

# **The neoliberal transformation of university and restructuring of academic labour**

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## **Abstract**

*This study examines the neoliberal transformation of the university, focusing on the significant changes in the organisation and orientation of academic labour. Academic labour has become increasingly fragmented, intensified, and eroded under managerial control and panoptic surveillance. A neoliberal labour regime contradicts the nature of academic work and destroys the potential for the development of the general intellect.*

**Keywords:** *Academic labour, neoliberalism, universal labour, general intellect, alienation, creativity.*

## **Introduction**

The university, like all public institutions, has changed dramatically since the rise of neoliberalism in the 1980s in developed Western countries. Within the last few decades, the traditional university has been replaced by the commodified neoliberal university (Peters, and Jandrić, 2018). The neoliberal university is characterized by “increased privatization and interventions in the organization of academic activities, inspired by discourses emerging from business and mainstream economics to implement auditing systems, efficiency measures, new financial management practices, cost-cutting, and so-called excellence measures” (Sørensen, and Traweek, 2022, p.3). Significant cuts in government funding are forcing universities to generate their own income and

become business-like corporations (Maisuria, and Helmes, 2019). Students and their families have been forced to shoulder a greater share of university costs (Mitchell, Leachman, and Saenz, 2019).

The rise of neoliberalism, with its tenets of commodification, competition and consumerism, promotes the market-oriented and entrepreneurial business model in higher education. Neo-liberal practices of profit maximisation, aggressive competitiveness and rugged individualism are becoming increasingly dominant in higher education in developed Western countries (Zawadzki and Jensen, 2020).

David Harvey (2005) has defined neoliberalism as “a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterised by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade” (p.2). The ‘free-market evangelists’ view market mechanisms such as competition and profit as the primary means of promoting individual freedoms.

Neoliberal reforms of higher education promote the transformation of the traditional university into an entrepreneurial university. In the current reform of higher education, the traditional Humboldtian model of the university of the university is seen as ‘old-fashioned’ (Ash, 2014). Bill Readings, in his book “The University in Ruins”, has provided a critical analysis of the transition from the modern university based on the nation-state to postmodern universities transformed into multinational corporations.

The concept of academic capitalism provides a framework for understanding the complex and multifaceted changes taking place in universities as a result of the increasing influence of market and market-like practices (Slaughter and Rhoades, 2004a). Slaughter and Rhoades (2004b) suggest conceptualising the

transformation of the university as “a shift from a public good knowledge/learning regime to an academic capitalist regime” (p.19). The concept of academic capitalism offers critical perspective on the potential consequences of the increasing commercialisation of higher education.

Despite extensive analyses of the various dimensions of the implementation of neoliberal reforms, the field of higher education “suffers from a severe undertheoretization” (Szadkowski and Krzeski, 2022). The critique of the neoliberal transformation of the university focuses mainly on market relations. The theory of academic capitalism relies on the use of market and quasi-market terms to conceptualise capitalist relations (Szadkowski and Krzeski, 2022).

The key distinction between the *phenomenal appearance* of things and their *inner essence* has a long history, from ancient Greek philosophy to Hegel’s system. For K. Marx, market relations can be considered as the level of phenomenal appearance, while the production process is the inner essence of the capitalist mode of production. Social relations are understood as relations between individuals who enter into relations of equality at the level of phenomenal appearance. “...it is only through the sphere of production that one can understand the true meaning of exploitation in a given society, i.e., the capture and appropriation of the products of someone else’s labour” (Szadkowski and Krzeski, 2022).

The neoliberal transformation of the university has been accompanied by a profound and permanent reorganisation of the labour process. In the last decade, a large body of studies on academic labour have appeared (Hall, 2018a, 2018b; Vostal, 2016, McCarthy et al., 2017; Allmer, 2019). Academic labour has been studied through the prism of different disciplines, including political economy, sociology, management, education, political science and cultural studies. Critical reflection on the body of research on academic labour has revealed

significant shortcomings and research gaps. “The academic labour studies literature tends to be essayistic in style, hardly engaging on a theoretical level, but criticising neoliberal developments, romanticising the ‘golden age’ of universities and wanting to restore Fordist configurations” (Allmer, 2019).

Rethinking writings on academic labour, Winn (2015) argues “...there is relatively little critical engagement with labour itself as the object of critique” (p.2). McCarthy et al. (2017) argue that “there is an under-theorisation of research work from a political economy perspective” (p.1020).

This paper provides a conceptual overview and theoretical examination of academic labour. Drawing on Marx’s categorical apparatus, I argue that it can provide a critical framework for understanding academic labour. The paper addresses the relationship between the neoliberal transformation of the university and the reconstruction of academic labour. Neoliberal reforms in higher education imply the devaluation of academic labour and negatively affect the lives of academic workers (Zawadzki and Jensen, 2020; Cardozo, 2017).

Four points are raised in this paper: first, it questions whether academic labour could be understood in terms of universal labour and general intellect. Second, it proposes that the increasing dominance of abstract labour is leading to an erosion of the potentially creative dimensions of academic work. Third, it will examine some aspects of the alienation reinforced by the neoliberal labour regime. Fourth, it will raise the question of the subjectivity that the neoliberal labour regime generates on the basis of efficiency, calculability and control. The paper discusses some of the implications of applying the Taylorite notions of scientific management and the techniques of the business-industrial world to the university (Taylor, 1998, Callahan, 1962).

