Putting the university to work: technology-mediated extraction of land and labour from UK universities

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#### **Introduction:** background, questions, concerns

#### <u>Background</u>

**Immediate:** UCU Strike 2019-2020 ending with COVID-19 pandemic & push for online/hybrid teaching **Previous Research:** labour relations, social reproduction, unbundled HE, academic precarity **Ongoing research on HE's digital turn:** teaching & learning, research & metrics, capital, **not** labour

#### **Research questions**

- **RQ 1**: how are academic workplaces and relations of production reorganised to facilitate the entry of new technologically-driven public-private partnerships towards the streamlining of the university? How are universities being 'put to work' by public-private arrangements
- **RQ2**: what ways do the division of labour in academia and real subsumption of teaching with the entry of digital technologies, affect the organisation, security, quality and experience of academic labour; and how is resistance being engendered or suppressed in the digital university?

#### **Theory:** subsumption of labour under capital

[M]achinery sweeps away every moral and natural restriction on the length of the working day. ...the most powerful instrument for reducing labour-time suffers a dialectical inversion and becomes the most unfailing means for turning the whole lifetime of a worker and his family into labour-time at capital's disposal for its own valorisation (Marx, 1867).

#### Formal Subsumption

pre- or non-capitalist modes of production are attributed a value; the worker's labour becomes subject to a wage relation, but the very material form of the labour process does not change other than the subordination of the worker's activity to capital logic  $\Leftrightarrow$  academic labour: valorisation of research **Real Subsumption** 

The real subsumption is predicated upon new divisions & hierarchies, transformed class relations, resetting social conditions for the reproduction of wage labour & consumption towards realisation of value (Harvey'17) **YET:** "At no point... does Marx recognise that the reproduction of labour-power entails women's unpaid domestic work" (Federici'19)  $\Leftrightarrow$  academic labour: focus on teaching as care

## **Context:** UK public higher education

**Post-WWII massification:** through the introduction of polytechnics & open education **Since 1980:** gradual introduction of new public management, quality control, fees

- **Dissolution of block grant** to institutions teaching from fees, research competitive cyclic funding
- **Polytechnics into 'post-1992' universities** with Further and HE Act 1992
- 'Quality assessment' Research Selectivity Exercise, RAE, REF, TEF/KEF/WEF
- Introduction of fees : Teaching and HE Act ±1000 p/y ('98); HE Act ±3000 top-up for UK/EU ('06) Browne Review 2010 full-cost fee up to ±9000 p/y ('12); TEF gold medal fee increase ('18)
- **New frames:** 'value-for-money' (Tomlinson'18), 'employability' (Boden & Nedeva '10), etc. **Entry of private providers:** 
  - **University / city/ industry** interface: anchored on university real estate & intellectual proper
- **University core business** teaching, supervision, curriculum design, student support (OPMs) **Surplus vs deficits:** ±44bn HE surplus BUT pension cuts, ±121bn student debt & 58% faculty casual By 2018 HEIs expected to finance up to 75% of capital expenditure from own cash (was 31% in 2015)

## Formal subsumption: Extraction of rent

Tech-'enhanced' burden of the public behind the 'public' university:

- **Student loans: fees & costs 'sponsored' by the state, but paid by the public** fees support core faculty to teach 'vocational' employability skills instead of companies indebted student-workers trained & fed bite-size content: dependent, profitable & compliant public bears risk of student loans repackaged as debt and sold on to private investors
- **Research sponsored still predominantly by taxation money, but commodified as** metrics-driven competitive cyclic funding, huge expense & privileges selected 'elite' HEIs patents & knowledge & 'impact' at low cost & for high profit for companies (Uber, AI) publishing corp's extract free labour, and sell subscription & Golden Open Access to HEIs
- University-anchored 'innovation districts' using:

university real estate for businesses & start-ups to 'incubate' knowledge - staff space scarcer university staff, facilities, and investment 'credit' to fundraise & coordinate such extraction university staff & student 'user data' to predict consumption & increase surveillance

