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Academic Labour and its Exploitation

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This article aims to provide an innovative approach to understanding the complexities of the exploitation of contemporary academic labour. My broad theoretical framework will be that of Marxism. Yet the innovations of my argument come in the form of the critical synthesis I propose between a range of Marxist, neo-Marxist, autonomist and non-Marxist approaches.

To Marxists of an orthodox persuasion some of my arguments will appear heretical. In contrast, for those of an autonomist and post-Marxist persuasion, I may appear to give too much ground to orthodoxy. Yet the argument I make can be seen to point effectively to ways in which academic labour is exploited, and the contribution it makes to capitalist valorisation. In short, I believe my argument to be true.

I consider the conceptual tools of Marxism to be in their current form only partly adequate to the task of understanding academic labour. Marxists of a more orthodox persuasion have tended to provide a much too restricted account of exploitation, meaning that they cannot conceptualise adequately the specificities and complexities of academic labour in particular, and intellectual labour more generally.[1] I argue against some orthodox Marxists (though not necessarily Marx) that material productivity is not a necessary condition of valorisation and therefore exploitation. The production of commodities can take many forms, including the production of ideas and affects. This is key given that the academic labour process is a site of intellectual and affective production. Moreover, I provide a key conceptual expansion of the Marxist notion of exploitation by developing a category of *mediated exploitation* – that is the claim that capitalism can exploit labour which is not part of the immediate capitalist labour process, labour which is nevertheless key to the totality of capitalist valorisation. Academic labour occurring in the state sphere is one such mediation, as is (re) productive in the private sphere. Indeed, both forms of labour to an important extent are (re) productive. Some earlier Marxist writers had moved in this direction. However, they could not have anticipated all the complexities of the forms of mediated value creation takes in capitalist societies. Moreover, earlier Marxist writers had been largely blind to the role of reproductive labour in capitalist value creation. Thus, my argument at least suggests certain corrections to this.

My argument also moves beyond concerns with a general account of the exploitation of academic labour, to consider how this connects with aspects of a more concrete academic classed experience of and adaption to mechanisms of academic exploitation. Here I consider some of the forms of classed subjectivity which facilitate (and undermine) capitalist exploitation, as well as those that perhaps do not. I also point to some of the differential classed experiences of exploited academic labour. In doing this, I challenge the idea of an academic precariat, preparing instead to claim that there exists in the

contemporary academic labour process something akin to an academic reserve army of labour and an academic labour aristocracy. The existence of an academic reserve army of labour may be beneficial for capitalism, but in the case of the academic labour aristocracy and its quasi-Soviet bureaucracy, this may not be so clear.

Productive Labour and Exploitation

The vast scholarship concerning Marx's understanding of productive labour has not produced a settled position - though the debate has now run for over a hundred years. The exegetical debates are largely overdetermined by a complex and contextual politics of reading.[2] Before discussing some of these debates, it is important to make a general remark about how Marx understands productive labour. Marx differentiates productive from unproductive labour; he also differentiates productive labour in a general sense (that is the creative labour which furnishes objects from nature) from productive labour in a capitalist sense. Marx is specific about how he defines unproductive labour. Unproductive labour is labour which does not contribute to the production of surplus-value, but is rather consumed solely for the purpose of satisfying a concrete need in, say, the form of a service. Productive labour in a capitalist sense is, for Marx, labour which contributes directly to the process of valorisation – that is, the production of surplus value.[3] Marx maintains that a necessary condition of productivity is that labour exchanges 'directly with capital as capital', as opposed to exchanging with revenue. Thus, Marx's concept of productive labour is limited, a limitation which I will challenge below by introducing the concept of *mediated* value.[4]

The 1970s and 1980s witnessed a range of important debates on value theory and its relationship to class and exploitation. Much of the content of these debates will strike us today as rather outdated – in part because they occur in advance of the information technology revolution which has shaped so much of the content of debates on academic labour.[5] This said there are I think aspects of these debates – in terms of both advances and limitations – which are of use for how today we can attempt to understand the class composition and exploitation of academic labour.

Position A

This position was developed by writers such as Ian Gough**,** Meiksins and Meiksins-Wood.[6] For such writers, exploitation was to be understood in a broad sense to include not only the activity of surplus value creation, but also the performance more widely of surplus labour. These writers are also clear that the material character of labour is not key to the category of exploitation. Workers producing ideas can be every bit as exploited as those digging coal, or working in cotton mills. From this, it follows that state sector and private sector workers can both be exploited, and consequently have a collective 'interest' in resisting such exploitation.

And as a key aspect of their argument is concerned with providing an inclusive account of proletarian labour, compatible with the realities of their time, they relegate the category of exploitation – as broad as the construe it - to a secondary definitional importance. It was the fact of wage labour as such which comprised both a necessary and sufficient condition for working class membership; labour's proletarian character is to this extent established at the level of its sale (exchange), though its modes of exploitation will vary. It is of course the case that it is this exchange which comprises an important condition of possibility for exploitation, for it establishes the initial balance of class forces. To be owned – to the sense that our labour power is alienated – means that someone has power over us; however, the metrics of exploitation are importantly conditioned by the process of political class struggle.