## **Redefining the academic labour**

The implementation of neoliberal reforms in higher education has destroyed the romantic, idealistic view of the university as an ‘ivory tower’. The metaphor of the university as an ivory tower refers to a place where academics are detached from the real world. The definition of the university as an ‘ivory tower’ is as an institution for ‘the disinterested pursuit of truth by curiosity-driven scholars’ (Chantler, 2016, p.217). Neoliberal reforms, through the rapid commercialisation of the modern university, are pushing for the elimination of the ‘ivory tower’. We need to move beyond the neoliberal imaginary, based on the celebration of market-oriented practices and begin to see the university as a unique workplace for staff and students.

The profound changes in the university as a workplace can only be understood if they are conceptualised within the capitalist mode of production (Allmer, 2019). The neoliberal restructuring of the university can be seen as a response to the secular crisis of capitalism. The current crisis of capitalism is the result of overproduction, underconsumption and a collapse in global rates of profit (Carchedi and Roberts 2013; Harvey 2013). A restructuring of the university has emerged to expand the production of surplus value through the commodification of formerly public goods (such as health, welfare and education) (Hall, 2018b). The privatisation and commodification of public goods is a new form of accumulation based on the expropriation of “the results of past struggles by workers for the redistribution of surplus value in the form of universal public services” (Huws, 2013, p.127). The commercialisation of public services is crucial to the expansion of international capital. The financial crisis of 2008, which coincided with a crisis of profitability for international capital, intensified trends towards the commodification of higher education.

In response to the decline in labour productivity and the fall in the rate of profit, there is a tendency to include sectors traditionally considered ‘unproductive’ in

the process of capitalist reproduction in order to contain the economic crisis in the global North (Hall, 2015). The transition from a Fordist to a post-Fordist regime of accumulation and from a Keynesian to a neoliberal mode of regulation entails a radical restructuring of academic labour (Allmer, 2019).

According to Moulier-Boutang (2011, p.113), cognitive capitalism is “a paradigm, or a coherent research programme, that poses an alternative to post-Fordism”. Vercellone (2007) challenges theories of post-Fordism as inadequate to capture the profound changes in the relationship between capital and labour and proposes the term ‘cognitive capitalism’ to conceptualise the development of an economy based on the driving role of knowledge. Moreover, the concept of cognitive capitalism emerged in the context of a critique of neoclassical theories of the knowledge economy, which failed to address the antagonism between capital and labour (Vercellone, 2005).

Vercellone (2007) distinguishes three stages in the development of the capitalist division of labour: 1. the stage of formal subsumption of labour (from the 16th to the 19th century); 2. the stage of real subsumption, which begins with the first industrial revolution; 3. the stage of cognitive capitalism. It begins with the social crisis of Fordism and the emergence of a ‘diffuse intellectuality’ (‘mass intellectuality’ in Virno’s sense) (Virno, 2007). This stage was called “the capitalism of the general intellect” (Vercellone, 2007, p.33). The paradoxical term ‘communism of capital’ has also been used to characterise the rise of the general intellect (Beverungen et al., 2013). Cognitive capitalism creates a new form of subsumption, defined as the ‘subsumption of the general intellect’ (Vercellone, 2007). Some researchers propose the use of the term ‘bio-capitalism’, which refers to the ‘subsumption of life’ (Fumagalli, 2019). In ‘bio-capitalism’, the basis of accumulation is broadened to include wider areas of human life, such as education, care, cultural, artistic and leisure activities. In

other words, the dominance of dead labour over living labour takes the form of ‘the subsumption of life’ (Fumagalli, 2019).

Smith (2013) challenges this optimistic view of the flourishing of the general intellect in the post-Fordist mode of regulation, arguing that the theory of cognitive capitalism is based on an “underestimation of the restrictions on the diffusion of the general intellect in contemporary capitalism.” Furthermore, Caffentzis and Federici (2009) argue that the theory of cognitive capitalism, with its one-dimensional emphasis on the role of knowledge, underestimates the broader global capitalist division of labour that entails multiple forms of exploitation.

What is perhaps more significant, and characteristic of the current debate, is that the changing configuration of intellectual labour is being examined through the lens of concepts such as ‘cognitive capitalism’, ‘general intellect’, ‘immaterial labour’ (Dyer-Witheford, 2005). Universities have been characterised as places of ‘immaterial labour’ in the double sense of this term: “they are the locales where future ‘immaterial labourers’ are trained and taught. And this training and teaching is itself an immaterial labour, in which information and communication is used to shape the emergent commodity - the student – that will result from the academic process” (Dyer-Witheford, 2005, p.77). The term ‘immaterial labour’ refers to “the labour that produces the informational and cultural content of the commodity” (Lazzarato, 1996, p.133). The term ‘immaterial labour’ itself is problematic because it has a purely negative orientation towards material labour. Identifying the ‘cultural’ and the ‘informational’ with the non-material involves a simplistic and reductionist approach to the material as physical. A physicalist approach to materiality fails to capture the diversity of the material world and the dynamics of its historical development.

More specifically, academic labour could be characterised as a form of intellectual work. Academic labour comprises two interrelated forms of activity: teaching and academic research. Teaching was the main mission of the university in the Middle Ages. The medieval university was “a corporation or guild of masters (professors) and scholars (students)” (Scott, 2006, p.6). The combination of knowledge creation and knowledge transfer through research and teaching at the university is one of the most significant innovations at Wilhelm von Humboldt’s Berlin University. The unity of research and teaching has become one of the fundamental principles of the modern university (Mittemeijer, 2022).

Scientific work, as knowledge creation, can be seen as a kind of universal labour. “This labour depends partly on the co-operation of the living, and partly on the utilisation of the labours of those who have gone before. Co-operative labour, on the other hand, is the direct co-operation of individuals” (Marx, 1998, p.106). Scientific work as universal labour involves two interrelated moments:

A) The transmission of existing knowledge to new generations and its collective reappropriation. New generations of scientists build on the foundations laid by the work of previous generations. No scientist or thinker works in isolation. This idea is expressed by the quote attributed to Newton: “If I have seen farther, it is by standing on the shoulders of giants” (Merton, 1973, p.274-275). These words convey a sense of commitment “to the common heritage and a recognition of the essentially cooperative and selectively cumulative quality of scientific achievement” (Merton, 1973, p.275).

