

The Learning Factory, or, The Reserve Army of Academic Librarianship.

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Capitalist production is not merely the production of commodities, it is essentially the production of surplus-value. The labourer produces, not for himself, but for capital. It no longer suffices, therefore, that he should simply produce. He must produce surplus-value. That labourer alone is productive, who produces surplus-value for the capitalist, and thus works for the self-expansion of capital. If we may take an example from outside the sphere of production of material objects, a schoolmaster is a productive labourer when, in addition to belabouring the heads of his scholars, he works like a horse to enrich the school proprietor. That the latter has laid out his capital in a teaching factory, instead of in a sausage factory, does not alter the relation.

Karl Marx, *Capital*, Volume 1, Chapter 16.

In 1848, fifteen years after the abolition of slavery in the British Empire, the West India Association wrote that “A great measure has been accomplished by the nation – to use the metaphorical cant of the day, the chains have been knocked off the slaves; but the nation is too great, too noble, to be generous at the expense of others. What was foretold has not come to pass; free labour is not cheaper than slave labour, and it is idle to suppose that the British planter, with the precarious labour of free men, can successfully compete with the continuous and compulsory labour of slavery”¹.

What is interesting here is the equation of free labour with precarious labour. Marx referred to as the labourer “free in a double sense”, that is free from feudal bonds or slavery, and free to sell his or her labour on the commodities market. For the West Indian Association, the labour of free workers could not compete with the profit-margins provided by slavery. Forty years later, in 1883, the condition of precarity is blamed on the workers themselves, as one observer wrote:

If we go to any dock or labour yard in which men earn a miserable pittance by unskilled and precarious labour, again we are well within the mark if we reckon that half the men we find there ought never to have been there, and

¹ Thomas Hodgkin and H. Norton Shaw, “What is to be done for West Indian colonies”, *Simmond's Colonial Magazine and Foreign Miscellany*, Volume 13 (1848), 75.

would not have been there had they diligently availed themselves of the opportunities of the several positions from which they have fallen.²

“Precarious labour” in its modern sense, arose out of the victory of neoliberalism in the 1980s and 1990s, in the quest to restore profit rates that had drastically fallen from the late 1960s and into the 1970s. At first, the modes of precarity primarily affected women and other marginalized populations. Already by 1991, the kind of “non-standard employment” strategies that we are only too aware of today (e.g. zero-hour contracts) were being used to erode the stability and security of workers’ lives.³

In Chapter 6 of *Capital*, Marx writes that the freedom of the worker was due to the fact that the worker “is short of everything necessary for the realisation of his labour power”, that is, the workers are separated from the means of production; in addition, given that the worker has no other legal obligations, he is free to sell his labour on the market⁴. Later on, he writes that

With this polarization [into labour and means of production] of the market for commodities, the fundamental conditions of capitalist production are given. The capitalist system presupposes the complete separation of the labourers from all property in the means by which they can realize their labour.⁵

Precarity, then, is neither a function of the indolence of workers, nor is it something new and proper to the neoliberal order, a mistake or failure on the part of one political party or other. Precarity is a necessary part of the economic (and therefore social) relations of the capitalist mode of production. Precarious labour is not only a requirement of the “freedom” of the working class, but it is also a means to increase competition and lower the cost of labour itself, either directly through wages, or indirectly through the “social wage”, in the form of cutting benefits, pensions, social programmes, etc. The reason “precarious labour” has become so associated with the neoliberal flavour of capitalism is due to the “revanche” of the capitalist class against the infrastructure and services of the welfare state, which it began to dismantle in the late 1960s, and which achieved its apotheosis under the regimes of Thatcher and Reagan, and continues to this day. The victory of neoliberalism ended the hegemony of Keynesianism and the welfare state dream of full employment.

² Samuel Cox, “The Sluggard’s Garden”, *The Expositor*, Volume 6 (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1883), 410.

