

Academic Labor

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Negotiating Labor and Management in the French Context¹

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After my PhD completion six years ago, I began working at a small, private, largely liberal arts university in structure and stated mission (but largely non-liberal arts in students' majors and their interests). Three years into my time there, I found myself in administrative positions. Now I am stepping back into the ranks of faculty after chairing the communications department, the largest in the university (business is second), though I continue to be a union representative, a position that is characteristic of the particular institutional hybridity formed by my geographical and cultural context. More precisely, I am working in a university in France that grants BA and MA degrees accredited in the United States. That means the neoliberal², managerial trends in U.S. higher education affect my institution through a shared culture of management and assessment, even if it is simultaneously beholden to French labor laws. Indeed, my institution is a patently weird *mélange* of American and globalizing neoliberal values and practices, and French labor law. To complicate matters further, I had accepted a position as a faculty union representative, a role that is appointed by a union member when he or she steps down. I thus found myself for the last four years in a bizarre position as labor, management, and union mediator.

Beginning with this legal aspect, I want to sketch three important contexts for academic labor at my institution, which should also demonstrate potential for articulating academic labor movements elsewhere.

For any business with more than 50 employees, French labor laws require the establishment of a committee—called the *Comité de l'Entreprise* (CE)—that is a check on the potential opacity and mystery of management. Its objective is to assure a hearing for employees' collective expression on the business' decisions relative to management and financial development of the institution (<http://vosdroits.service-public.fr/F96.xhtml#limited>). It has a limited but important power, which can include, for example, calling for and observing a detailed audit of the private university's finances. Furthermore, the union delegates (there are two staff and three faculty delegates at my institution) must by French law have annual negotiations with management considering salaries and general working conditions; they must also negotiate legally binding agreements with the university on subjects such as what constitutes full-time and part-time work, research, teaching, and service. The union delegates are part of operations in the

¹ Thanks to Jim Cohen and an anonymous colleague at a Paris state university for their generous interviews about their experiences in the French system.

² I use the term following Harvey's treatment of the subject (2005).

French university system, though because those schools are public, they are not required to have a CE, as my university must.

In addition to the important difference (from, say, U.S. universities) that my university must have CE and union representatives who negotiate with university management, French labor law also requires different contracts that entail certain rights for employee and employer. In France, you have two major kinds of contracts: *Contrat Duree Determiné* (CDD) and *Contrat Duré Indeterminé* (CDI). The first basically refers to short-term contracts, which are generally adjuncts in the U.S. system. French labor law states that a CDD must not last more than 18 months (the equivalent of three semesters). If it does go that long, the university must offer the employee a CDI for full- or part-time work, or part ways.³ There are incentives not to have temporary or short-term contracts in my institution. Short-term temporary employees are not expected to perform the same service as full-time permanent faculty. Nor are they required to do research, two responsibilities that are listed in the contracts of other faculty. They are paid at a percentage of full-time courses, but they are also not expected to do anything but teach, and if they are rehired again and again, they have the legal right to demand a permanent position.

Thus, although some academics may be forced to drift from position to position in France, there is perhaps less precariousness and more legal recourse to fight dispensability than exist in the U.S. context. In addition, our communications department's temporary, part-time faculty members are often professionals (not academics) who are brought in to teach practical, "pre-professional" courses, a setup that is largely appealing to those who simply get pleasure from teaching, or who want to gain some extra money, not to those who depend on a temporary position to make a living, though we do have some cases of the latter. In this sense, communications departments that include advertising, public relations, and strategic corporate communications are clearly dealing with a different labor set from literature or history departments. Other levels of differentiation depend on national labor laws.

Although France has much stronger labor laws to protect the worker from the whims of managers and the market, neoliberal academic labor practices have crept in in other ways. Although I will focus on my university, which is private, the Sarkozy government's education reforms have been well publicized for their neoliberal privatizing elements and tone of the French state university system. When I interviewed an English department professor at one of the Paris universities about how her situation and France overall compared with other national systems, she emphasized that France is difficult to compare to the U.S. or any other system because it is highly centralized, does not charge fees, and is thus extremely underfunded. She continued by stating that the French system is nominally interested above all else in forming Republican citizens and not much in the market. However, "my university for example, now charges fees for masters degrees and has close ties to private industry," she said. To understand the levels of job security amid neoliberalizing trends in French universities, one must understand the hierarchy of positions. The French state university system employs administrative staffers, full professors, lecturers (*maitre de conferences*), teaching posts (*prag, certifié*), and temporary posts such as *lecteur* and ATER (a temporary research and teaching position). However, it also employs an increasing number of casual

³ However, management has told me several times, in my union representative capacity, that they can fire anyone they like—it's just a matter of how much they want to pay in legal costs.

staffers, called *vacataires*, who have to already also have a full-time job to be able to teach in a university. Some are not paid until one year later.