B) The development of cooperation and collaboration among current generations of scientists in the context of solving current problems. There is a shift from an individual-based to a team-based model of research (Wuchty et al., 2007). The growing importance of teams in knowledge production is evidence



of the collaborative nature of scientific work. Universal labour can be defined as work done “through universal means (linguistic symbols, ideas, theories), creations of world culture, which form the collective historical wealth of humanity” (Pavlidis, 2014, p.148). Universal labour is a “...rational (i.e., ‘scientific’ in a broad sense), self-conscious, collective kind of creative activity” (Sayers, 2007, p. 452).

Scientific activity as a form of universal labour is based on the general intellect. Marx employed the category of general intellect in the “Grundrisse.” Marx (1993, p.706) defined the general intellect as “the organs of the human brain, created by the human hand; the power of knowledge, objectified.” The general intellect is increasingly integrated into the process of material production and transformed into direct productive power.

The development of fixed capital indicates to what degree general social knowledge has become a direct force of production, and to what degree, hence, the conditions of the process of social life itself have come under the control of the general intellect and been transformed in accordance with it. To what degree the powers of social production have been produced, not only in the form of knowledge, but also as immediate organs of social practice, of the real life process (Marx, 1993, p.706).

Marx argued that the general intellect is objectified in ‘fixed capital’. Increasing investment in fixed capital leads to the expansion of mechanisation and then to the automation of labour processes. The elimination of living labour from the production process means that it becomes impossible to extract surplus value. In other words, complete automation means the abolition of surplus value production. “Capital thus works towards its own dissolution as the form dominating production” (Marx 1993, p.700). The concept of the general intellect in Marx’s writings is part of the systematic examination of the internal contradictions of the capitalist mode of production, and highlighting its ‘absolute inner limit.’

A ‘neo-workerist’ theoretical framework proposes a different version of the general intellect (Fumagalli et al., 2019). Virno (2007) argues that in the post-Fordist regime, the general intellect develops in interaction with living subjects, rather than in its relation to fixed capital, as Marx proposed in the “Grundrisse.” From this perspective, the ‘general intellect’ includes “formal and informal knowledge, imagination, ethical inclinations, mentalities and ‘language-games’ (Virno, 2007, p.5). More specifically, the development of the general intellect lies in the human mind’s ability “to penetrate into their inner relationships, to grasp the determining links between their different sides, to understand the causes for their appearance, evolution and transformation and, of course, to discern the prospects for this transformation” (Pavlidis, 2012, p.40-41). The ability of the human mind to grasp essential relations is directly related to human consciousness, which can reflect social relations as active, cooperative and transformative. Due to the profound changes not only in material production but, more generally, in the structure of society, education has become a critical terrain for the development of the general intellect.

Taking into account that educators’ work involves using the general intellect, which means the activation not only of their knowledge but of the whole content of their consciousness, of all the cultural wealth of their personality (feelings, mental capabilities, moral principles, aesthetic ideals, philosophical worldviews), for the success of their pedagogical work, it becomes necessary for them to develop as bearers of the “general intellect”, as personalities. The fundamental development of educators’ general intellect (consciousness) is of paramount importance to the successful accomplishment of their mission. (Pavlidis, 2012, p.42)

The mobilisation of the general intellect involves not only the development of cognitive abilities but also the growth of social consciousness and the development of personality. The full development of the general intellect is only possible in a society in which “the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all” (Marx and Engels, 1976, p. 506). Neoliberalism

turns in the opposite direction: the “decomposition of the common into a privatized neoliberal aggregation of individuals” produces...” ‘social idiocy’ (or general idiocy) (Hands, 2014, p.237). The English word ‘idiot’ comes from the ancient Greek word ‘ideotes,’ private citizen or individual (from ‘idios,’ private, ‘one’s own’). ‘Idiotes’ were people who only cared about their individual interests and ignored the needs of the community (Dafermos, 2013).

Neoliberalism, by promoting the “cult of possessive individualism” (Macpherson,1975), turns citizens into ‘idiots’ i.e., private individuals who only care about their private affairs. Margaret Thatcher’s words “There is no such thing as society” express the systemic stupidity of neoliberalism.

It is crucial to develop a dialectical approach to scientific work and to highlight its contradictory character in the current historical situation. On the one hand, the transformation of science into a productive force and the development of the social character of labour create the conditions for the rise of the general intellect. On the other hand, the processes of commodification and fragmentation of society and knowledge undermine the possibility of the actual development of the general intellect. As long as the law of value continues to operate, only embryonic forms of the general intellect (its preconditions) can emerge.

The increasing blurring of the boundaries between work and leisure brings to light profound changes in the nature of work. This trend indicates the need to develop the general intellect through various intellectual, socio-cultural and technological practices. Burdeau (2015) argues that the general intellect today encompasses three broad areas of knowledge and social relations: the social and intellectual forms of communication and knowledge in the online world; the university as a historical site of learning; and artistic, cultural, technical, and scientific knowledge. It becomes clear that the university is an appropriate place for the cultivation of general intellect, which relies heavily on intellectual

commons and collaboration. Market-oriented policies and practices in higher education distort and cannibalise embryonic forms of the general intellect.

These trends manifest the profound transformation of academic labour.