Though I have sympathy with Position A, there are also some areas of objection which are important for our argument. For example, from a Marxian point of view, it is not clear how labour which produces only a surplus (but not surplus value) can be regarded as exploited. For what is the nature of this surplus? And how is it (re) extracted and distributed? This is not to say that we cannot extend the meaning of exploitation in his way, but we need to know more about the precise mechanisms of exploitation therein. We might also argue that the relationship between the state sector and private sector worker is an exploitative one, to the extent that state wages are paid from tax revenue.[7] This is significant for the argument of this article to the extent that a large proportion of academic labour is – even in contemporary neo-liberal capitalism - carried out in the state sphere. This is the common ideological argument of those private sector workers who protest the pension provision of public sector workers, an ideological argument which the neo-liberal governments who attack universities and the public sector have done much to exacerbate. But this is not only a right-wing argument. It is an argument which Marx (rather regrettably) makes. [8] However, it is an argument which I think breaks down once one acknowledges that value can be produced through a *mediated* process in state sphere. Before moving on to consider this concept of mediated value production in a more detailed fashion, I want to set out in contrast what I have termed Position B – a materially reductive account of value production and exploitation.

Position B

For writers such as Poulantzas and Mandel, exploitation must be understood as the specific extraction of surplus value. More than this, they argue that such surplus value could only be generated in the production of material commodities. Only those workers exploited in this way could be considered as proletarian as such.[9] If correct, this would have significant implications for the concerns of this article. Put bluntly, it would commit us to the view that all academic labour must be non-proletarian labour.[10] Consequently, it would place a great deal of cognitive work externally to the class composition of the proletariat.

Thought their motivations are different, Mandel and Poulantzas considered their arguments to be an accurate statement of a Marxian position. In a contemporary context, the implications of these argument would be devastating for Marxism. Whilst capitalism continues to operate at the level of violent materiality, – key to its growth since the 1980s has been its informational, immaterial and cognitive aspects – including put reaching well beyond academic labour.

The fetishisation of materiality in these arguments does not therefore seem a particularly fruitful starting point for our analysis. First, because it cannot account for the deindustrialisation and re-composition of the working class issued in by the neo-liberal revolution of the 1970s. This was a period in which – to use Eric Hobsbawm's words - the forward march of labour seemed to be halted.[11] It was also a period in which there was a reorientation of Western capitalism towards informational and cognitive forms, and a displacement of material production to the global South. Second, it cannot address how academic labour – central to this cognitive shift - has been shaped in this re-composition. Third (important for this challenges the so-called orthodoxy of such writer) it does not acknowledge the ambiguity of Marx's argument on this issue. Let us reflect on this ambiguity. For there are clearly moments were for Marx materiality is not necessary for productivity. In *Capital* Marx insists:

> 'a schoolmaster is a productive worker when, in addition to belabouring the heads of his pupils, he works himself into the ground to enrich the owner of the school. That the latter has laid out his capital in a teaching factory, instead of a sausage factory, makes no difference to the relation.'[12]

Thus, Marx insists that the 'determinate material form' of labour and its product has nothing to do with whether that labour is productive.[13] For the sake of balance however, it should be noted that my case is not so easy. For example, in a passage which Mandel uses to support his argument, Marx writes:

> 'As for labourers which are productive for their purchaser or employer himself - as for example the actor's labour for the theatrical entrepreneur - the fact that their purchaser cannot sell them to the public in the form of commodities but only in the form of the action itself would show that they are unproductive labours'.[14]

Nevertheless, we should avoid the temptation of overstating the significance of such passages as a statement of Marx's position. There are two reasons for this. First, the fact that the most ambiguous passages occur in a work which was not only published posthumously, but also comprises less a completed text than a series of research notes, should necessitate caution. Second, to stress the necessity of such materiality would open Marx's work up to the very same criticisms he makes against Smith; that is it would seem to be a move away from the crucial emphasis on the level of 'social form, the determination of productive and unproductive labourers by their relation to capitalist production'.[15] Thus where other aspects of my argument in this paper may challenge certain Marxist orthodoxies, my argument concerning materiality is not necessarily one of

those. The position which I now set out – Position C – does not take materiality to be a necessary condition of valorisation. Nor do I think that all proletarian labour is necessarily exploited. Let's look at this position in more detail.

Position C

I accept the first half of position A (if academic labourers are employed as wage-labourers, then they must be regarded as working class, regardless of whether-or-not they are exploited). However, I reject the second half of Position A. The more convincing position to me would seem to be the one which insists that surplus value creation is central to the category of exploitation (though by introducing the category of mediation, I have a less than orthodox view of what this means), and that the materiality of commodities is not a necessary condition of value creation. In this section I want to defend some further key propositions. I do this in the context of a consideration of possible criticisms to Position C.

