Net/Working in the Edu-factory

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I'd like to begin with the observation that, as was so vividly dramatized in the Academy Award-winning film *The Social Network,* the university was the "primal scene" of that most august of social media sites Facebook. It is no accident. When has the university *not* been about social networking, or net/working social life? When has it not been an apparatus for producing and incubating relationships and modes of sociality, first among social elites, today among a much broader range of people? How many of us, for instance, met the loves of our lives (or our loves of the moment) at university? And it's not just us inmates of the asylum: as a greater and greater proportion of youth pass through our halls, as the so-called labour market seems to demand bachelors' and even masters' degrees where once they required only high-school diplomas or informal apprenticeships, the university is emerging not merely as a source of a commodity called "higher learning" but as a key site of contemporary "biopolitics": the production of life itself.

In a funny way, the university, part feudal, part neoliberal, has become a key site, if not *the* key site of capitalist production. This is the thesis of a consortium of radical scholars and activists, students, professors, and

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precarious academic workers, who call themselves The Edu-factory Collective. This initiative originated in Italy and England and today counts contributors from Japan to Tunisia, Mexico to India, and Nigeria to Poland. Their organizing thesis is that "as once the factory, now the university": where once, in an industrial economy, the factory was the key site of the industrial capitalist production of values and life, today, in the knowledge economy, the university has become the pivotal and iconic institution of the new capitalism. While at first blush this may seem hyperbolic, Edu-factorians point out the way the university has become an apparatus of what Carlo Vercellone calls "cognitive capitalism," a tendency in the global division of labour based increasingly on communication and connectivity, one that, more than ever, depends on harnessing people's creativity, agency, and intellectual life. From the need to constantly accelerate consumerism to the way global production chains are stitched together through communicative labour, from the incessant exhortation to "entrepreneurship" to the mushrooming prominence of the (largely-feminized) "service sector," global capitalism as a whole relies on our *mental* and *social* labour as never before. Even more so, it relies—as sociologists Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello note—on the *production of networks*, on people fabricating, traversing, and exploiting connectivities. In a world where the welfare state erodes and where we are taught to expect no job security or pension, where we can rely only on ourselves, and where we must constantly compete with one another in order to not only succeed but survive, we are each tasked with becoming creators and facilitators of personal networks in an information economy.

The Edu-factory

Within this new milieu, the university and the humanities take on several new roles. First, the university becomes a key "switch" in global networks of power and privilege, working as a means to separate, segment, and place in hierarchies members of the global "cognitariat." The university has become an iconic facilitator of global flows, a space where public and private are negotiated, where the for-profit sector and the not-for-profit sector court one another, where the common good and individual ambitions are put into dialogue. While a more valorized aspect of this occurs in the "STEM" fields (science, technology, engineering, medicine—partnered with major corporations), we in the humanities are no less part of that system, if only (at worst) to provide the veneer of scholarly integrity and critical inquiry. But we also provide shared cultural signposts and, importantly in our field of English language and literature, enable the liquid

deployment, transmission, and reception of information and ideas. In a strange way, we have always taught and researched social networking: the collective production of meaning, the way cultural value, subjectivity, and possibility is a negotiation of shared narratives and discursive techniques.

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Second, the university has become a fulcrum of what Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri call "biopolitical production," a place where life is made and remade by the millions of students, workers, and others who pass through the institution. Once, critical scholars spoke of the "hidden curriculum" of higher education as the enculturation of rote learning and hierarchies of knowledge and power that prepared workers for life in turgid factories and soul-sucking office towers (Giroux and Penna 34). Today, the hidden curriculum of the edu-factory is the training of individuals to *net/work*, to develop a neoliberal work-of-the-self fundamentally based in social networking: building tenuous and disposable linkages to maximize personal leverage in a world without guarantees. Jeffrey Williams has, for instance, noted what he calls the "pedagogy of debt," the way the compulsory borrowing is a form of education in and of itself which prepares students for a life of financialized precariousness. So the postpublic university itself has become a factory for the production of the new, flexibilized subject of the emergent Age of Austerity.