Academic labour, as a form of universal labour, has the potential to promote social, shared knowledge and to generate public/social goods. At the same time, processes of subsumption of academic labour under capital are taking place in the public higher education sector (Szadkowski, 2016b). The pressure to develop profitable activities with university resources and faculty manifests the logic of commodity production and capital accumulation. The commercialisation of knowledge, research and education is a key feature of the so-called 'knowledge economy.' The key point is the creation of an entrepreneurial, organisational culture within the university and the subordination of academic labour to an entrepreneurial, capitalist logic (Vostal, 2016). Moreover, academic labour is gradually being restructured in the course of the introduction of neoliberalism in universities.

Neoliberal policies promote a fundamental change in the nature of academic labour through managerial control and surveillance. From the perspective of neoliberal market fundamentalism, "...academic work is not primarily about the 'production and dissemination of knowledge', but rather it is part of a macro-economic process of ensuring institutional survival and international economic competitiveness - in other words, an endless process of maximizing 'profits' for the university in the interests of 'accumulation'" (Smyth, 2017, p.9).

Tensions and conflicts arise within the structure of knowledge production. The increasing subordination of academic labour to the logic of the capitalist mode of production comes conflicts with the essential nature of academic labour as a form of universal labour that has the potential to contribute to the development of the general intellect. Robert Merton (1973, p. 275) emphasised the

communitarian nature of science and its incompatibility with “private property in a capitalistic economy.” Merton (1973) argued that science, as a product of social cooperation, belongs to the community. Recognising the contributions of scientists does not imply exclusive rights (or private property) in new discoveries.

The commercialisation of academic science, where private/business interests are paramount, creates conflicts of interest, undermines the integrity of research and weakens public confidence in the results of scientific research. The university provides “a terrain in which the productive knowledge, skills, capacities and relations of society might be generalised rather than commodified” (Hall, 2021, p.36). However, the implementation of neoliberal policies is accompanied by the enclosure of ‘intellectual commons’ (Harvie, 2000). The marketisation of academic life undermines the ‘gift culture’ of the academy and leads to the atrophy of the commitment to independent, free research (Bollier, 2002). The enclosure of the intellectual commons as a part of the commodification and privatisation of public goods is “a new form of accumulation by dispossession” (Harvey, 2004; Burdeau, 2015, p.654). This ‘new form of capitalist accumulation’ through the expropriation of intellectual commons undermines and distorts the general intellect.

### **On the increasing dominance of abstract academic labour**

Marx’s distinction between abstract and concrete labour provides a framework for examining the neoliberal transformation of academic labour.

Abstract labour is “homogeneous human labour, expenditure of one uniform labour power” (Marx, 1996, p.49). Abstract labour produces exchange values, while specifically useful concrete labour creates use values that satisfy human needs (Marx, 1996). It is important to make a conceptual distinction between ‘work’ and ‘labour’ in English (Fuchs and Sevignani, 2013).

In the Marxist tradition, the term ‘work’ refers to the productive activity that creates use values for the satisfaction of human needs. A specific form of work that produces exchange value is called ‘labour’. Exchange values are measured in terms of socially necessary labour time.

Work is a broader concept that encompasses productive activity in general, while labour refers specifically to those activities that produce value and surplus value. In other words, labour is *alienated* and *exploited* work (Frayssé, 2014).

Academic labour “...has a two-fold nature, containing both abstract and concrete labour” (Harvie, 2006, p.26). The neoliberal transformation of universities has led to an increasing subordination of academic labour to the production of exchange value. Academic labour “is being commodified as its ‘use value’ is rapidly being displaced by its ‘exchange value’” (McCarthy et al., 2017, p.1018). However, it is important to clarify that academic labour is more than a particular form of concrete labour that produces ordinary ‘use value’. *Academic labour as a universal labour encompasses a wide range of scientific traditions, norms, ideals, ways of thinking, methods and cultural achievements in human history. From this perspective, academic labour is a part of the scientific and cultural heritage of humanity.*

The increasing subordination of academic labour to the production of exchange values leads to the enclosure and cannibalisation of the intellectual commons, a collective heritage that belongs to all humanity. The neoliberal transformation of the university means reducing academic labour to a series of measurable ‘outcomes’ such as publications, citations, impact indicators, patents, research funding, student satisfaction, etc. (Ball, 2012). The ‘obsession with quantity’ (Fischer et al., 2012a, 2012b) expresses the tendency to subordinate concrete work to abstract labour, the production of use values to the production of exchange values. A one-dimensional focus on measurable outputs leads

to neglecting the substantive content, orientation, and essential contributions of academic labour. In other words, academic labour is increasingly reorganised to produce strictly measurable and predetermined ‘outputs’ rather than to develop socially useful skills, knowledge and practices (Hall, 2018a).

More specifically, academic labour is examined in terms of countable academic output per predefined unit of time, e.g., per year (student completions/graduations, publications, grant applications, etc.). “Academic production is bound to socially necessary impact/time – that is, the time required to produce a use value of a certain impact (a published output that counts within a given national or institutional evaluation procedure) under the conditions of production that are considered “normal” for a given higher education system and with the average degree of skill and intensity prevalent in the working process of that system” (Szadkowski, 2016a, p.62). All academic activities become measurable and quantifiable (Harvie, 2006). Quantification through a series of assessments promotes the standardisation and homogenization of academic labour, which takes the form of abstract labour. Academic labour has become commodified as its ‘use value’ is rapidly replaced by its ‘exchange value’ (McCarthy et al., 2017). Research products are scrutinised for their exchange value rather than their actual contribution to science and social usefulness (Harley, 2017). As a result, abstract labour that generates exchange value and profit, increasingly dominates over universal labour that produces creative insights, discoveries, and original contributions to the advancement of science.