Affective labour can be value creating

If we reject the surplus labour account of exploitation, then it would seem much affective labour (including what feminists have termed the 'labour of love') cannot be considered as exploited. For such labour does not occur in the directly capitalist labour process. Given the gendered character of the capitalist labour process, this is a serious problem. But my response is in many ways a simple one – we need to broaden out the concept of exploitation beyond what has become a certain Marxist orthodoxy. Here I think it is important to differentiate between the following types of exploited affective labour:

a) Labour which is physically affective in its material composition. We might include under this heading the labour of sex workers – a labour which in its most violent sense, involves the combination of the material and the emotional - the two of course cannot be separated. Given the growth of internet technology, such labour is increasing. Moreover, for Marxist economists, such an increase presents a challenge to their modelling of the capitalist mode of production. For, labour trafficked into the 'sex industry' is bonded rather than free proletarian labour.

b) Affective labour which might be associated more typically with the service sector in neo-liberalism – what we might term 'service with a smile'.[16] This category of affective labour is of increasing importance in the domain of academic labour. Academics not only carry out intellectual/cognitive tasks; they are more and more responsible for the social and psychological welfare of their students. Indeed, academic labour comes to resemble the labour of other service sector workers. The metrics of the academic labour process judge academics to the extent that they can emote in the correct way. Indeed, in the United Kingdom, 'enthusiasm' for teaching is a central metric of the National Student Survey(NSS). The expression of such labour has a definite physical content; yet, its object(ive) is to shape linguistic and emotional affects, to make student customers feel

welcome, to feel at home; and this is work carried out by an increasingly casualised labour force.[17]

c) The type of affective labour carried out in the 'private sphere' – specifically that labour concerned with the reproduction of labour power. The work of feminist writers such as James and Federici has done a great deal to show how this labour is value producing, though I argue that this value is produced in a mediated fashion.[18] Note also that I am not suggesting that the mediated production of value (which I discuss in greater detail below) is any less important than direct value production. I do not wish to contribute to the type of Marxist orthodoxy which has done much to exclude gendered experience from a theory of value and exploitation.[19] Such reproductive labour in the private sphere is a necessary condition of value extraction. This is so for (at least) two reasons. First, because capitalism cannot function without the social reproduction of labour power.[20] Second, and related to this point, classed subjectivity must necessarily be socially and ideologically reproduced – and the private sphere is an important unit for such production. This said, we ought to neglect how the direct capitalist labour process itself plays a role in the reproduction of exploitable subjects. As Kathi Weeks has made clear:

> 'Exploitable subjects are not just found, they are made at the point of production… Even at the level of specific workplaces, individual managers can to some degree fashion exploitable subjects, including the specific kind of feminised or masculinized subjects they imagine they have already hired.'[21]

The reproduction of such gendered subjectivity has often served to marginalise the voices of women. It may also be considered to create a range of gendered expectations in the labour process, producing differential modes and experiences of exploitation. The academic labour process is not immune to this, to the extent that affectively oriented tasks – student support and well-being for example – tend to be disproportionally distributed to female academics, whereas high value research becomes disproportionately to be the domain of men.

Moreover, the double bind of women's experience is of importance here, meaning that many women might be considered as more exploited than their male counterparts – that is they contribute to direct valorisation in the capitalist labour process, and to a disproportionate level of mediated value production in the domestic sphere.[22] Put another way - the costs of socially necessary labour in the household are 'met' outside of the wage form – but the subject who is reproduced in this process will often become a subject of direct capitalist exploitation. And this leads us directly to what I consider to be a certain conceptual advance of this article – the concept of mediated exploitation.

Value can be created in a mediated as well as a direct fashion

From the point of the (substantially revised) Marxist account of exploitation which I wish to defend here, this category of mediated exploitation is key. Put simply, mediated value can be regarded as value resulting from labour carried out in the non-capitalist sphere

which is only transformed into value at the point it enters the immediate capitalist labour process. An example of this would be the state provision of training which allows a worker to create more value when put to work by a capitalist. Other examples may those which we have just discussed; that is socially reproductive labour carried out in the private sphere, labour which leads to the very creation of exploitable subjects.

Before making the argument regarding mediated value in more detail, it is crucial not to forget the emergence of what Slaughter and Leslie over twenty years ago termed 'academic capitalism'[23]. For value creation in universities may be direct, as well as mediated. With academic capitalism, academic goods are increasingly generated to make a direct profit. Universities are often funded out of direct private capital investment. Both autonomously and at the request of government, universities are increasingly providing research and development (R and D) activities directly for private capital, or acting themselves as private capitalists. A classic example of this is the MIT model, where universities patent profitable research findings, and develop spin-off companies in partnership with venture-capitalists.

This may be differentiated from a type of quasi (state) capitalism) This is recognised by scholars such as Harvie and De Angelis and Harvie.[24] Forms of metrics imposed by governments have led to the creation of what we might term 'research value'. This is a key aspect of the 'rule of measure'. In the UK, for example, the Research Excellence Assessment (RAE) and more recently the Research Excellence Framework (REF) assess research on the basis of a starring system. How quality is assessed varies across different units of assessment. In the context of the current REF (REF2021), outputs awarded 3* or 4* (the top two ratings) will generate income (from tax revenue) for the submission of which they are a part, and ultimately their institution. It should also be noted that REF2014 and REF2021 assess not only output quality, but also research impact – that is the idea that publically funded research should have a beneficial impact on the wider community. And the REF guidance stresses that business profit and productivity can be regarded as one such 'beneficial impact'. The UK has also introduced a Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) and a Knowledge Exchange Framework (KEF). In the case of the TEF, the quality of degree courses is assessed substantially on the basis of the employment 'outcomes' of students.

It is this quasi-capitalism which is a key arena in which mediated value is produced in universities. The mediated value with which we are concerned is primarily connected with the skilled labour which is deployed in order to create further skilled labour. Here capitalists are bound to formulate quasi-capitalist metrics to attempt to establish the efficiency of the skills production which facilitates valorisation.

