

Academic Labor

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Academic Labor and the Literature of Discontent in Communication

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As the job crisis of the early- to mid-1990s rolled across college campuses, fundamentally altering the higher education employment landscape, a rich, incisive and belligerent literature emerged that at once decried and challenged the pernicious effects of the reserve army of underemployed yet highly trained, well-qualified, recently minted PhDs on the academic labor market. In journals such as *Social Text* and a wide array of disciplinary outlets, scholars described the changing culture of the academy as corporatization and identified, among its many effects, that the “content of work in the academy—of curriculum development, research, and service—is shifting and being redefined” (Rhoades & Slaughter, 1997, p. 9). Moreover, as graduate students took to the streets to protest the changing conditions of their own labor and the diminished prospects for future employment, even mainstream media outlets took notice of the job crisis, noting that the work of the academy had been transfigured by the overproduction of PhDs amid a dearth of tenure-track appointments. For a time, it appeared that the corporatization of higher education had become something of a cottage industry, producing critical analyses and vehement protests even if little of it seemed to help stem the tide.

And yet, in spite of what is certainly a fundamental transformation of the higher education landscape, scant attention seems to have been paid in the field of communication. In what appears to be a stunning case of what Cherwitz and Hikins (2000), admittedly in a different context, identified as rhetoric’s tendency toward “provincialism,” there has been hardly a mention of the notion of corporatization in the communication field, even as other disciplines have identified it as among the foremost crises in contemporary intellectual life. In part, communication’s apparent indifference to the corporatization of the academy, and concomitant issues of academic labor, is merely a corollary to what Mosco and McKercher (2009) recently identified as a more general neglect of labor in all its variations: “It is probably accurate to conclude that if, as the media theorist Dallas Smythe (1977) famously remarked, communication is the blind spot of Western Marxism, then labor remains a blind spot of communication studies” (p. 21). Denning (2004) accounts for communication’s indifference to labor by noting that as part of the “cultural turn,” the field came to define its primary object of study as culture rather than work or labor: “Work and culture seem to be opposite in a number of ways. Culture is seen as the equivalent of leisure, not labor; the symbolic, not the material; shopping and tourism, not jobs; sex, desire, and fantasy, not work” (p. 91). In part, this apparent separation between culture and labor is born of renowned cultural studies scholar Raymond Williams’ appropriation of two historical senses of the notion

of culture. According to Denning, Williams “borrowed from the Arnoldian and Tylorian traditions while burying them” (p. 78). Thus, communication’s focus on culture is predicated on the erasure of labor and work:

The concept is invented by Tylorians and Arnoldians alike to name those places where the commodity does not yet rule: the arts, leisure, and unproductive luxury consumptions of revenues by the accumulators; and the ways of life of so-called primitive peoples. The world dominated by capital—the working day, the labor process, the factory and office, machines and technology, and science itself—is thus outside of culture. (p. 79)

Communication’s failure to grapple with questions of academic labor is, therefore, merely a part of the field’s more general neglect of labor issues. Indeed, even Mosco and McKercher’s (2009) laudable corrective to the field’s neglect of labor fails to identify the academy as a site where labor struggles to come to grips with a fundamentally altered employment landscape.

This is not to suggest, however, that scholars of communication have been unaffected or even entirely unaware of the transformations wrought by corporatization. Instead, as befits Denning’s (2004) description, the field has transformed the material concerns of the job crisis into largely symbolic ones. This article critiques the loosely- framed “literature of discontent with academic scholarship” (Rushing & Frenzt, 1999, p. 229) that emerged in the field of communication and that roughly parallels the critical literature concerning the corporatization of the academy. As scholars across the academy decried the impact of corporatization on their disciplines and the shared intellectual task of the university, scholars in communication turned their attention to a different set of issues: namely, why so much of the scholarship appearing in the field’s officially sanctioned outlets was so often both uninspired and uninspiring. I conclude this essay by identifying the centrality of academic labor to our understanding of labor and thus calling for a reorientation of the field to the material conditions of our own work.