It is no coincidence that “...many academics in mainstream teaching and research positions are overwhelmed by their workloads and the range of their responsibilities, and are concerned that the opportunities for creativity, innovation and originality are being eroded” (Bexley et al., 2013, p. 397). The utilitarian, output-oriented administrative behaviour undermines curiosity-

driven scientific exploration into the unknown. A one-dimensional emphasis on the number of publications can undermine the making of significant scientific discoveries. Peter Higgs, the British physicist who gave his name to the Higgs boson, confessed that if he had not been nominated for the Nobel Prize in 1980, he would have been fired for not having the required number of publications. “No university would employ him in the current academic system because he would not be considered ‘productive’ enough” (Aitkenhead, 2013). Derek, a physicist and historian of science, saw the danger of "scientific doomsday" in the exponential growth of the research enterprise (Derek, 1975; Sarewitz, 2016). Chu and Evans (2021) offer evidence that “fundamental progress may be stymied if quantitative growth of scientific endeavors — in number of scientists, institutes, and papers — is not balanced by structures fostering disruptive scholarship and focusing attention on novel ideas”. Some researchers argue that the exponential growth in the number of scientific publications has been accompanied by a decline in the quality of scientific output. “Currently, many published research findings are false or exaggerated, and an estimated 85% of research resources are wasted” (Ioannidis, 2014, p.11). Mirowski (2011) argues that science's dependence on market logic leads to its degeneration.

The dominance of abstract, fragmented and mainly repetitive work in science explains the discrepancy between the quantitative expansion of scientific knowledge and the decline in its quality. The mass production of papers in a hyper-competitive environment “favours mainstream ideas and suppresses new and ‘heretical’ views” (Carson et al., 2012/2013, p.186). The enormous pressure on academics to be productive reduces the quality of scientific output and undermines trust in science (Sarewitz, 2016). “In such a research factory, conditions are usually not conducive to the slow, painstaking and self-critical work that is necessary to produce really good scientific results” (Ravetz, 1996, p.55). In this system of performance measurement, the number of publications



becomes more important than their quality and contribution to the development of science. “The focus has shifted from making discoveries to the number of papers published and, in some cases, the journals in which they are published” (Carson et. al, 2013, p.188). Increasing instrumentalism in science encourages researchers who are more concerned with achieving measurable results than with making an original and significant contribution to knowledge.

The increasing pressure to publish to ‘publish or perish’ limits opportunities for critical reflection, dialogue, and the maturation of creative ideas/knowledge. Today’s scientists are reminiscent of machine-like workers from Chaplin’s film “Modern Times” “forced to work more and more quickly to the point of absurdity” (Frith, 2019, p.1). Creative, collaborative research is becoming increasingly difficult in an over-competitive and highly individualised environment. The obsession with high performance undermines the creative exploration of unknown and unpredictable avenues and encourages a utilitarian, instrumental attitude to science. Managerial control over the labour process undermines intrinsic motivation, rewards conformity and restricts academic freedom, which is a necessary condition for the development of creativity. Csikszentmihalyi (1996, p. 133) warned of the danger of diminishing creativity and recommended: “So much less pressure and much greater freedom to explore and try out things without fear of failing.”

Despite the mainstream rhetoric of creativity based on entrepreneurship, embryonic forms of creative labour are evolving in a sea of repetitive, reproducible work leading to a “closure of thinking in the science-as-we-know-it” (Jörg, 2011, p.75). Individualisation and competition undermine creative scientific activity as a form of universal labour that requires an evolved form of collaboration, sharing, mutual support, academic freedom, and social responsibility. Competition-driven secrecy at the expense of collaboration and

sharing is at odds with the nature of scientific work as universal labour (Resnik, 2007).

Managerial control over academic work promotes de-skilling and segmentation through the technologies of quantification and measurement (McCarthy et al., 2017). We have witnessed the transformation of academic labour into the production of an abstract, homogeneous, standardised, alienated, fetishised universality. Marx's insights into commodity fetishism provide the theoretical framework for analysing the effects of the commodification of academic labour. In a commodified world, relations between people seem to be relations between commodities. The neoliberal university landscape has become the site of novel fetishes such as 'excellence', 'top ranks', 'world-class', etc. Commercial outcomes replace meaningful learning and creative scientific work. The academic lifeworld has been colonised by performance metrics (Singh, 2002). The instrumental nature of an accounting-based practice undermines a meaningful engagement with the learning process and with the creative self-development of the student's personality. There is no room for intellectual curiosity (Singh, 2002), critical reflection and dialogical conscientization (Freire, 1972a) in the marketised educational landscape. "In academia, commodification of academic labour occurs as its use value, in the form of its contribution to the development of the student as a person, as a citizen or at least as a depository and carrier of culturally valued knowledge, becomes displaced by a preoccupation with doing those things which will increase its exchange value" (Willmott, 1995, p.1001).

Wood (2010) argues that the commodification of higher education has produced new forms of mystery and occult. The '*rationalisation*' of higher education through managerial control ultimately leads to the production of *irrational* 'converted forms', i.e., distorted forms of consciousness (Mamardashvili, 2017). Behind the neoliberal fetishes and occult practices deployed in academia lies the

fact that universities are increasingly being integrated into “the accumulation of capital” (Rikap and Harari-Kermadec, 2020, p.22).

### **Alienating academic labour**

Marx (1975) in his work “Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844” distinguished different forms of the alienation of labour: 1. the alienation of workers from the products of labour; 2 the alienation of workers from the labour process itself; 3. the alienation of workers from other human beings; 4. the alienation of workers from their nature (species-being). The “Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844” were the starting point of Marx’s systematic study of political economy. Marx’s “Capital” provided a profound analysis of alienated labour, although he did not use this term.