I want to return to this issue of skill in a little more detail. Academic labourers are not only skilled (involving years of training and accreditation), but are also themselves involved in skills (re) production – and increasingly, skills (re) production for the capitalist sphere. To think through this issue, I want to make a brief return to Marx.

In *Capital Vol. I*, Marx defined socially necessary labour as that labour required to 'produce any use-value under the conditions of production normal for a given society.'[25] Marx considers this labour as comprising labour carried out with an average degree of skill and intensity, or what he terms 'simple labour' - a term which he somewhat problematically uses interchangeably with that of 'unskilled labour'. But where does this leave skilled labour? Marx insisted that 'More complex [i.e., skilled] labour counts only as *intensified*, or rather *multiplied* simple labour, so that a quantity of complex labour is considered equal to a larger quantity of simple labour'.[26] Mandel's equation of skilled labour with a tool may be useful here.[27] This tool is something possessed by the skilled labourer, and itself embodies a definite quantity of socially necessary labour. Thus, when the skilled labourer engages in labouring activity she will expend both a definite quantity of her own effort which - so long as such effort is not utilised in a way which is socially inefficient - can be viewed as the expenditure of unskilled or simple labour, as well as transferring (or rather transforming) the labour embodied in the tool to the new product.[28] The point with this skill, or this 'tool', is that its possession (and socially efficient utilisation) by the worker increases her/his productivity.

The Austro-Marxist Hilferding influentially argued that the category of socially necessary labour should have a wider scope than that usually implied by Marxian orthodoxy. Hilferding's work incorporates within the basis of a Marxist theory of exploitation not only the labour of those workers involved directly in the sphere of capitalist production, but also the labour of those employed in state spheres such as education – and importantly higher education. Accordingly, if we take seriously the claim that value can be produced in a *mediated* fashion – that is that labour's value creating capacity can flow from the revenue funded educational sphere to the sphere of private capital – then it would seem possible to argue that capitalists have an (in)direct 'interest' in ensuring that the exploitation of educational workers is maximised. The greater the amount of surplus-labour which is carried out in the educational sphere, the more the capitalist gets in return for her/his tax investment. And the greater the amount of surplus-labour that is transferred to the private sector the greater the amount of value that is created through its transformation.

It is crucial to understand the mediation of valorisation for a number of reasons. First, without this category, the Marxist theory of exploitation can really have nothing to say about the reality of how capitalism is able to extend exploitation beyond what we may term the immediate capitalist labour process. Valorisation does not only occur in the factory. Second, the category of mediated value can enable us to point not only to the antagonisms, but also to the possibility of a solidarity of 'interests' between workers in the state and private capitalist spheres, and other forms of non-capitalist labour – say reproductive labour – which is also value creating. Third, and most importantly for the concerns of this paper, without this category I would argue that we are blind to key aspects of the form which the exploitation of academic labour takes today.

I want to make a final point of qualification. It is the case that many of the arguments on which I have initially drawn are from Marxists writing prior to (or at the early stages of)

the neo-liberal stage of capitalism. The neo-liberal re-articulation of capitalism has resulted in the subjection of ever more spheres of life to the direct rule of capital – that is the 'real subsumption' of society itself.[29] Accordingly, where we might – at least in social democratic societies – have considered the capitalist state to have been separate to the process of direct capitalist valorisation (though of course functionally necessary for such valorisation), the state itself has significantly (though not entirely) been brought within such valorisation. This is clear to the extent that educational goods – skills and training – do not only contribute to *mediated value production*, they also contribute directly to such valorisation. To put this more simply, educational goods and services can often be regarded as commodities in a capitalist sense.

Academic labour is internally complex and differentiated (or, some academics are more exploited than others)

The concern so far in this paper has been to propose an adapted and critically revised Marxist account of exploitation which can enable us to understand the exploitation of academic labour in the context of contemporary neoliberal capitalism. But my argument has been at a certain level of abstraction, focusing primarily on what might (and might not) be regarded as exploitation in this extended Marxist sense. It should also be pointed out that my remarks on (re) productive labour commit me to a further claim. Such labour can be exploited by capitalists in a mediated sense, even where that labour is not proletarian in a strict Marxian sense. This further emphasises the point – again in contrast to Poulantzas *et al*. – that exploitation as such is not a necessary condition of proletarian membership. Indeed, in contrast to non-proletarian subjects who are exploited by capitalists, we may have proletarian labourers who are not exploited (though these are likely if valorisation is to be effective to be limited in number).

In this section of the article, I want to argue that differential experiences of (and indeed extent of) exploitation will vary partly in accordance with differentially classed subjectivities (inside and outside the proletariat). To illustrate this issue, I want to give some attention to the claim made be some authors that we are currently witnessing the emergence of a highly exploited (and exploitable) academic precariat. [30] In particular, I want to ask 'what can the category of the (academic) precariat tell us about the concrete experiences of the exploitation of academic labour?'