³ Gerry Rodgers and Frank Wilkinson, “Deprivation and the labour market: research issues and priorities”, *Labour and Society*, 16:2 (1991), 220 (pages 217-229)

⁴ Marx, *Capital Volume 1*, Chapter 6.

⁵ Marx, *Capital 1*, chapter 26.

The mechanism by which the competition among workers is increased, leading to a downward pressure on wages is, in Marxist terms, the increase of the “reserve army of labour”, in which capitalism

produces in the direct ratio of its own energy and extent, a relatively redundant population of workers, i.e., a population of greater extent than suffices for the average needs of the valorisation of capital, and therefore a surplus-population.⁶ [...] The general movements of wages are exclusively regulated by the expansion and contraction of the industrial reserve army.⁷

Precarious academic labour – adjunctification, endless part time contracts, etc – are part of a dual logic of both decreasing the power and the cost of labour through increasing the industrial reserve army, and attacking the institutions of the welfare state, in this case the university and by extension universal education itself, through corporatization of the institutions of higher learning. As parts of the university and as components of the welfare state in it their own right, libraries are necessarily implicated in this logic and its consequences for labour.

The Narrative of Library Obsolescence

In 1996, Bill Clinton signed the Telecommunications Act into law in the Main Reading Room of the Library of Congress. The significance of the location was not lost on Clinton, who opined on the “information revolution” as conduit for enlightenment, allowing “every American child to bring the ideas stored in this reading room into his or her own living room”⁸. The consequences for libraries would not be quite so cut and dried. In the same year, Arthur Curley, then Director of the Boston Public Library, opened a panel on “The Public Library Online” at the Harvard Conference on the Internet & Society as follows:

Before I introduce the panel, I want to congratulate them for showing up. If, as some project, the Internet will render the library obsolete, they probably ought to be back home job hunting.⁹

Curley moderated this view by suggesting that the internet might provide opportunities to libraries, rather than rendering them obsolete, by giving them “the means of reaching out.”¹⁰

⁶ Capital, chapter 25.

⁷ Capital, chapter ?

⁸ Guy Lamolinara, “Wired for the Future”, *Library of Congress Information Bulletin*, February 19, 1996. <https://www.loc.gov/loc/lcib/9603/telecom.html>

⁹ Arthur Curley, Deirdre Hanley, Andrew Magpantay, Betty Turock, “The Public Library Online”, *The Harvard Conference on the Internet & Society* (Harvard University Press, 1997), 166.

¹⁰ Ibid.

In many ways, the narrative of library obsolescence was victorious over the narrative of library outreach. Many of the decisions made by library administrators support the provision of services to students that have little or nothing to do with access to data, information, or knowledge, or even of supporting the teaching, learning, and research of our parent institutions. It should come as no surprise, then, that administrators of the neoliberal, corporatized universities, should also feel that libraries are no longer worth supporting both in terms of workforce and funding. In an interview with the *Winnipeg Free Press* published on June 10, 2016, University of Manitoba president David Barnard ascribed drastic cuts to library staffing as simply a result of “significant changes to university libraries” due to the prevalence of online information. The *Free Press* wrote:

When he was a student, everything was stacked on shelves, and if he needed a book not available, he’d have to wait for an inter-library transfer. Now, “It’s possible for a student sitting with a laptop” to access almost instantly information which no longer requires the assistance and expertise of a librarian.¹¹

Leaving aside Barnard’s complete ignorance of the role librarians play in *making* that information accessible on the web, both through metadata and digitization projects, and through selection and licensing within an academic library, Barnard’s position simply conforms to a dominant and superficial view of libraries as more-or-less obsolete, given that “everything is on the internet”¹². This narrative – that with the rise of Google and cheap broadband, libraries and library workers are obsolete – is a product of the wider narrative of austerity driven by neoliberal policies that are designed to decrease the costs of labour and to dismantle the (educational) institutions of the welfare state.