Marx’s concept of alienated labour has been used to conceptualise significant changes in the nature of academic labour (Gregory and Winn, 2016; Hall, 2018a; Harley, 2017). The concept of alienation of academic labour refers to various transformations of labour relations in the neoliberal university: the casualisation and proletarianisation of academic labour (Enders and de Weert, 2009), the alienation of academics from the product of their labour (Harvie, 2006), the alienation of academics from their labour (Harvie, 2006; McCarthy et. al, 2017), the alienation of academics from their colleagues, the academic loss of collegiality (Hall, 2018a), increasing levels of anxiety, stress, and depression among academic staff (Harley, 2017; Morrish, 2019), etc.

Deep government cuts to funding for higher education have been accompanied by a shift towards employment on fixed-term contracts, an increase in the number of part-time researchers, and insecure jobs. The neoliberal colonisation of higher education is leading to an increasing fragmentation and segmentation of academic labour, and a reduction in the cost of academic labour. The politics of divide and rule leads to an increasing fragmentation of the academic community (Lorenz, 2012).

The concept of precarity within and outside academia reflects unstable employment relationships and increasing job insecurity (Burton and Bowman, 2022). The academic precariat, particularly early career, are in continuous oscillation between various forms of flexible, unstable labour, and unemployment. Academic workers must demonstrate a high level of performance in order to obtain permanent employment. Precariousness is becoming a permanent condition in the neoliberal ‘risk society.’ The increasing proletarianisation and casualisation of academic labour leads to the erosion of academic freedom, intellectual autonomy, and financial security.

The neoliberal labour regime reinforces “the alienation of individual academics from their peers in their own institutions with whom they are in competition for scarce investment resources” (Hall, 2018a, p.82). Competitiveness is seen as a driving force for improving the services provided by the university. “...The imperative of competition tends to produce conformity and standardization” (Vostal, 2016, p.105). The neoliberal labour regime demands an academic workforce that is flexible and adaptable to market-based mechanisms.

Performativity is a key mechanism for imposing market-like conditions on academia. Performativity re-orientes “pedagogical and scholarly activities towards those which are likely to have a positive impact on measurable performance outcomes and are a deflection of attention away from aspects of social, emotional, or moral development that have no immediate measurable performative value” (Ball, 2012, p.20). The celebration of this performative instrumentalism culminates in the reduction of academic labour to its simple components measured by performance indicators. Performativity is judged on the basis of commodified indicators (or commercial values) rather than academic principles (Sutton, 2017). “In regimes of performativity experience is nothing, productivity is everything...more publications, more research grants, more students” (Ball, 2012, p.19).

The neoliberal cult of performativity has the effect of undermining the deeper motivations for engaging in academic work and discouraging the subjects themselves. The loss of meaning and increasing frustration among academics is an inevitable consequence of the ‘performatisation’ of academia. High workload pressures (publishing, grant funding, teaching, administration) have made academic work an increasingly alienating activity. In a highly regulated and controlled environment, academics have “lost control over their labour” (McCarthy et. al, 2017, p. 1019).

Neoliberal management practices promote the creation of an academic ‘star system’ through competition and individualisation. The neoliberal labour regime reinforces tendencies toward “workaholism, useless superiority effort and narcissism” (Çimşir and Tümlü, 2021). Lemaitre (2015, 99) argues that the research evaluation system produces a type of narcissistic scientist who “will seek to benefit from their influence in their field, their access to good journals, and their network of ‘arias’”. Narcissism cannot be adequately explained without reference to its production and reproduction by the neoliberal labour regime. The university “...became more like a glorified supermarket” (Mouzelis, 1995, p.168).

The reconstruction of universities as corporate enterprises under managerial governance leads to a fundamental change in the academic habitus. Neoliberal management practices push academics to become highly visible entrepreneurs, mini-capitalists, investing in their future. Mouzelis (1995, p. 168) notes “as the ideal of the disinterested scholar was replaced by the ideal of the academic/cultural entrepreneur (who attracts massive research funds, is a media star, knows how to mobilize social networks, and achieves smooth co-operation between state bureaucrats, politicians, business people and academics)”. The rise of the academic ‘star system’ is accompanied by the eclipse of public intellectuals who address a general and educated audience (Jacoby, 2009). The

ideology of ‘excellence’, described as the “holy grail of academic life” (Vostal, 2016, p.106), plays a crucial role in legitimising and reproducing the academic ‘star system’. This technology of neoliberal ideology increases competition for grandiosity, increases narcissism, and discourages collegiality and solidarity. The ‘academic rock stars’ of this ‘toxic university’ reproduce the ‘triumph of emptiness’ (Alvesson, 2014; Smyth, 2017).

The acceleration of academic labour is one of the most important forms of academic alienation. The transformation of the temporalities of academic labour is internally linked to the expansion of commercialisation, ‘publish or perish’ pressures and continuous evaluation. Universities are seen as ‘slow’ and ‘outdated’ to the demands of the so-called ‘knowledge economy.’ The ‘new managerialism’ (or ‘new public management’) leads to strict control of the efficiency of working time, and the reduction of free time (Vostal, 2016). The fragmentation and strict control of the efficiency in academia are manifestations of the ‘Taylorisation’ of intellectual labour (Dominelli, & Hoogvelt, 1996).

Proponents of the ‘slow science movement’ (Berg and Seeber, 2016) rightly describe the effects of the acceleration of academic labour without explaining its causes. In our view, the subordination of academic labour to capitalist control is the main cause of the ‘culture of speed’ in the academy. David Harvey (2014, p. 99) highlights the systematic nature of the acceleration of the circulation of capital: “the need to facilitate speed-up and acceleration of capital circulation in all its phases, shortening the turnover time of capital in production [...] have been imperatives in capital’s history.” The temporal autonomy of academia is incompatible with the logic of subsuming academic labour under capital.