I asked my colleagues in the French system about their daily job responsibilities to give an idea of what the work experience is like by comparison. One replied who asked to remain anonymous,

My job is determined by state law. I have to teach 192 hours a year plus grade, prepare, receive students, supervise exams, attend pedagogical meetings, and coordinate classes. Further, I am required to research and to belong to a research group. I founded my own research center. It is "inspected" every four years by so-called experts. The group is active, but the funds are derisory. One of my main problems with my job is the pressure to research, but the lack of funds and conditions to conduct research makes that difficult.

A final criticism and reality of the French system that my colleagues emphasized was that despite this clear national system, French universities notoriously lack transparency, a problem many have stressed at my own university. The colleague in the French state university system explained:

Administrative responsibilities, for example, are unevenly distributed and defined. I coordinated a team of eight professors and 500 students for five years without being paid extra for this work. When I finally said I was giving it up they offered to pay me. I now am paid extra 'hours' for the coordination I do. But my colleague in another department gets paid three times as much as I do for similar work.

Although my private university must abide by French law, it is not subject to the reforms in the French state university system, though some of those trends may provide resources for intersystem organizing on local and state levels. But the major context for developments in academic labor for universities in the United States or accredited there and operating abroad (like mine) is perhaps the crisis in the liberal arts market and how it converges with discourses of neoliberalism and professionalism (Blumenstyk, 2010; Flower, 2003; Stone, 2004; Edelstein, 2010; Hatcher and Hirtt, 1999).

Some scholars have discussed the "new academic capitalism" partly as a conflict of interest in a race for corporate sponsorship of research and teaching that leaves less lucrative areas of research and teaching underfunded, often the liberal arts and especially humanities (Bok, 2003). My own institution currently suffers less from such trends in academic capitalism than from the way neoliberalism has been internalized in prospective student markets, where student-consumers and their parents demand more "practical" professional training and less critical-analytical, supposedly irrelevant liberal arts study. In this sense, my institution is part of a larger crisis in liberal arts education brought on partly by widely circulating neoliberal discourses on education. Many of the private liberal arts colleges also intensely experienced this crisis, spurring some to repackage their identities and missions to be more competitive in the market. Communication studies are, again, in a privileged place in the university-as-shopping mall. Its topical hybridity, including professional "hands on" courses for the market, also arguably put it in a position of ethical responsibility to help find solutions to offset neoliberalization with potential public good

and "thinking" (Readings, 1999) functions of the university. This could come via discussions of curricular policy in which the maximum number of means-end professional courses students may take are reduced, and their relationship to more traditional, critical, and analytical courses becomes a reflective focus of the education itself, while the number of the latter courses is increased and may be taken outside the major itself (for example, in languages, literature, history, or philosophy). The roundabout effects of neoliberal discourses and subjectivities on the market and then on academic labor itself need creative responses from within a university's curriculum, too, because particular universities clearly cannot change those extra-university discourses and values on their own. One might add, however, that one element of international academic labor movements might be to encourage critical reflections on these discourses in mainstream media outlets—agenda-setting by sending press releases and op-eds to those outlets, and offering to do interviews.

These processes, struggles, or games of agency (freedom to participate and influence structure and managerial agendas) and structure between private educational institutions and market forces, themselves shaped by larger cultural and economic developments and discourses therein, rebound on the university as a commodity itself (Rikowski, 2001, 2003). In other words, globally circulating neoliberal discourses and policies, from new education policies, organizations, and practices from the UK to the California state system, from the OECD to the WTO, help produce markets where educational institutions' goals become increasingly beholden to consumers' demands and assumptions about education, which is largely specialized and seen mainly through economic ends. Molesworth, Nixon and Scullion (2009) have interestingly described this phenomena in Erich Fromm's conceptual vocabulary of modes of existence as *being* or *having*, where students seek to *have* a degree instead of *be* learners, where education has only an instrumental market value, not one based on *thought* or *agency* in politics and culture, among other things such as a perspective from Foucault's aesthetics of living (Foucault, 1990; Readings, 1999).

A major result of such developments outside our university is that particular departments and faculty members are encouraged if not indirectly forced to become entrepreneurs, and departments and individual faculty members become, beneath the surface of collegiality, fierce competitors for scarce resources. This manifests itself, for example, in departments constantly rebranding their identities and stated goals for assessment and marketing, as well as developing new courses, always in a relationship with student-consumer numbers and how scarce resources are implied in those numbers. The low numbers potentially result in course cancellations and faculty "owing" our university time and money for canceled classes within a specter of an economic restructuring that could cut departments and fire professors in the name of economic efficiency and survival. It manifests itself in attempts by departments to start individual agreements of cooperation with departments and programs in other universities around the world, as when financial planners advise clients to broaden their portfolios. It also manifests itself in a more consumerist relationship with increasingly empowered students in terms of what they like or don't like, while the capacity of the university to help form reflective ethical subjects becomes co-opted to one that assists the formation of the specialized consumer-producer subject already shaped by discourses of neoliberalism that swarm around the university from the outside. Interestingly, it follows that students have both more and less agency in self-formation through education, as do the university. Meanwhile, all this may happen while the publicly stated aims and identity of a university remain more or less static because students and the market circumvent the alternative discourse of formation and flock to what are

often described as pre-professional majors or even pre-professional courses within two or three majors, which at our university are communications, business, and international relations. Again, this is not peculiar to my institution. When I asked a colleague at a top communications research institution in the U.S. whether he was used to teaching students mainly interested in advertising and marketing, he replied that they were the bulk of the students in his very large communications program.