Barnard’s view of libraries was immediately challenged not only by librarians across the country, but by the president of the University of Manitoba Faculty Association, Mark Hudson. In a letter to union members, including faculty, librarians, and some (but not all) instructors, Hudson wrote that

While libraries are indeed changing, that change need not and ought not include a loss of focus on the libraries’ core resource: the people that make our libraries accessible.¹³

¹¹ Martin, 2016. <http://www.winnipegfreepress.com/local/u-of-m-union-disagree-strongly-on-library-staff-cuts-382525141.html>

¹² Clark 2010, <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2010/jul/13/internet-age-still-need-libraries>; Jenkins 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/dec/22/libraries-dying-books-internet>.

¹³ Hudson, 2016, <http://aesces.ca/um-libraries-correspondence/#umfajuly7>.

Barnard's view was also challenged by the Canadian Association of Professional Academic Librarians, who wrote:

In the 21st century, academic librarians are no longer 'keepers of knowledge' but rather are partners in the cultivation, facilitation, and sharing of knowledge.¹⁴

The issue of job-security for librarians and non-academic library staff was one of the issues in contention during the UMFA strike which lasted between November 1 and 22, 2016¹⁵. While the resolution of the strike was widely seen as a victory for UMFA¹⁶, others were more critical¹⁷. Mark Hudson, in a letter to students from January of this year, conceded that

Unfortunately, even with a strong strike, we were unable to move the administration to extend protections against layoffs for financial reasons to librarians and instructors. UMFA did win a spoken-word guarantee of no layoffs for either of these groups until 2019, but this is nowhere near the same as winning fair and equal job protections.¹⁸

The question of job security is a vexed one in Canadian academic librarianship. The details of academic or faculty status of librarians differs across Canadian universities, ranging from full tenured faculty status at Laurentian to non-tenured librarians at McMaster who are not even part of the faculty association (which is the norm at most Canadian universities). At University of Alberta, academic librarians have arguably *more* job security than faculty, since librarian positions are covered only by a "financial emergency" clause¹⁹, while faculty are affected by both "academic reorganization" and "financial emergency"²⁰. Because of this, the question of precarity differs among academic librarians.

¹⁴ CAPAL 2016, <http://capalibrarians.org/2016/06/letter-to-dr-bernard-president-and-vice-chancellor-university-of-manitoba/>.

¹⁵ UManitoba, 2016, <http://umanitoba.ca/strikeinfo/facts.html>

¹⁶ Camfield 2016, <http://rankandfile.ca/2016/12/07/solid-strike-wins-gains-at-the-university-of-manitoba/>.

¹⁷ Heller & Desai, 2016, <http://www.themanitoban.com/2016/12/a-historic-opportunity-squandered-reflections-on-the-umfa-strike-settlement/30150/>.

¹⁸ Hudson, 2017, <http://www.themanitoban.com/2017/01/a-post-strike-letter-to-university-of-manitoba-students-from-umfa-president-mark-hudson/30312/>.

¹⁹ UAlberta, 1998,

<http://www.hrs.ualberta.ca/MyEmployment/~media/hrs/MyEmployment/Agreements/Academic/Librarian.pdf>.

²⁰ UAlberta, 2006,

<http://www.hrs.ualberta.ca/en/MyEmployment/~media/hrs/MyEmployment/Agreements/Academic/Faculty.pdf>.

Library Students

Attacks on the job security of those already employed are only one aspect of the story. As Nick Dyer-Witheford points out, labour issues such as precarity do not only affect those who are currently employed. In *Cyber-Proletariat* he argues – following Marx – that the concept of “proletariat” is broader than that of “the working class” since, under capitalist conditions, “a large proportion of the working class is workless”. “While the term ‘working class’ clearly includes all wage labourers, ‘proletariat’ opens to us the explicit inclusion of the unemployed and paupers”²¹. I would argue that, given that the condition for almost all employment as a professional librarian is gaining an American-Library-Association-accredited Master’s degree from one of eight programs in Canada²², this also opens up the inclusion of students to conditions of precarity, as well as the effect of corporate logic on cohort sizes on the labour conditions of the library workforce.