The acceleration and intensification of academic labour destroys the space for reflective dialogue and critical thinking and leads to the erosion of the academic

ethos. ‘Speed fetishism’ (Adam, 2003, p. 101) is linked to increasing individualisation and metrics-based competition which undermine collaborative, collective creativity. Furthermore, Müller (2014) refers to the *anticipatory acceleration*, which “...tends to privilege research questions and approaches that are predictable in terms of their outcomes...”. The competitive and accelerated academy discourages engagement with complex problems that require systematic, long-term commitment and do not yield easy, immediate results. In contrast to the capitalist principle of labour time management, according to which “time is money”, Marx pointed out that free time is “time for the full development of the individual” (Marx, 1993, p.701). For Marx, the free time is true wealth, the ‘space’ for full development.

A general acceleration of academic work-life leads to increasing stress, exhaustion, and a deterioration of well-being. The imposition of performance management techniques leads not only to the disintegration of “traditional academic values – such as scientific freedom, boldness, integrity, and collegiality” (Roumbanis, 2019, p.198), but also to the self-imprisonment of academic workers (Hall, 2018). The organisation of academic labour under the regime of competition, quantification, and management performance “...reinforces alienation or separation from self, other and the world” (Hall, 2018a, p.73). The university becomes an ‘anxiety machine’ that drains academic workers of their health and creativity (Morrish, 2019). The excessive workload and toxic dominance of audit cultures and metrics over the lives of academic workers leads to a deterioration in their mental and physical health (Morrish, 2019). Stress, frustration, discouragement, exhaustion, and burnout are consequences of the imposition of managerial control and acceleration of the academic labour (Vostal, 2014). The expansive commodification of the university produces an alienated academic “as a mentally and physically dehumanized being” (Marx, 1975, p.284).

The zombie metaphor has been used to describe the extreme alienation of academic labour: “the death of universities as centres of critique” (Eagleton, 2010), audit culture as ‘zombie-like language’, “zombified scholarship” (Whelan et. al, 2013), ‘zombie science’ (Charlton, 2008, p.328), ‘zombie leadership’ (Smyth, 2017), etc. The zombification of the academy refers to the reduction of academic workers to the living dead who do not think, have lost their autonomy and control over working conditions. “A group of zombies represents a mindlessly obedient, unquestioning labour force, functioning mechanically and tirelessly, requiring minimum sustenance” (Wood, 2010, p. 237). The neoliberal imperatives of the commercialisation of universities lead to the domination of dead labour over living labour in higher education. Marx (1996, p.241) remains relevant in examining the causes of the zombification of the academy: “Capital is dead labour that, vampire-like, only lives by sucking living labour, and lives the more, the more labour it sucks.”

### **Manufacturing the neoliberal subject**

The term ‘McDonaldisation’ metaphorically sums up the neoliberal obsession with efficiency, calculability, predictability and control. The McDonald’s organisational (fast-food) approach, with its focus on ‘packaged’ services, products, and processes, reinforces and promotes uniform, instrumental, uncritical thinking. “The great sources of uncertainty and unpredictability in any rationalizing system are people...McDonaldisation involves the search for the means to exert increasing control over both employees and customers” (Ritzer, 1993, p.100).

The transformation of students into consumers of educational services and academic staff into providers of outputs is an expression of the McDonaldisation of the university. Students increasingly see themselves as customers rather than learners, while the university is understood as a service provider (Ritzer, 2018). The McUniversity operates according to the motto that



‘the student consumer is always right’. Consumerism is a crucial dimension of the practices of a managerialised, market-oriented academic world. “Consistent with the phenomenon of performativity, the rhetoric of accountability in higher education promotes a customer-service relationship between students and faculty members” (Delucchi and Smith, 1997, p.325). The neoliberal consumerist framework promotes commodification and passive learning. The consumerist turn in higher education has the potential to “... transform learning into a process of picking up, digesting and reproducing what students perceive of as an unconnected series of short, neatly packaged bytes of information” (Naidoo and Jamieson, 2005, p.273). The dominance of a neoliberal consumerist framework leads to the reproduction of a ‘banking model’ of education that undermines the development of critical thinking (Freire, 1972b). In a neoliberal university, students are conceived as consumers of education who learn instrumentally in order to adapt flexibly to the needs of the labour market.

The consumerist turn in higher education has significant implications for the teaching process. The neoliberal university turns students into consumers rather than co-creators of the educational process. In a market-oriented university, students are to be satisfied as customers. Student satisfaction is seen as a criterion for evaluating the quality of education. However, student evaluation has no validity as a measure of teaching effectiveness (Lorenz, 2012; Uttl, White, Gonzalez, 2017). Furthermore, refocusing academic labour on student satisfaction has problematic implications. The student-consumers tend to avoid complex challenges and prefer “the rapid consumption of ‘knowledge pills’” (Paricio Royo, 2017, p.144). Bunge (2018) argues that “the unearned arrogance encouraged by the heavy reliance on student evaluations helps produce passive, even contemptuous students who undermine the spirit of the class and lower its quality for everyone.” Viewing students as consumers of educational services

minimises their role as co-producers of knowledge and active participants in a learning community. This view undermines their participation in a process of self-development and self-transformation (Maringe, 2011).