The Literature of Discontent

Although it encompasses a variety of unique perspectives, the literature of discontent seems to have had its genesis in Rodden’s (1993) essay in the *Western Journal of Communication*, in which he argues that “academe today faces a spiritual crisis incomparably more difficult than any transition in its recent past” (p. 112). Although it addresses a number of issues then current within the field, the article captures the mood of the times as it rails against the increasing professionalization of communication as it competed for prestige with neighboring disciplines: “Building personal empires of PhD student co-authors, new scholarly societies, new professional divisions, new journals (Have S.C.A. members really needed three new journals in the last four years?), has become the *raison d’etre* of senior academics” (p. 129). However, as befits a “spiritual crisis,” the causes of the assorted evils ravaging the academy are “the dim yet governing presence of two dirty and secret vices: hypocrisy and envy” (ibid.).

In addition to giving voice to a rising sense of discontentment within the field, Rodden’s essay inaugurated within this literature of discontent the tendency toward seeking symbolic causes for material

problems. Indeed, all of the evils described by Rodden—the personal empires, increased specialization, and proliferation of scholarly publications—can be attributed to the corporatization of higher education. In other words, the answer to his question, “Does communication really need three new journals?” is this: It depends. In order to understand the range and variety of the communicative experience, perhaps not; but if the goal is to provide more outlets for the publications demanded by the corporatized university, then three may be insufficient. The literature that follows Rodden’s provocation continues this theme, identifying the malaise in academic scholarship as stemming from a variety of sources, including the disconnect between personal and professional identities (Bochner, 1997); the cult of professionalism (Nothstine, Blair, & Copeland, 1994); the disciplining of the erotic (Corey & Nakayama, 1997); and deep-seated myths endemic to Western culture (Rushing & Frenzt, 1999).

This literature of discontent perhaps reached its culmination in a special issue of the journal *Communication Theory*, in which a number of authors “provide reflective discourses that speak to their own disenchantment and renewal in the academy offering a critical examination of institutional process, practices and relationships” (Geist, 1999, p. 367). However, in all of this reflection over the malaise within the field of communication, there is little recognition of the fact that much of it can be traced to an increasing anxiety over the conditions of labor then taking hold within the corporatized university. Indeed, if much of the work produced by communication scholars bears the mark of being uninspired and uninspiring, we need look no further than the constraints placed on academic labor by the corporatized university. As Hardt and Negri (2009) argue, “you can, of course, think and produce affects on demand, but only in a rote, mechanical way, limiting creativity and potential productivity” (p. 147). Moreover, scholars in other fields were recognizing these constraints and producing trenchant analyses of the corporatized university, such as:

The ideological underpinnings and material effects of policy have shifted from Keynesian to Malthusian principles with Dickensian results. A policy of survival of the fittest versus full employment leads to reduced employment, increased poverty, and growing material disparity. Those conditions are accompanied by disdain for the less well-off and by blaming victims for being unproductive, inverting them into victimizers and causes of their own and other social and economic problems. (Rhoades & Slaughter, 1997, p. 32)

In communication, the analysis is a bit more tepid, with Gunn and Beard (2000) remarking of the same period:

Today in the American academy, it is common knowledge that a central part of the curriculum concerns the negotiation of continual institutional pressures that threaten to subordinate “higher education to the needs of capital” (Aronowitz, 1998, par. 4) and that academics in the United States had not quite accepted the inevitability of the corporatization of education. (p. 279)

And, as if to demonstrate Rhoades and Slaughter’s contention that these “conditions are accompanied by disdain for the less well-off and by blaming victims for being unproductive” (p. 32), the first response the

growing literature of discontent produced James W. Chesebro's (1993) pedantic and blandly provocative essay "How to Get Published," in which he claims:

Faculty members may find publication standards inappropriate, but given current conditions, "survival" in the academic environment requires that faculty members adopt an attitude, frame of mind, or motivational set which encourages them to initiate and to complete the publishing process. An interim conclusion reached in this analysis is that the primary reason by faculty members do not publish is because they are not motivated to write. (p. 374)

Leaving aside for a moment the anxiety over academic "survival" that Chesebro mysteriously brackets off by scare quotes, there is little mention throughout the essay that the underlying reason why we need to concern ourselves with faculty members' lack of motivation (either to write or to publish) is that the academic job market was becoming increasingly brutal, demanding higher levels of productivity in order to secure a scholar's survival as anything more than one of the academy's overworked, underpaid contingent laborers.