Third, the university becomes a laboratory for new forms of labour discipline. The old mirthless one-liner that academics are free to chose which seventy hours per week they work is no longer an inside joke but a rueful commentary on the transformation of work in the "new economy" as a whole, with its tendency toward part-time, precarious, and casual employment. We eager, often precarious aspirants toward academic "careers" are, ironically, both holding out for what Stanley Aronowitz calls "the last good job in America" (with tenure, casual summers, and a considerable modicum of collaborative workplace management) and, at the same time, as Andrew Ross notes, model workers for an age of neoliberalism—struggling tooth and nail to compete in a prestige-based economy without guarantees. The grinding combination of budget cuts, peer evaluation, the impetus to "publish or perish," the reliance on part-time, temporary, and "casual" teaching staff, and the overproduction of doctoral students all speak not only to the transformation of the university into a pared-down teaching machine but to the way the university has come to prefigure the forms of what Tiziana Terranova calls "soft control" and the insidious self-exploitation that is quickly being foisted on the rest of the workforce as trade unions and workers' rights are systematically dismantled.

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Against the Never-ending End of History

Where once the smug neoliberal proclamation of the "end of history" promised that the rising tide of liberated capitalism would "lift all boats," today world leaders and pundits all admit that we are entering an age of eternal austerity and limitless decline—what I have elsewhere called "necro-neoliberalism." We in academe have suffered for a long time with neoliberal cuts and belt-tightening, waiting for a moment when things would return to a "normal" we assumed existed *before* the hiring freezes, *before* the massive spikes in enrolments, *before* the neglect of the humanities by growing cadres of seemingly pointless senior administrators infatuated with research "deliverables."

But the good times are *never coming back*. They are on the horizon of no mainstream political imagination in the global North. Student and faculty uprisings in Spain, in England, in Tunisia, in Mexico are grounded in a furious (if yet fully self-actualizing) refusal of this confiscation of the future. They are based in the shared experience of the university as the site where youth are compelled to borrow and pay to wait out a labour market that has no real use for them. For students everywhere, the university, and now graduate schools, are spaces of exile from the world, pay-per-use storage facilities for excess populations. More cynically, universities have become spaces where youth can, through a series of disciplinary procedures, be weaned off the middle-class expectations of their forebearers (of economic security, of a debt-free life, of decent, steady work doing something meaningful).

But they have also become key spaces for organizing social networks, for stitching together common meanings and forms of communication and building *solidarity*, and for becoming staging grounds for massive protest movements. The Edu-factory Collective's provocatively titled book *Toward a Global Autonomous University* demands that we imagine the future of the university beyond restoring the feudal academy to a hallowed place within a necro-neoliberal world or defending the university as a site of elite cultivation. Rather, it asks us to reimagine the university as a fulcrum toward a very different society, as both a model and a reactor for new social networks, new modes of affinity and possibility.

Whither the humanities amidst the imperative to net/work? What are the humanities if not the study of how social networks solidify around text and the way texts are essential tools by which we cohere or disrupt social networks? At our best, we impart to our students and discover in our research how social and cultural values are produced and reproduced

in the historically specific patterns of "social networking." I dare say we are better trained than information or social scientists to comprehend the logic of how networks (*textuses*) are woven and rewoven and how they weave and reweave their weavers. And it is this vocation we should perhaps keep in mind when considering how to engage with the new social media. Presently, like the necro-neoliberal university, these media are symptomatic and constitutive of a moment of "cognitive capitalism" that would see the ultimate value of social networks as the production of profit, regardless of the human and ecological cost. If we have a role to play today it is teaching students, society, and ourselves how *we are always already social net/working* and how we might do so in ways that (re)produce values we would likely all want to see, including equality, autonomy, creativity, and social justice.

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