Guy Standing, along with sociologists such as Mike Savage, have written about the growth of a 'precariat', a class category peculiar to contemporary capitalism.[31] In the ashes of the social democratic settlement, we have witnessed an increasingly rigid separation between workers on at best short-term contracts with greatly reduced life opportunities, and the 'salariat' who enjoy reasonable levels of job security. Yet, Savage and Standing are ambiguous about the relationship between concrete class practices and exploitation. Put another way, they do not really demonstrate the role 'precarity' plays in enhancing valorisation. This process it could be argued creates type of apparent and contradictory separation of interests between the 'precariat' and the 'salariat'. The salariat

on the one hand have an interest in intensifying the exploitation of the precariat, in order to retain their own privilege (including the exploitation of organisational assets). And as the salariat often enjoy a position of hierarchical domination, they can ensure that the labour costs of at least one class strata are deflated as far as possible, therefore maximising surplus value extraction. Of course, that which enhances valorisation on one level, may undermine this process on the other – especially where privileged workers who maximise the exploitation of less privileged workers are able to charge higher than average labour skills rents in doing so.[32] (I will discuss this point in greater detail below.)

Yet the specific characteristics Savage and Standing attribute to the precariat leads me to have some doubts as to its applicability in the context of contemporary academic labour. Savage writes that the precariat class are: 'Positioned at the bottom of the social hierarchy. They are a group who have very low amounts of all… kinds of capital with incomes of only a few thousand pounds a year, little savings and wealth.'[33] This may denote many individuals who carry out academic labour. Indeed, I do not want to negate the experience of academic labourers on part time and zero-hours contracts - it is clear that such groups are often exploited, and that the 'uberification' of higher education – as Hall maintains - is a real process. Such 'uberification' allows universities to maximise value extraction with very little overhead costs. Academics become to this extent self-exploiting subjects who serve the process of valorisation.

The idea of an academic 'precariat' also presupposes a level of unity of class experience which is to an important extent absent in the context of academic labour.[34] To put this point more simply, some precariously employed academics may well be more precarious than others, and therefore their experience of exploitation may be more violent. Thus, when we compare this to the relative privilege of some 'junior' academics – those for example with savings and familial wealth (to refer back to Savage) - who may nevertheless be employed on part-time even zero hours contracts with those who do not have access to such resources, the idea of an academic precariat loses some purchase. There is a significant literature documenting the class composition of cultural professions.[35] There is also an important and growing literature looking at the differential classed experiences of students.[36] It would be unusual if the arena of higher educational labour – where a key value is placed on educational credentials and middle class modes of cultural capital – did not act as an arena in which class advantage (and consequently disadvantage) is reproduced.

My key concern however is not simply the production and reproduction of disadvantage, but what this tells us concretely about exploitation. Given that those junior lecturers with higher amounts of cultural capital, educational and importantly economic capital are in a much less 'precarious' situation than their counterparts with working class familial history, their status as exploitable subjects is substantially different to their less privileged counterparts - we cannot always argue that they are less exploited. To refer back to Weeks' argument, we need to consider how exploitable subjects are (re) produced. However, in this context I make a different stress to Weeks, arguing that

subject constitution prior to the entry to the immediate labour process is of a more fundamental importance.

The over-supply of academic labour is clearly advantageous for those seeking to exploit this labour – whether real or quasi-capitalists. I will return to this theme below when I refer to an academic reserve army of labour. But for now, it is worth simply commenting that the over-supply of labour enables overall labour costs to be driven down – and therefore the totality of surplus value to be enhanced. Yet in this context of over-supply, those with the 'appropriately' 'distinguished' habitus are likely to be best situated to mobilise their educational capital in order to secure the more lucrative forms of temporary work which allow access to the higher echelons of the institutional hierarchy of higher education. [37] Thus they will have a favourable location as they attempt to extract a share of the overall academic product, and are therefore better positioned to improve their conditions of labour at least across the lifetime of their academic career.[38]

I want to add an important qualification to my argument here. I am not claiming that such relative disadvantage always means that such junior academics are necessarily more exploited than their 'privileged' counterparts in the sector – though they often will be. There is much more to exploitation than this. For it is possible that a junior academic Russell Group university (to refer to the UK context) may be engaged in research and teaching projects which generate higher levels of surplus value than say a precariously employed academic of 'traditional working class' origin working in a teacher training institution. (We could also make a similar point in discussion of an academic salariat.) To put this point simply, they may be paid more but also more exploited. Exploitation and deprivation are not the same thing. My claim here as pertains to exploitation is more limited. Capitalism in general (and even more so neo-liberal capitalism) will tend always to seek to drive down labour costs to maximise surplus. And it will attempt to achieve this in the state and the private spheres. Its orientation to investment also tends to be short-term. Those academics with less privilege will tend to have less options available to them – put simply, their bargaining position will be weaker – and therefore less well situated to demand a larger share of the surplus which they are involved in the creation of.

Many of these concerns pertaining to the structural dynamics of the exploitation of academic labour may be thought about by making something of a critical return to an older Marxist literature – particularly the literature which differentiates the reserve army of labour from the labour aristocracy; though the shape of these categories must change to the extent that the academic labour process is the type of mixed economy which I have argued it is above. This move enables us to unite contemporary sociology of class with a concern for class's connection with exploitation.

Marx differentiated between the labour aristocracy (privileged workers who if exploited appear to have a significant material gain from this exploitation) and the 'reserve army of labour' – that is workers who are either unemployed or with casualised work relations, who bring economic discipline if other workers are encouraged to make 'excessive' wage demands. The advantage of drawing on Marx's approach is that it enables us to start to

understand how it is that social and structural differentiation in the academic labour process enables relationships of exploitation to be both produced and reproduced. And combine this with the quasi-soviet character of much of the academic labour process (and the way in which this interacts with capital via *mediated* and immediate forms valorisation) and some interesting contradictory dynamics start to emerge.