On the one hand, library students are a constituency most subject to conditions of precarious employment, in the form of unpaid internships, working multiple part-time or zero-hour jobs, temporary contracts and residencies, as well as affective consequences around having to relocate, or having to “perform” particular race, gender, or professionalism roles. Students are also caught at the nexus of the contradictory forces at play within the capitalist university: increased enrolment regardless of the job market versus the library school as the site of supply-management of professional librarians. For example, while there are approximately 1700 academic librarians working in Canada²³, the library program at University of Toronto’s iSchool alone had an enrolment of 382 FTE in 2015 and awarded 164 ALA-accredited Master’s degrees²⁴. Total Canadian enrolment in library programs in 2015 was 1375 FTE and 681 degrees were granted. Even accounting for vacancies in public and special libraries, the library market cannot absorb this many graduates, especially given the staff reduction measures undertaken by neoliberal organizations under pressure of austerity.

This imbalance between student supply and employment demand promotes precarity on two fronts. On the one hand, the pressure of new students to find work makes multiple jobs, unpaid internships, and short-term contracts necessary to students and new graduates. On the other hand, the pressure of this reserve army of labour weighs on employed academic librarians and justifies the replacement of full-time positions with part-time, short-term, or casual jobs which can be staffed by (underpaid, under-benefited) students and recent graduates. All of these

²¹ *Cyber-Proletariat*

²² University of Alberta, University of British Columbia, Dalhousie, McGill, Université de Montréal, University of Ottawa, University of Toronto, and Western.

²³ Schrader, Kaufman, Revitt, 2017, <http://www.open-shelf.ca/20170201-ocula-results-from-the-first-capal-census/>.

²⁴ ALA,

<http://www.ala.org/accreditedprograms/reportsandpublications/prismreports>

constituencies find themselves competing for positions which – under pressure of the capitalist logic of profit – are no longer there. As Myron Groover has written,

The library schools will not voluntarily reduce class sizes. Not now, not ever. That's not their job; it would be tantamount to suicide for them to contemplate doing so of their own accord. [...] Enrollment will not be affected until we start talking about the job market much more loudly and much more widely.²⁵

De-professionalization

In addition to the relationships within librarianship of academic librarians, library school students, and LIS faculty, academic librarians are also part of a network of relationships within the academy at large – tenured faculty, sessional instructors, etc. The pressures of precarity affect academic librarians through competition between these groups as well. This was the context of the unionization of McMaster librarians in 2009 – 2011.

The full history of this event remains to be written, but the basic outline is clear: in 2009, two academic librarians, members of the McMaster University Faculty Association (MUFA), both of whom were satisfactorily occupying supervisory positions, were summarily fired. Nothing indicated that the firings were related to performance;²⁶ in fact, the firing was justified by the University Librarian with reference to budgetary constraints, but this explanation was considered insufficient by both the McMaster librarians and MUFA Executive. A letter from MUFA Executive to the university admonished the administration for “the callous treatment of employees which has become engrained in McMaster’s Human Relations practices”²⁷ and called for an apology and reinstatement.

The suddenness of the firing and the flimsy pretext with which it was justified caused librarians and MUFA to express their mistrust of the administration in general and the University Librarian in particular. It would be bad enough if this had simply been a case of neoliberal austerity measures interfering in the operation of an academic institution, but in fact the move was made as part of a process of “transforming” academic libraries through the marginalization of librarians²⁸, i.e. the standard neoliberal move of increasing precarity and lowering labour costs. At an invited talk he delivered at Penn State in 2011, two years after the librarian firing, Trzeciak presented his vision of a library “staffed not by librarians, but by

²⁵ Myron Groover, “On Precarity”, *Bibliocracy*, January 6, 2014. <http://bibliocracy-now.tumblr.com/post/72506786815/on-precarity>

²⁶ McMaster 2008, <http://library.mcmaster.ca/news/5179>.

