of concepts and strategies for action, a critical analysis of recent trends, or a history of struggles. The collection as a whole is valuable for those already active in the politics of higher education. But, more importantly perhaps, it furnishes an excellent teaching tool. For students within and beyond the walls of academia, this volume provides an overview of the multiplicity of struggles going on around the world over education – struggles that are often irreducible to a single framework or language of analysis, but nevertheless are brought into conversation. The volume is quite inspiring, as it opens one’s eyes to the possibility of collective action across those hetero-linguistic communities, while providing starting points for further exploration and rich fodder for debate.

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3 For further theorization of the “undercommons”, see Shukaitis (2009).