First, the presence of a large strata combining unemployed academic labourers and those with fragile or zero-hours contracts.[39] The presence of such an overqualified labour force – the academic 'reserve army of labour' - is deeply advantageous to university employers. The shift here from the category of the precariat to that of the reserve army of labour involves a shift in the mode of abstraction; we move from the complexities and perceived experiences of a somewhat disparate group of workers, to an understanding of what might unite a group of workers from a capitalist perspective. That is, we look at how labour hierarchies enable (and indeed disable) capitalist valorisation. Thus, we can come to understand how labour hierarchies allow for the costs of skilled labour (re) production to be kept to a minimum. Indeed, as the reserve army of labour are often outside of the immediate capitalist labour process, they are responsible for their own skills (re) production; employers on the other hand get the benefit of these skills with little or no investment. We can witness this clearly in the context of the current university sector. Here we see intense competition of applicants for an increasingly limited number of PhD scholarships, whilst at the same time a loans regime has been put in place which transfers training costs (and associated debts) to individuals.[40]

From the perspective of academic capitalism, the reserve army of labour's disciplinary function is key. If workers do not do what is demanded of them – working weekends and late into the night, responding 24/7 to student emails, writing grant proposals, producing high quality research 'outputs', carrying out bureaucratic functions, etc. – then they can quite easily be replaced by someone else, often on a lower salary. The competition is currently so fierce that from the employer's perspective, there is always someone not only cheaper, but also 'better'. Given that an academic's career cannot advance without alignment to an institution (and the nature of this advance will also be conditioned by the status of the institution, access to which will be shaped by one's possession of social and cultural capital) then it is hardly surprising that such academics will be anxious to maintain their post. And the suppression of labour costs means that there is both a larger resource to be put into capital projects and into senior manager salaries, thus intensifying the scope of what has been termed by Wright organisational asset exploitation. Thus, senior managers in universities have a structural interest in the persistent subordination of their academic colleagues. I will discuss this issue in greater detail below.

Second, the reserve army of labour concept may be useful an analogous way. The structures of armies are ranked. We refer to the officer classes in order to denote the privileged origins of this level of military service. Typically, the artillery – the most precarious role in the army - have been drawn from the working classes. Social mobility between the ranks – though not impossible – is socially limited. It is conditioned on the basis of what Bourdieu has termed distinction. A public school – and possibly Oxbridge –

education will accelerate career progression. A working class background and comprehensive education will not. As I have remarked above, beneath the ideal of meritocracy and universality is a hierarchical academic domain, reproduced on the basis of definite class practices. And this hierarchical structure can facilitate (and work against valorisation).

If we displace the category of the academic precariat for that of the academic reserve army of labour, we might also displace the category of the salariat with that of the academic labour aristocracy. Engels uses this term to refer to those workers with craft skills – who, owing to their effective unionisation, were able to stave off mechanisation and reorganisation, and therefore resist the imposition of capitalist forms of exploitation and valorisation.[41] Lenin on the other hand uses this term in a pejorative fashion; that is to refer to all those considered enemies of international socialism, from – which at various times included the social democratic and trade union leadership, the economically higher echelons of the working class, and in his polemics during the first world war, the entire working class of imperialist countries. Hobsbawm[42] identifies six main features of the labour aristocracy. These are as follows: First, they have a regularity and relatively high level of wages. Second, they have strong prospects of social security. Third, they have favourable conditions of work. Fourth, they have advantageous conditions of labour when considered against lower social strata (for example, the reserve army of labour). Fifth, they have preferable general conditions of living. Sixth, thy have better future prospects of future advancement, for themselves and their children. We can see such privilege operating in the academic labour process. We might also refer again to the disciplinary function which such a group may have in helping to accelerate the exploitation of the lower echelons of academic labour. Clearly it is not too much of a stretch to argue that such relations are evident in the context of contemporary academic labour. It is also clear that academic labour is contested both at the level of the reserve army of academic labour, and at the aristocratic pole. As Halsey made clear, 'donnish dominion' is no longer the norm – the power of the bureaucratic senior management team is in the ascendency.[43]

So far, I have suggested how labour hierarchies may facilitate capitalist valorisation. I have also mentioned briefly that they may do the opposite of this. Thus, we might ask 'to what extent does the differentiation of academic labour identified above (dis) advantage capital?' I concur with David Harvey that neo-liberal capitalism is less concerned with accumulation, than it is with negative (non-progressive) redistribution, a redistribution which maximises the power and resource of existing elites, where this is largely concerned as a zero-sum game with the world's poor.[44] There is a tension between capital's demands that the educational labour process contribute indirectly towards valorisation and the structure of that labour process. Put another way, there is an extent to which contemporary neo-liberal capitalism is a rather inefficient form of capitalism. Thus, while UK universities find themselves in financial difficulties, the pay and bonuses of those in charge continue to increase. We might consider this to be a form of organisational asset exploitation (to use a term from the work of Erik Olin Wright).[45] Senior university managers are able to mobilise their organisational assets – status, position, habitus, distinction, etc. - in order to charge exploitative rents (in the form of

wages and bonuses) to the institutions which they lead, regardless of whether the productivity of those institutions has increased during their tenure.

