Humanities Top to Bottom

—The Cognitariat and Publishing

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I hope it's kosher to begin with a brief recollection of Niall Lucy, who invited me to write this piece. I met and started working with Niall in 1990 and last saw him a little over a year ago, shortly before he passed away. Over that quarter of a century, I knew him as a fellow tutor at Murdoch University (1990-93), a fellow doctoral student (albeit at different schools) (1990-93), a fellow house-swapper (1994-95), a fellow-author (Miller *et al.*, 'Production'), and a friend. I was enriched by knowing him, even though we were out of contact for a long time until just before his death.

When we taught together, and in our brief writing collaboration, the thing that struck me about working with Niall was his mixture of pedagogic drive, Derridoid prose, and textbook precision.

Unusually for those touched by Derrida's love of deconstructing denied logocentric interdependency through punning allusion, Niall was also keen on crisp, clear expression, and forms of life that students could follow—or not, as they chose. So his complex playfulness was matched by his approachability, both in person and on the page.

Niall was interested in literature and literary theory but equally in radio, television, sports, cinema, and popular music and their own forms of life, both theoretical and applied. He showed respect for real interdisciplinarity, the kind that disobeys not just what New Critics or analytic philosophers preach, but that refuses distinctions between quantitative and qualitative, humanities and social-scientific approaches to culture and society. His example is a wellspring for my take on the humanities today, and specifically on those who are precariously employed in that faculty and on the publishing system that relies on them.

I'd like to begin by looking at the question of precarious scholarly labor before moving on to publishing, in the process arguing that the bottom of academia, workers who have minimal agency, permits the top to exist. Their labor comprises the conditions of possibility for research academia to flourish: almost invisible, casualized employees allow the institutions where they work to be concrete.

The Cognitariat
The philosopher-politician-prisoner Antonio Negri (see *Goodbye*) redeployed the concept of the cognitariat from the lapsed-leftist-Reaganite-futurist Alvin Toffler (*Previews*). Negri uses it to describe people who are mired in casualized labor despite boasting heady

qualifications. They live at the complex interstices of capital, education, and government in a post-Fordist era of mass unemployment, limited-term jobs, zero-time contracts, right-to-work statutes, credential creep, occupational insecurity, and the proletarianization of professions.

This college-trained cognitariat plays key roles in the production and circulation of goods and services, creating and coordinating culture as musicians, directors, writers, journalists, professors, adjuncts, sound engineers, editors, cinematographers, graphic designers, sports broadcasters, zine correspondents, and so on. The cognitariat also features audiences and consumers, who pay for content, interpret it, and elide barriers of entry to media production through their anointment as prosumers (another term coined by Toffler in the 1980s).

These groups operate within institutional contexts that are constructed and sustained by their labor: private bureaucracies, controlling investment, production, and distribution across the media; public bureaucracies, offering what capitalism cannot while comporting themselves in an ever-more commercial manner; small businesses, run by charismatic individuals; non-government organizations, of whatever political stripe; and networks, fluid associations formed to undertake specific projects.

Power does not only flow unidirectionally in these relationships. Cognitarians sometimes engage in dreamy self-exploitation and autonomous identity formation as part of the entrepreneurial self promised by new communications technologies and ideologised in cybertarianism. They may even announce themselves as autotelic subjects: joining a gentried poor dedicated to the life of the mind fulfills them and putatively proffers a labor market of plenty (Gorz, 'Économie'; Ross, *Nice work*; Neff *et al.*, 'Entrepreneurial').

The prevailing ideology underpinning this cognitariat requires correction. As Marcuse predicted seventy years ago, far from liberating all and sundry, innovations in communication technology have intensified managerial coordination ('Some Social'). For Herbert I. Schiller, an 'infrastructure of socialization' synchronizes 'business cultures', organizational models, 'institutional networks', and modes of communication and cultural production in the interests of capital (*Communication*, 8-9, 16). And it has undermined the flow of full-time employment in fields that are not protected by big government's big-science agenda. The humanities cognitariat is expanding, even as its breadth-requirement service to liberal education intensifies. Pressure for more instrumental areas to learn about diversity, justice, ethics and identity is augmenting, and the humanities are at the address that specializes in such matters—but permanent positions are scarce because demand is not located in major sequences or grant gravy trains.

In the US, which I know best, tenure-track hiring in language and literature occurs at two-thirds the national average for academia overall. No wonder the American Academy of Arts & Sciences recently asked whether there were "Danger Signs for the Academic Job Market in Humanities?". Job advertisements in Spring 2015 were 30% down on the equivalent season's peak in pre-Depression 2007 (American Academy of Arts & Sciences, 'Danger').

Most people teaching the humanities either work full-time in second-tier schools with gigantic course loads, often on limited-term contracts, or as freeway professors, driving feverishly between teaching jobs to cobble together a living. In 2009, just 53% of humanities faculty was in full-time employment, and an even smaller proportion in tenurable positions. And the relative worth of their compensation is diminishing all the time. In 2003, health academics were paid an average of $US6,000 more than in 1987, during which time the humanities

average declined by a thousand dollars; in 2005-06, a business academic cost twice as much as a humanities one, compared to one and a half times as much twenty years earlier (Miller, *Blow Up*, 14).

At the same time, those wishing to depart the cognitariat—or full-timers keen to maintain their privilege, which depends upon the cognitariat—are under immense pressure to publish, publish, publish. (They presumably provide the consumer demand for the Australian software program Publish or Perish. I kid you not).