Chesebro's provocation did not, of course, go unanswered, but instead served as a kind of negative touchstone for the ongoing literature of discontent. The first response to Chesebro's well-intentioned advice to the unpublished came from Bach, Blair, Nothstine and Pym's (1996) critique that takes Chesebro to task on a number of fronts, including his blame-the-victim mentality and valorization of the "community's authority structure and sense of history" (p. 404). Furthermore, the authors address the "material conditions of publication in our community" (p. 408), wherein they counter Chesebro's argument for a lack of motivation by the "unpublished" by pointing out that it "ignores the wide variation in workplace responsibilities and resources faced by different members of the field" as well as "personal circumstances, as if birth and death, health and illness, marriage and divorce, were irrelevant to the question of one's 'motivation' to publish" (p. 408). It is important to note, however, that Bach et al.'s response focuses on the "material conditions of publishing" but not, necessarily, the "material conditions of labor" (p. 399). The underlying anxieties that gave rise to Chesebro's project of providing helpful advice to the "unpublished" fail to appear in Bach et al.'s response. In it, we find little sense that:

The bar for tenure is rising at major research universities and teaching institutions alike . . . The process of judging a tenure candidate varies widely from place to place—and from discipline to discipline—but *whatever an institution expected 10 years ago, it now expects more* [emphasis added]. (Wilson, 2001, p. A12)

In fact, a clear statement concerning the pressures being experienced by the professoriate didn't appear in the communication literature until Rushing and Frentz's (1999) contribution to the literature of discontent, in which they offer the following evocative description:

At the appointed time, the faculty of the Arts and Sciences college of our university assembled in Old Main, with much anticipation and considerable anxiety, to hear the new chancellor tell us of his plans for our school. Glancing around, we noticed several

faculty members catching the minutes before his appearance to grade one more paper. Bleary-eyed and hard-pressed, we listened while he told us that, in a word, nothing we had done before his arrival had been done well enough or, more to the point, in enough quantity. (p. 229)

Furthermore, Rushing and Frenzt take pains to acknowledge that the pressures they identify are being experienced across employment categories:

The measuring starts early and picks up speed as we go. The scenario is well known. These days a fresh PhD had better the race before the gun goes off, with a publishable dissertation in one hand, an article or two in the other, and a sheaf of convention papers tied to the belt. Few provisions are made for the "slow starter," the person who may have little to say at first (or much to say but without all the tools needed to say it), but who gains speed steadily and eventually enriches the field with finely honed work. And s/he must not slow down with the years. (p. 243)

And yet, in spite of the eloquence with which they render the plight of the professoriate under academic capitalism, Rushing and Frenzt fail to identify that the primary cause for the debasement of academic worklives was "the quickening conversion of learning into intellectual property and the university into a global corporation" (Miyoshi, 2000, p. 8).

Instead, Rushing and Frenzt (1999) assert that the present malaise within our discipline can be traced to a "more general cultural orientation that values 'up' over 'down,' speed over deliberation, and quantity over quality" (p. 231). Undoubtedly, the academy is replete with metaphors that uncritically valorize notions of labor and productivity that, in Berardi's (2009) more general description of 21st-century work: "In order to stimulate competition, a powerful injection of aggressive energy became necessary, a sort of permanent electrocution producing a constant mobilization of psychic energies" (p. 97). Indeed, Rushing and Frenzt (1999) note "the general dispiritedness between the lines of our fellow scholars' critique of academia" (p. 240). This "dispiritedness" has its parallels in Berardi's (2009) notion that, "once the organism gets overtaxed to an unbearable degree, a panic crisis may lead to collapse, or the organism might detach itself from the flow of communication, manifesting a sudden psychic loss of motivation. (p. 102)

However, for Rushing and Frenzt, the genesis of these notions is located not in the wholesale adoption of corporate practices by university administrations, but by our reliance on certain mythic metaphors that are deeply rooted in Western thought. In their focus on metaphor, Rushing and Frenzt echo McMillan and Cheney's (1996) analysis of the "student-as-consumer metaphor," wherein they acknowledge that the "university seems to be moving toward a traditional, top-heavy, over-managed and cumbersome model" (p. 4).