This labour process we might note without much irony is quasi-soviet to the extent that it judges productivity through a top down strategic planning process – five-year plans are frequently put into place – and judgements of performance are made to the extent that the key performance indicators set out in these plans are met (regardless of the need for tactical changes during this five-year period). Generally weak structures of governance often mean that direct accountability is a challenge. For these reasons, universities are frequently slow to respond to the imperatives of the market. Private capitalists increasingly question the benefits a mass higher education system has for them. (In relation to my argument above, this is in part a result of the difficulties of measurability regarding mediated exploitation.) This in part explains the current hostile political environment in the UK towards higher education. It also explains the enthusiasm which right wing politicians in particular have towards the privatisation of the university sector. Thus, it may be a certain irony that that the senior managers of universities may themselves have a perverse interest in refusing capitalism.

Conclusion

There are a number of key points ai want to stress in way of a conclusion. Contemporary academic labour is frequently exploited. The resources of Marxism can be used to shed interesting light on this exploitation. However, in analysing the forms of exploitation of contemporary academic labour we are pointed to some of the limits of Marxist theory. It has been my intention in this article (through a type of internal critical dialogue) to stretch these limits – by sometimes going beyond them. I have done this through a critical engagement with a range of approaches, from ‘orthodox’ Marxism, to autonomism and feminism. Yet despite all my attempts at critical synthesis, there is a great deal which a broadly Marxist approach can bring to the understanding of contemporary academic labour. The category of mediated exploitation acknowledges a need to ‘go beyond’ whilst adapting existing tools to new realities. My approach brings together an understanding of how value can be created inside and outside the immediate capitalist labour process, with an understanding that valorisation can be intellectual, cognitive and affective, as well as material in a straight forward sense. This is the reality of the network of valorisation in which academic labour is embedded and exploited. My argument has also dealt with what I consider to be an important political reality. Though many academic labourers are exploited, some are more exploited than (and exploited differently to) others. To understand some of the mechanisms through which such differentiation in exploitation can happen, we need to go beyond the immediacy of the capitalist labour process. We need to understand the complex ways in which differentially classed academic subjects are exploited. And the political importance here is key. Struggles against value can take many forms. Some of these forms may be progressive and others less so (for example in the case of intra-class exploitation). Moreover, the fragmented mobilisations of neo-

liberal academic subjectivity make it difficult to imagine a form of emergent solidarity which can challenge capitalist hegemony and hence the project of valorisation. If the power of neo-liberal capitalism in the academic labour process is to be challenged, refusal of exploitation will not be enough; rather solidarity will be key. But that is another story.

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[1] Clearly there is a direct relationship of this labour to other categories – intellectual, cognitive and affective labour. For academic labour frequently partakes of these labour forms. Thus, where these concepts concern the debate over academic labour I draw on them. But a more extensive exploration of these categories is beyond the scope of this paper. See: See the selection of essays in *Cognitive Capitalism: Education and Digital Labour*, edited by Peters, Michael A. and Ergin Bulut (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2011).

[2] Cleaver, Harry. *Reading Capital Politically Today* (Austin/Brighton: University of Texas Press/ Harvester Press, 1979); Negri, Antonio. *Marx Beyond Marx: Lessons on the Grundrisse* (New York/London: Autonomedia/Pluto, 1991); Hardt, Michael and Antonio Negri. *Empire* (Cambridge Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2000).

[3] Marx, Karl. *Capital*, Vol. 1 (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976).

[4] *Ibid.* See especially the appendix 'Results of the Immediate Process of Production'.

[5] Hardt and Negri, Empire; Peters *et al.*, *Cognitive*; Dyer Witheford, Nick. *The Cyber Proletariat* (London: Pluto, 2017).

[6] Gough, Ian. "Marx's Theory of Productive and Unproductive Labour," *New Left Review* 76 (1972): 47-73; Peter Meiksins, "Productive and Unproductive Labour and Marx's Theory of Class," *Review of Radical Political Economics* 13, no. 3 (Fall 1981); Meiksins-Wood, Ellen. *The Retreat from Class* (London: Verso, 1989).

[7] See for example Mandel, Ernest, *Late Capitalism* (London: New Left Books: 1975).

[8] Marx, Karl. *Theories of Surplus Value*, Part 1 (London, Lawrence and Wishart, 1963): 218. It is worth quoting Marx: 'Those two-thirds of the population [who live off revenue] consist partly of the owners of profit and rent, partly of unproductive labourers… The latter help the former to consume the revenue and give them in return an equivalent in services - or impose their services on them, like the political unproductive labourers.'

[9] Poulantzas, Nicos. *Classes in Contemporary Capitalism* (London: New Left Books, 1975); Mandel, *Late Capitalism*.

[10] Poulantzas, *Classes*: 210.

[11] Hobsbawm, Eric. *The Forward March of Labour Halted* (London: Verso, 1981).

[12] Karl Marx, *Capital* Vol. I: 644.

[13] *Ibid.*

[14] Marx, Karl. *Theories of Surplus Value. Vol. I* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963): 72. And there are other examples. Such is the case with Marx's criticisms of Garnier's rejection of Smith's view that 'productive labour… is that which realises itself in some particular subject or vendible commodity, which lasts for some time at least after that labour is past'. Adam Smith cited in ibid.: 183.

[15] Marx, *Theories*: 162.