## **Real subsumption:** Extraction of labour

Tech-'enhanced' new divisions and alienation of academic labour

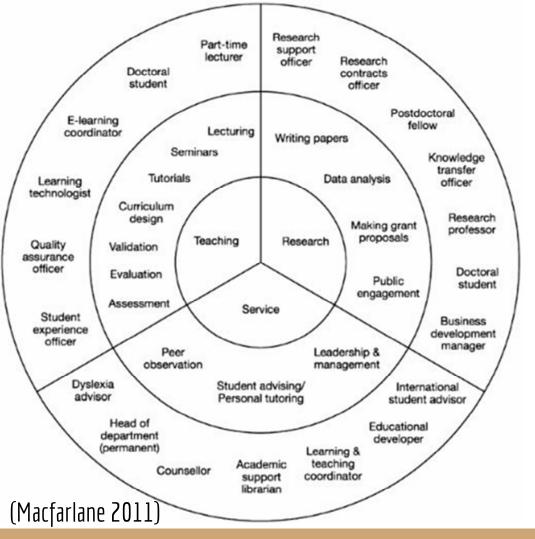
- Polarisation of research and teaching work

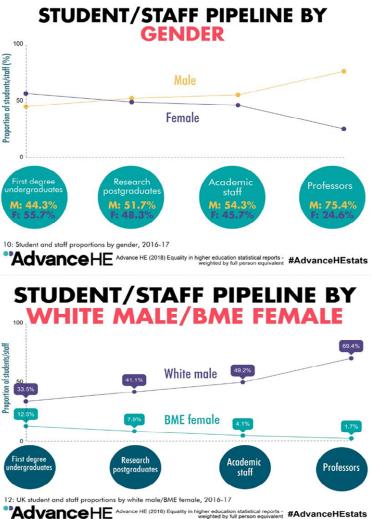
research increasingly relies on fundraising: time & human resource management the 'ideal' academic: available 24/7, transnationally mobile, care-less, manager research as 'data collection' done by PhDs & postdocs not eligible to be PIs on big grants teaching as 'buy-out' of faculty time from projects while students still lured by research rank

#### Casualisation & feminisation of teaching-only work

70,000+ 'atypical' contract staff at UK universities, 6,500 on zero hour contacts: reserve army women & BAME faculty: care for increasingly anxious students + child & elderly care at home

 'Unbundled' outsourcing & deprofessionalisation & modularisation of teaching online program management providers (OPMs) - 65+ firms, \$3+ bln annual revenue take 50-70% of all revenue from+platform rent+data access from online classes use 1) unpaid teaching of university-hired workers; 2) outsourced uni-educated OPM staff





## **Transgressing** the real and the formal

- **Academic (and cognitive) labour's challenge to commodification**: Inspiration, mental creativity & innovation not effectively captured via Taylorist strategies (i.e.value/per unit) **Organisational strategies:** subjective performance of the worker is important **Digitalisation and lockdown:** emphasises the role of the computer/machine and its
- interaction with labour.
- **The performance of the work**: and the capture of value via technology transgresses the boundaries between real and formal subsumption; between economic / domestic spheres
- Struggles over performance rights crystallise corporate strategies: to own and
- commodify new knowledge: it becomes property of the employer via online platform classes

## **Discussion:** Resistance?

Effects & lessons of the COVID-19-facilitated push online

- Exposed and accelerated public-private extraction for private benefit
   accelerated the proliferation of HE platforms due to changed teaching & learning experience
   shed light on university capital investment (dorms, construction) vs. staff & student security
   elevated questions of labour rights and appropriation of workers' resources, spaces and work
- Exposed workers and trade unions as ill prepared for negotiating these changes remote access & absence from campus facilitated employers avoiding formal bargaining permanent faculty H&S prioritised to deeper job losses feeding casualisation & outsourcing not unique to HE, but manifest in particular ways given HEI commodification/assetisation
   Unions CAN take back power.

struggle to provide licensing agreements that are lawful to retain members' rights demand full audit of procurement of platforms & data use & investments by digital providers prioritise casual workers & attempt insourcing & reprofessionalisation of OPM-hired staff

# Thank you for your attention!

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