In the neoliberal university, students and their families become entrepreneurs, investing in their own education, skills and productivity. Therefore, they should have the necessary information about higher education institutions (see their ranking lists) to make the right investment choices (Hall, 2015). More generally, it is possible to detect “the shift from viewing academic workers as labour to seeing them as human capital” (Berg, Huijbens and Larsen, 2016, p.178). The marketisation of the university distorts and compromises the pedagogical relationship (Singh, 2002; Naidoo and Jamieson, 2005; Maringe, 2011; Paricio Royo, 2017). There is a strong tendency to transform the pedagogical relationship between teachers and students into a commercial transaction (Furedi, 2011). The student-as-consumer model promotes passive and instrumental attitudes to learning and leads to the erosion of trust and risk-taking (Singh, 2002; Naidoo and Jamieson, 2005). “The result is a reduction of academics’ own autonomy, impacting on their creativity and freedom to teach in a way that meets students’ basic psychological needs” (Morris, 2022). The erosion of academic autonomy combined with students’ individualistic orientation, limits their ability to engage in activities in their ‘zone of proximal development’ (Dafermos, 2018).

The university is being transformed to provide students with the professional skills demanded by the market. The mission of the neoliberal university is to produce a flexible, adaptable workforce for the ‘global knowledge economy’ rather than to provide a comprehensive, well-rounded education. Fragmentation, individualisation, and instrumentalisation lead to the *destruction of the universality of the university and its transformation into a factory for the production of measurable results.*

The university is transformed from an academic community into a business organisation where students are individualised consumers “increasingly unable to think critically about themselves and their relationship to the larger world” (Giroux, 2013, p.111). Knowledge becomes a commodity to be consumed rather than a collaborative, creative process. Skills training, demanded by a competitive and voracious market, replaces comprehensive knowledge. An instrumentalist emphasis on the acquisition of employability skills can undermine important personality traits such as curiosity, willingness to learn for learning’s sake, persistence in tackling complexity and critical thinking (Nixon et. al, 2012). Narrow instrumentalist/utilitarian training undermines critical thinking, creativity and a sense of justice.

The constitution of a neoliberal subject [or ‘neoliberal form of subjectivity’ (Teo, 2018)] is mediated by the labour regime based on efficiency, calculability, predictability, and control. “The neoliberal subject is a competitive person, wholly immersed in global competition” (Dardot and Laval, 2014). The neoliberal subject as a disembodied individual “...seeks to make an enterprise of their own life, investing in their human capital in order to fuel the consumption that will produce their own satisfaction” (Houghton, 2019, p.623). Under neoliberal conditions, it is impossible to produce well-educated individuals capable of creating original knowledge, especially in the field of basic research, which is inherently associated with uncertainty, unpredictability, and failure. Postmodern ideas of “the death of the subject,” “the fragmentation of subjectivity” and “the destruction of meaning” (Newman and Holzman, 1997, p.108) reflect the process of the dissolution of the subject who can think critically and develop original knowledge.

The neoliberal, commercialised university promotes passive and instrumental learning. It undermines Kant’s motto for the Enlightenment: “Aude sapere” (“Dare to know”). Moreover, “the system never before favoured so much the

idiots (always per the original etymology referring to private self-interest-oriented behaviour)” (Dalakoglou, 2016, p.69). The enclosure of the commons by market-oriented activities creates “the dispersed, fractal, and divisive subjectivity” (Burdeau, 2015, p.660). The neoliberal governance of labour not only destroys the potential for the development of general intellect but also produces ‘general idiocy’ (or ‘social idiocy’) (Hands, 2014). From a very different theoretical perspective, Stiegler comes to a similar conclusion regarding ‘systemic stupidity’ in a consumer, hyper-industrial capitalism. “Systemic stupidity is engendered by generalized proletarianization, from which there is no escape for any actor within the consumerist industrial system” (Stiegler, 2013, p. 22).

### **Instead of an epilogue**

In summary, we have argued that the neoliberal transformation of the university has significant implications for the academic labour process. The neoliberal university is more concerned with the production of exchange value than with the creation and dissemination of knowledge (Berg et. al, 2016). Academic labour is increasingly integrated into the logic of capital’s valorisation and accumulation. The construction of a neoliberal university involves the segmentation, fragmentation, and acceleration of academic labour. The increasing dominance of abstract, fragmented and standardised labour in higher education weakens its ability “to educate young people to be reflective, critical, and socially engaged agents” (Giroux, 2013, p.110). The ‘neoliberal academic world’ with its celebration of self-interested behaviour “...is being adjusted structurally in order to produce idiots” (Dalakoglou, 2016, p.69), rather than thoughtful, critical citizens.

Fostering short-termism, the neoliberal labour regime, with its pragmatic, instrumentalist focus on current profit, sacrifices the future of education, science, and society. A central mantra of neoliberalism is that “no alternative to

the current organization of society and education is possible or imaginable” (Lissovoy, 2013, p. 423). The challenge is to find alternative ways of intellectual work, knowledge creation, higher learning, and transformative practice beyond the narrow horizon of neoliberal dystopia.

A reconsideration of Marx’s insights on universal labour and the general intellect could be the starting point for reconceptualising the future of the university, science, and society. Overcoming the alienation of labour (including intellectual labour) is not an abstract, bare negation of the capitalist mode of production. It would be more appropriate to think of overcoming the alienation of labour in terms of a concrete, dialectical, sublation (*Aufhebung*) that involves both preservation and cancellation (Sayers, 2011; Dafermos, 2018). The full development of the general intellect and the reappropriation of the universal wealth of humanity presupposes a fundamental transformation, a transition to a new type of society (Vaziulin, 1988; Patelis, 2011). “The true wealth of society...is nothing other than the constant production and reproduction of the man as a holistic, universal, harmonious being. The socialisation of the means of production is the elimination of the social forces that are separate from man and hostile to him” (Vaziulin, 1992, p.95). It would be “humanity’s leap from the kingdom of necessity to the kingdom of freedom...” (Engels, 1987, p.270).

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