²⁷ MUFA 2009, <https://mcmaster.ca/mufa/LibrarianDismissal2009.pdf>

²⁸ Rogers, 2011, <http://www.attemptingelegance.com/?p=1031>

information technologists and (much cheaper) post-doctoral students”²⁹. This talk was delivered by the time the librarians separated from MUFA and certified on their own. This vision – which Trzeciak was prepared to talk about openly only outside the organization – is tied to a view of the deprofessionalized library, which in turn is connected both to dynamics of library obsolence and to the adjunctification of academia. In their post-mortem of the University of Manitoba strike, Heller and Desai wrote that

UMFA needed the victory on instructors’ job security as a first step toward ensuring against [an increasing number of precarious faculty members]. This would have to be followed by action to better the terms on which sessionals – who have an even worse deal than instructors and are more numerous – are hired as part of a push to reverse the trend toward corporatization and commodification of higher education. It should be noted that the threats to academic librarians’ job security is part of the general withdrawal of support for research in the corporate university.³⁰

While the position that library work can be replaced by cheaper, more precarious, labour, is part of the longer-term library narrative that we have already seen.³¹

The corporatization of the university and the libertarian view of online information may seem contradictory, but they serve the same purposes: the lowering of labour costs through technology and the reserve army of labour. As Dyer-Witthford has pointed out, the libertarian views of information from the early days of the internet have, since the early 2000s, conflicted with an increasingly commercialized digital space. In the library context, this means that, while increasing numbers of journal articles and ebooks are indeed accessible online, the intellectual property represented by those books and articles must be protected by digital-rights management, strict licensing, and the kind of annual price increases typical of the worst kind of exploitative monopoly. We have seen the consequences of this ecosystem in Canada over the last couple of years of libraries having to cut journals subscriptions for the first time in many years.

While the rise of the open access movement is changing this system to a certain extent, the majority of this valuable scholarly content is *not* freely available on the web, but the licenses come out of library budgets, the cataloguing necessary to make this material findable is done by librarians, and the interoperable computer systems needed to enable legal access is also deployed, managed, and in some cases, programmed by librarians. Many of the interactions with students necessary to help them negotiate this byzantine system as well as to separate the authoritative from

²⁹ Brown 2011, <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/dont-discard-the-librarians/article4263121/?page=all>

³⁰ <https://urpe.wordpress.com/2016/12/07/henry-heller-radhika-desai-on-the-umfa-strike-settlement-at-u-of-manitoba/>

³¹ Brown 2011.

the opportunistic occur between students and library staff on a daily basis. Academic librarians are actively engaged in important work across campus, including copyright, scholarly communications and open-access, research data management, publication metrics, and digital scholarship. For Dyer-Witheyford, the free, frictionless, digital “lifestyle” of the global north and west is predicated on a material economy – including labour – which remains as class-oriented and exploitative as ever.

Just as the advent of the neoliberal university has not changed the fact of labour and precarity under capitalism, the transformed nature of library work – from the analog to the digital – has changed the focus but not the general dynamics and power relations of library work. Not long after Trzeciak’s presentation of his vision of librarians, which included reducing the number of academic librarians and removing librarians from supervisory positions, McMaster’s academic libraries asked for the support of their faculty association in dealing with the threat to its members. MUFA declined to give this support, leading eventually to the librarians withdrawing from MUFA and certifying their own union, MUALA, with the labour board in February 2011. An anonymous editorial in the MUFA newsletter from March 2010, stated that the decision of the librarians to leave the association

means that MUFA was unable to provide adequate security to these members, in spite of significant efforts, because the Joint Committee, the collegial system for dealing with such problems, was ineffective.³²

The traditional capitalist tactic of dividing groups of workers against each other appears here in full force, to the extent that academic librarians in full-time permanent university positions continue to feel that their job security is threatened. The effects of precarity are felt even among nominally protected workers.