Not only do departments become more competitive and entrepreneurial (even sometimes making mergers like corporations), but so too do individual faculty members. Take, for example, the increasing competitiveness between colleagues in the university, where accepting the “game” of applying for rewards (in the form of conference and research support, course relief, and sabbaticals) means accepting a field of competition detrimental to solidarity and organizing academic laborers around common rights and faculty governance. Still, it is worth emphasizing that it’s not clear, at least in my situation, that administrators deliberately impose neoliberal practices and assessment based on a comprehension and embrace of the ideology, though that would be fertile ground for institutional research and critique. Just as often we hear bandwagon arguments that justify new values and practices—the “that’s just the way universities do it nowadays” explanation or “I don’t know a university in North America that doesn’t do this.”

I don’t think colleagues in administration and outside it (or even in the ostensible pre-professional courses or majors) often have a deliberate neoliberal project for the university. Rather, like many students, they have perhaps unwittingly taken up a position within the swarming discourses of neoliberalism, while others observing perplexedly the situation shrug their shoulders and say, “What can we do?” Not to sound overly cliché, the situation challenges us to do the following: 1) make as lucid as possible to colleagues the description of these neoliberal changes; 2) raise alarms about a common education project that most of us joined and valued at a different time (even with its particular flaws in particular places) as well as the stakes to be lost and gained from inaction; and 3) initiate a careful discussion of options for negotiating these outside and inside cultural-economic shifts that cannot possibly be overturned by a few individuals inside one university. Hence the importance of movements to oppose these conditions.

In my particular setting, it is better to avoid arguments about collective precariousness of employment because such arguments are based on quite false premises in the first place. Communications departments do not usually share the same space on the efficiency chopping block, an empirical reality that drives colleagues into anxious positions of individualist survival. Instead, we should begin by pointing out how these developments threaten faculty governance and a common educational project (often stated as the university’s mission). Once we agree on that, we must admit that we have to do something for the collective, not just ourselves. This is precisely the conversation I have launched at my own university, and part of it also includes critical reflections on the keywords employed by neoliberal discourses, such as “practical” and “professional.”

Such an initiative means that instead of leaving management alone to negotiate the many pressures of neoliberalism, I have organized meetings with faculty to discuss these pressures and how they affect our common project for a contemporary liberal arts education (which requires discussing in detail what that project is and trying to reach a consensus on it, that consensus itself being emphasized as

necessarily reached as fast as possible so that we may move to some action in the face of these changes). This way, faculty may be able to re-craft university-wide curricula in view of these changes. I have proposed requiring more critical-analytical courses to be required of pre-professional majors, and a common rhetoric that stresses every liberal arts course is potentially professional training as well as conscious projects for exercising freedom within socio-, cultural-, and political institutions, instead of unquestioningly following the behavior they demand. I have further proposed that liberal arts classes, such as history and literature, require some basic courses in business or other courses perceived as pre-professional or technical. This strategy enables faculty members to propose their own interpretation of the conjuncture while suggesting their own solutions that have been a product of collective deliberation. It tries to put faculty members in the position of agents, not simply victims who are limited to criticizing management's own negotiation of neoliberalism. In addition, in my geographic specificity, the knowledge of unions and their lawyers can be tapped as a resource when necessary for exploring options of not simply resistance, but active politics.

Bringing the collective project of a university into relief also helps bring a critical eye on the perfunctory assessment exercises in neoliberalizing universities which may ironically help us better articulate the common project of our university. These developments about assessment and productivity are not thus wholly noisome; the problem is the ideological context that produces them. Almost everywhere some individuals, out of self-interest, exploit collective privileges, not contributing as much or contributing in ways that damage the collective project, through lack of service, poor course preparation, inattention to developments in a field, and so forth (and this admission should not be taken out of the context of my other comments). The problem is that the neoliberal assessment exercises are not really interested in the way that individuals threaten a common project determined collectively by faculty and administrators. They worry about "the bottom line." An aspect of neoliberal university governance is to make responsibility for managerial decisions distant, embodied by some faraway accrediting body with which faculty members cannot have a dialogue about its criteria. One strategy here has been to have one-year CE and union reviews of faculty assessment reports, assessment of assessment, though it is clear that pressure on accrediting bodies can come only from a movement, not from a lone university.

Thus communications programs can start by reaching a consensus themselves about how they fit into their own institutions' negotiations of neoliberal trends. Then they may want either to launch university-wide discussions or rather approach various other departments about interdependent solutions, while working outward to form networks with other institutions domestically and globally. Above all else, those of us interested in collective transnational alternatives to neo-liberal education models must stress the urgency of having agency in determining our collective academic project, and the danger of losing that project through purely individual responses to these trends, no matter how critical those individual responses sometimes are. In unified action there is hope to influence effects; divided we are left to precarious individual responses.

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