Unfortunately, this transformation of the material into the cultural or symbolic offers, at best, an incomplete analysis of the ravages of the corporate university. For instance, in regard to their "denial of descent," Rushing and Frenzt (1999) can offer only this:

We recognize that academia cannot itself provide all the conditions for such divine inspiration, that to some extent it merely comes when it will, and that it is up to each individual to make spaces for it within the ongoing demands of the workaday world. *What the institution could do is to relax its unremitting call for more, especially in lieu of an active concern for what is good* [emphasis added]. (p. 243)

In other words, and in keeping with the entire "literature of discontent," the solutions to the problems caused by corporatization are individual ones: Wait for divine inspiration; make space in our lives as academics, and make a plaintive plea for academia to "relax its unremitting call." Rushing and Frenzt argue that "the gods must be crazy" but fail to acknowledge that their well-articulated exigencies are not the product of deranged deities but a perfectly rational system of academic capitalism behaving in completely predictable ways. Perhaps the institution could relax its demands for more, but it is difficult to see precisely why it would.

The focus on individualized solutions reaches its apotheosis in Drew's (2006) contribution to the literature of discontent, wherein he argues for "an ideology of sloth" (p. 69). This ideology aims to overturn the dictates of the "publish or perish imperative [which] has become academe's version of global warming; no issue inspires so much vexation and so little action" (p. 66). Drew acknowledges that, "The whole issue of scholarly productivity is, as Marxists say, overdetermined. An economist would blame the publishing boom on free-market competition: between PhDs for research posts, between universities for high rankings, between academic presses for name authors" (p. 69). Thus, it is important to note that the "ideology of sloth" is predicated on securing "the luxury of tenured or tenure-track positions" (p. 70) unless the sloth has access to "an independently-wealthy life partner or secure[s] a large bank deposit in his name from an anonymous benefactor" (ibid.). And while a good bit of this may be read as tongue-in-cheek, the models Drew provides of successful academic sloths prominently features David Marc, who "describes himself as 'a traveling salesman of ideas' driving around Southern California's freeways from one adjunct gig to another" (p. 75), thus having failed to avoid "the plight of the *full-fledged* slackers [emphasis added] who occupy the 'McStructorships' that the academy increasingly offers fresh PhDs" (p. 70).

Here the job crisis that continues to plague the academy is dismissed with the admonition that "a central conviction of cultural studies is that we needn't be slaves to economics" (Drew, 2006, p. 69). Furthermore, casualized labor in higher education—those "McStructorships" and adjunct "gigs"—are represented as either the fate of "slackers" or the blessings of an academic labor system that provides enough casualized teaching positions to keep body and soul together while Drew's "academic sloth" pursues his love of writing. At this point, the blame-the-victim mentality achieves nearly absurd proportions, and the inattentiveness of communication to the material conditions of academic labor becomes a withering insensitivity to the all-too-real deprivations experienced by academia's underclass of casual laborers. And while it is difficult to deny that we shouldn't "be slaves to economics," the literature of discontent fails to challenge the fact that in regard to the academy, "most work remains invisible" (Denning, 2004, p. 92) and, as a consequence of that invisibility, "the new corporatism has not seriously had to acknowledge heterodoxy about restructuring as anything more than a public relations problem" (Liu, 2004, p. 46).