In the midst of MUALA’s first round of collective bargaining in early 2011, the university proposed a voluntary severance programme in order to meet, yet again, budgetary constraints. From MUALA’s perspective,

These developments mark the second time in his short tenure at McMaster University that University Librarian Jeffrey Trzeciak has overseen the reduction of librarian positions as a means of dealing with budget problems.³³

An increasing number of postdocs during this time, coupled with a decrease in librarians, indicated “an attempt at systematically replacing librarians with postdocs”³⁴, a move equivalent to the corrosive practice of adjunctification among

³² MUFA 2010, <https://www.mcmaster.ca/mufa/NewsFebMar10.pdf>

³³ Ruest, 2011, <http://ruebot.net/content/academic-librarians-front-lines-academic-librarianship-%E2%80%93-crisis-or-opportunity>.

³⁴ Ruest, 2011.

teaching faculty³⁵. The labour struggles continued at McMaster University Library until Trzeciak left to become University Librarian at Washington University, St Louis, in July 2012. The damage, however, was done. The split between MUFA and the academic librarians has led to lasting suspicion on the part of some librarians that faculty members do not see librarians as part of the academic community. MUALA, a union with a mere 24 members, is in a very difficult negotiation position, which nevertheless successfully negotiated (though not without struggle) their second collective agreement in 2015.

Conclusion

The two main consequences of the Reserve Army of Labour – downward pressure on wages and increased competition among workers – is a feature of capitalism no matter which period is under investigation, from the mass-unemployment of the 1930s, to the culture of downsizing in the 1980s and 90s, to today's precarious or "non-traditional"³⁶ employment. The competition among capitalists for higher profits and workers for the ability to sell their labour power is part of the underlying dynamics of capitalism itself. As Marx wrote in 1844, "the number of workers having been increased, their competition among themselves has become all the more intense, unnatural, and violent. Consequently, a section of the working class falls into beggary or starvation just as necessarily as a section of the middle capitalists falls into the working class"³⁷. According to Lenin, in order to escape from this recursive dynamic of profit and exploitation, "it is not enough for the exploited and oppressed masses to realize the impossibility of living in the old way, and demand changes"; instead, "it is essential that the exploiters should not be able to live and rule in the old way"³⁸. Precarity, being a tool of the exploiters, will only be remedied then the exploited themselves organize against it. Everything in our system of labour management – from competing and divided unions to collective bargaining constituencies – is designed to pit groups of workers against each other. By recognizing that those outside our official constituencies – students, adjuncts, "paraprofessionals" – need to be protected against the ravages of neoliberalism, we risk "losing" the benefits of our negotiated agreements and our socio-economic rank, but we also pave the way for a much stronger resistance against those ravages. In order for our professions to band together in solidarity to challenge the dominant practices of exploitation and precarity, we need to leverage collective bargaining while protecting the most vulnerable, and we need to wring commitments from our

³⁵ GaviaLib 2011, <http://gavialib.com/2011/12/the-coming-adjunctification-of-academic-librarianship/>.

³⁶ Tencer, Daniel. "Precarious work is awesome and Canada will get way more of it: report," *Huffington Post Canada*, April 19, 2017. <http://www.huffingtonpost.ca/2017/04/19/precariou-work-canada-n-16104284.html>

³⁷ Marx, 1844 Manuscripts, end of section on Wages of Labour.

³⁸ Lenin, *'Left-Wing' Communism, an infantile disorder*, 84-85.

parent organizations. Following Marx's view of solidarity, expressed in a letter of 1870, we cannot focus merely on the labour conditions of our own select group; the emancipation of the weakest among us must be the conditions for our own emancipation.