Academic publishing is increasingly the way out of cognitarians' lives, even as it is tough for them to find the time, money, and connections to undertake it—in fact, scholarship increasingly relies on the presence of cognitarians beavering away in classrooms as the invisible labor that undertakes the teaching which liberates full-time faculty to do research and writing.

Publishing
Academic publication is booming at a similar rate to the exploitation of academic labor (not surprisingly, given their logocentric interdependence). In 1870, just 840 math papers were published. A hundred and twenty-five years later, the annual number was 50,000. Scientific output doubles every five years, and the number of patent applications filed in the major centers—the US, Japan, and Western Europe—increased by 40% between 1992 and 2002. It now stands at about a million a year (Miller, *Blow Up*, 22).

In 2006, 1.3 million articles appeared in 23,750 journals. By the end of 2013, there were 26,529 journals in print and 4,267 solely on line, like

this one—part of an average annual growth rate of 3.5% since 1800. Perhaps a quarter of these publications are classified within the humanities (Colquhoun, 'Publish-or-Perish'; National Science Communication Institute, *Mapping*: 28).

It's been estimated that the US National Institutes of Health alone support approximately 65,000 published papers annually. The average number of articles read by scientists each year was 216 in 2003, up from 150 in 1977. In 2004, worldwide sales of English-language science, technical, and medical serials were conservatively estimated at UK£5 billion. Thirty years ago, the director of Yale's library system put it this way: 'we're drowning in information and starving for knowledge' (quoted in Miller, *Blow Up*, 47).

Should we refuse the golden age of cybertarian expression and the explosion of publishing outlets, because they are so tightly tied to the increasing governmentalization and commodification of academic life? This question arises because there is such pressure for simultaneous and potentially contradictory desires: citational obedience, innovation, application, relevance, and approachability. And all predicated on the inconspicuous world of adjunct teaching. The bottom supporting the top; in fact making it possible.

I undertake scholarly mentoring at schools in four countries. I'm struck by the instrumentalization and careerism I encounter, blended with love. But a passion for inquiry and the drive to a more knowledgeable public are frequently overdetermined by the deprofessionalizing, proletarianizing measurements of control that are crucial to the scholarly bureau. It's a classic case of coin-operated research and policy-based evidence, such that state-backed study and commercial bibliometrics are assumed to accord value (Boden and Epstein, 'Managing'; Werner, 'Focus').

Science journal pricing continues to spiral, destroying the ability of college libraries to buy books in the numbers they used to do. For example, an annual subscription to the *Journal of Comparative Neurology*, which comes out monthly, costs US$28,787 (Lambert, 2015). As a consequence, humanities and qualitative social-science areas are confronting their investment in the monograph, notably the Modern Language Association, since literary criticism and theory doesn't sell (the collapse of the market is blamed by many publishers on prolix prose and an overreaching by critics who anoint themselves experts on everything). In addition, the National Endowment for the Humanities, which underwrote the publication of hundreds of books from the mid-1970s, was crippled by the Republican Party in the mid-1990s, so a routine means of supporting humanities books has been eroded.

On top of these financial pressures, many university presses object to the political onus of US Research One tenure reviews being placed on their shoulders. If you get a book contract, you get tenure; if you don't, here's the door. There is the idea now of accepting manuscripts for publication but not actually publishing them—they remain in limbo except for the few that need to be printed to satisfy tenure and promotion committees and doting relatives. Meanwhile, for-profit houses are basically on a rather desperate path, where, as you may have noticed, they are signing up almost anything to be published, as they try for a high-volume, occasional-hit stratagem.

So this is a truly political-economic crisis, interlacing monetary and governmental components. Proposals are circulating for running several different business models for humanities scholarship. The ideas include allocating funds to authors, to underwrite publishing; to libraries, to purchase titles; and to researchers, to subsidize reading.

Author-pays practices are on the rise. Inevitably controversial, in one sense they formalize the reality that academics provide labor free or below cost, especially as manuscript reviewers for journals. Many journals outside the humanities and social sciences require subvention by authors to defray the cost of paper, illustrations, reprints, and so on (several thousand US dollars for an astrophysics paper of four or five pages in a name journal is standard). This is not always popular, but it is not seen as vanity publishing. And today, governments, most importantly the US Federal administration, increasingly refuse to keep paying multiply from the public pot for the profit of private presses via grants for research, professorial salaries, and library acquisitions—but still without guaranteeing public access.

Science publishing will determine much of our future: we depend on the labor-process models of people who sit at the high table in the big house. For instance, the University of Minnesota Press is partially underwritten by the Minnesota Multi-Phasic Personality Inventory, the test used pretty much around the world to determine whether people are mad, and which psychologists at the University update when new income streams are required/new findings require it.

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Where does this leave us? Where to now?

We need to rethink the interests of junior scholars as a group and both give them pragmatic advice and urge them to transcend it and devise business models for publishers.

The challenge is to confront the reality of our publishing political economy: a stratified domain that is simultaneously structured in dominance over, and dependence on, the cognitariat. We need to be aware of and do something about the governmentalization and commodification of scholarly life and the trends set by science.

If we don't, then the promises that can come with open access, the proliferation of ideas, and the democratization of publishing will find us in a very dark alley indeed, in fact a narrow *cul-de-sac*. We'll confront bureaucrats armed with energy-gorging measuring sticks, licking their unproductive lips. Meanwhile, cognitarians will labor away with large classes and little reward, freeway professors veering from one exit lane to another in search of the next college class.

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