[16] See Hardt, Michael and Antonio Negri. *Multitude* (Harmondsworth: Penguin: 2005): 108. See the important work by Hochschild, Arlie Russell. *The Managed Heart: Commercialisation of Human Feeling* (Berkley: University of California Press, 1983). It is worth noting that Hardt and Negri's argument – written over twenty years later - is remarkably similar to Hochschild's.

[17] Hall, Gary. *The Uberification of the University* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2016). This leads me to challenge the claims by writers such as Hardt and Negri whereas immaterial and affective labour comes to be situated outside the rule of measure. For Hardt and Negri, the shift to immaterial (affective and linguistic) labour suggests its increasing immesurabilty. Moreover, the importance of the 'general intellect' places production beyond the immediate labour process as such. Yet the idea of affective labour as necessarily beyond measure misses something about the economic and disciplinary objectives of the value form. And from the examples I have just noted, those concerned with valorisation are determined to impose measurement, though there ability to do so will be determined to an extent by contestation. See

Hardt and Negri, Empire. See also Negri, Marx Beyond Marx; Caffentzis, George "Immesurable Value: An Essay on Marx's Legacy," The Commoner 10 (Spring/Summer 2005): 87-104.

[18] See James, Selma and Mariarosa Dalla Costa. *The Power of Women and the Subversion of the Community* (Bristol: Falling Wall Press, 1972). Federici, Silvia. *Revolution at Point Zero: Housework, Reproduction, and Feminist Struggle* (Oakland, CA: Common Notions/Autonomedia/PM Press, 2012).

[19] Indeed, the category of mediation must be regarded as an abstraction (though an abstraction which is grounded in the social reality of the capitalist labour process).

[20] Himmelweit, Susan. "Reproduction and the Materialist Conception of History: A Feminist Critique," in *The Cambridge Companion to Marx*, edited by Terrell Carver (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991): 196-221; Young, Iris Marion. "Beyond the Unhappy Marriage: A Critique of the Dual Systems Theory," in Women and Revolution, edited by Lydia Sargent (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1981).

[21] Weeks, Kathi. *The Problem with Work: Feminism, Marxism, Antiwork Politics, and Postwork Imaginaries* (North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2011): 10.

[22] The racialisation of gendered and classed subjectivity is also crucial. See for example Davis, Angela. *Women, Race and Class* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981).

[23] Slaughter, Sheila. and Larry Leslie. Academic Capitalism: Politics and the Entrepreneurial University (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1997).

[24] Harvie, David. "Alienation, class and enclosure in UK universities", *Capital and Class* 71 (Summer, 2000): 103–132; "All labour produces value and we all struggle against value," *The Commoner* 10 (2005); Harvie, David and Massimo De Angelis. " 'Cognitive capitalism' and the rat-race: how capital measures immaterial labour in British Universities", *Historical Materialism* 17 (Issue 3, 2009): 3-30.

[25] Marx, *Capital Vol. I*: 129.

[26] *Ibid.:* 135.

[27] Mandel, Ernest "Introduction to *Capital Vol. 1*," in Marx, *Capital Vol. I.:* 11-86.

[28] See also Rowthorn, Bob. *Capitalism, Conflict, and Inflation: Essays in Political Economy* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1980).

[29] McCarthy, Cameron. "The Unmasking of Education in the Age of Globalisation, Neoliberalism and Information" in Peters and Bulut, *Cognitive*: 301-316. Hardt and Negri, *Empire*.

[30] See the online campaign: https://twitter.com/acaprecariat?lang=en (Last accesses, 10 April 2020).

[31] Standing, Guy. *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014); Savage, Mike. *Social Class in the 21st Century* (London: Pelican, 2015).

[32] Marx claimed that the capitalist economic system would generate its own grave diggers – but I doubt he anticipated that this would be found in the more reactionary elements of the proletariat.

[33] Savage, *Social Class*: 333.

[34] Hall, Uberification.

[35] Friedman, Sam, Daniel Laurison and Andrew Miles. "Breaking the Class Ceiling? Social Mobility in Britain's Elite Occupations," *The Sociological Review*, Vol. 63 (2015): 259-289; Friedman, Sam, Dave O'Brien, Daniel Laurison."Like Skydiving without a Parachute': How Class Origin Shapes Occupational Trajectories in British Acting," *Sociology*, Vol. 51, Issue: 5 (2017): 992-1010.

[36] See Bristow, Jennie, Sarah Cant and Anwesa Chatterjee. *Generational Encounters with Higher Education* (Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2020).

[37] Bordieu, Pierre. *Homo Academicus* (London: Polity Press, 1984).

[38] Friedman et al. have written about the mobilisation of class privilege and advantage in UK acting professions; many of the mechanisms they identify are comparable to the academic labour process. See Friedman et al. "Like Skydiving".

[39] We might here usefully distinguish between a non-deployed and deployed reserve army.

[40] We must also note here that information technology continues to be of particular use for reducing the costs of skills reproduction – a fact that could have not been anticipated by writers such as Rowthorn and Mandel.

[41] Engels, Frederick. *The Condition of the working Class in Engla*nd (Harmondsworth, Penguin: 1987).

[42] Hobsbawm, Eric. *Labouring Men* (London: Weidenfield and Nicolson, 1968).

[43] Halsey, A. H. *The Decline of Donnish Dominion* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995).

[44] Harvey, David. *Neoliberalism: A Brief History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

[45] Wright, Erik Olin. *Class Counts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).