Academic Labor as Communicative Labor

It may be the case, as Sterne (2009) argues, that communication has ignored issues of academic labor because we have, until recently, been relatively immune to the more severe deprecations experienced in other fields. "Critical Communication Studies has for some time now had better ratios of applicants to positions than neighboring fields like Literature, Film, History, Philosophy and Women's Studies" (p. 422). This relatively charmed existence seems unlikely to continue for very much longer:

Students who first applied for jobs in fall of 2008 entered their doctoral programs when the number of academic positions in Communication Studies was still expanding. The reality they confronted last year did not match their expectations when they entered their doctoral programs. (ibid.)

Therefore, we might expect that the inattention of communication studies to the job crisis will come to end as we grapple with a changing employment landscape.

If, however, as is argued here, communication's failure to acknowledge the transformations of the academy wrought by corporatization are part of a more general disregard to all of labor, then the corrective will have to come from a more fundamental reorientation of the field. Denning (2004), for instance, argues for "a labor theory of culture," which includes the admonition that "the cultures of the subaltern, the underothers, which demand recognition and cultural justice are not simply the expression of some pre-existing identity; their unities and divisions are the mediated products of the forms of labor" (p. 95). In its focus on the "forms of labor" that give rise to "unities, divisions and identities," a labor theory of culture becomes a productive site for a reconsideration of academic labor as an exemplar of the major trends currently reshaping the 21st-century labor force as described by Hardt and Negri (2009):

The trend toward the hegemony or prevalence of immaterial production in the process of capitalist valorization . . . a qualitative shift in the working day and thus the temporal "flexibility" of labor . . . affective, emotional, and relationship tasks, are becoming increasingly central in sectors of labor. (pp. 132–133)

In short, as "knowledge workers take up an increasingly large share of the jobs in the developed world" (Mosco & McKercher, 2009, p. 46), creating what Berardi (2009) calls "the cognitariat" (p. 105), academic labor will become emblematic rather than exceptional.

For scholars and teachers of communication, the corporatized university presents unique challenges to our sense of ourselves as, in Lentricchia's (1983) words, *specific intellectuals* "whose radical work of transformation, whose fight against repression is carried on at the specific intellectual site where he finds himself and on the terms of his own expertise, on the terms of his own functioning as an intellectual" (p. 7). He goes on to argue that the critic

. . . may organize teach-ins about the situation in El Salvador or in Beirut; he may work for the improvement of conditions for what we in the university call 'staff' as opposed to faculty; he may involve himself publicly in political work in the so-called outside world. (ibid.)

However, the overriding concern of the critic, according to Lentricchia, is that "our potentially most powerful work as university humanists must be carried out in what we do, what we are trained for" (ibid.). The corporatized university collapses the distinction between the "scholarly" and "outside" worlds. Under the dictates of academic capitalism, "institutions of higher education come increasingly to operate (under government pressure) as if they were ordinary businesses" (Fairclough, 1993, p. 143). Consequently, the corporatized university becomes a site of struggle just as contentious and real as the "so-called outside world." Indeed, what corporatization directs us to is an understanding that the university is every bit as real a world as any shop floor.

Moreover, as the trends described by Hardt and Negri (2009) reshape the contemporary workforce, communicative labor will play an increasingly central role in the lives of workers across the employment spectrum. As scholars and teachers of communication, we bear a particular responsibility to respond to these transformations as the students in our classrooms and readers of scholarship will be among those most profoundly influenced and influential in shaping the world of work and labor. The corporatization of the academy and concomitant deformation of academic work should no longer be considered peripheral to the forces that are reshaping the contemporary labor force. Consequently, the analysis of academic labor may serve as an exemplar for the cognitariat and become a particularly rich site for scholars of communication to intervene by moving beyond documenting the material consequences of corporatization to resisting its dictates through collective action. In other words, the treatment for Bochner's (1997) "institutionalized depression" (p. 432) is collective action to resist the worst of corporatization. As Lafer (2001) argues:

Beyond the immediate economic issues of wages and benefits, this is a fight over the extent to which the university will be democratized. The romantic vision of the medieval university run by its scholars is long gone. But the difference between a democratized and corporatized university remain more critical than ever as universities face the future. (p. 67)

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