

*On Schoolwork and the Struggle Against It**

As a student, and then as a university professor, the content and form of my work for many years has been shaped by the class politics of education. Today, as a professor, I deal with students, with other professors, with non-teaching staff and with the university administration. All of these relationships are, in turn, shaped by the more general politics of higher education and of the capitalist system as a part of which universities were created and continue to function.

Several hours a week, in class and in office hours, my work involves direct interaction with students. More intermittently I work with other professors in department meetings (e.g., admissions committee) or university-level gatherings (e.g., Faculty Council). Also intermittently I work with non-teaching staff (e.g., from secretaries and computer systems operators to custodial workers). The administration's rules, regulations and policies not only shape these direct interactions (through the imposition of divisions, hierarchy, work requirements and so on) but also, there is the constant demand for research and publication upon which salary and promotion are almost exclusively based. It may not quite be "publish or perish" but it is certainly "publish what and where we want, or eke out your existence on the margins with minimal salary and perks."

As a student in the 1960s and early 1970s I took up the study of what was then called revisionist history and critical social theory, eventually including Karl Marx's writings, because the history and theory I was being taught wasn't very helpful in understanding the events of those times (the Civil Rights Movement, the urban uprisings in the US, the Vietnam War, the Sixties' "cultural revolution" and so on) in which I was sometimes a participant and always an observer.

As a professor, I teach Marx because I found, and continue to find, that the fundamentals of his analysis, although laid out long ago (1840s-1880s), are still very useful in understanding and coping with today's world and its conflicts - from wars and battles over race, gender and the environment to school and the work of students and professors. Therefore, as one might expect, I bring some elements of Marx's analysis to bear, not only on larger social issues but also on my own, and my students', day-to-day work and struggles.

My reading of Marxist theory suggests that the university must be seen as one factory within a larger social factory -

a larger society that can be viewed as a factory because its institutions, including those of higher education, have been shaped by businessmen and government policy makers to produce and reproduce the social relations of capitalism. School-as-factory is designed to produce what Marx called "labor power" - the willingness and ability to work - and, at the university level, research results of direct use to private industry and the government. Despite long standing ideological claims that schools aim at personal enlightenment and the crafting of citizens capable of taking part in the democratic governance of society, the reality is quite the contrary. From Kindergarten to post-Graduate studies, schools seek to transform human beings into workers - narrowly educated people who are disciplined to do what they are told, the way they are told to do it, for the rest of their lives and to believe they are living in the best way possible. Naturally, many resist. Therefore school is a terrain of struggle and Marxist analysis is helpful in understand those struggles and in deciding how to participate in them.

In what follows, I focus on the work of professors and that of students and their interactions. I first describe and analyse what I and other professors are supposed to do, what students are supposed to do and what our relationship is supposed to be. In other words, as Marx does in *Capital*, I lay out the nature and dynamics of work according to the logic of capital that dominates the way the university is set up and supposed to operate. Afterwards I discuss how that logic can be, and often is, ruptured, as we - professors and students - struggle against it, struggle to craft alternative uses of our time and energy and struggle not to lose, or to create our freedom and autonomy.

Professors at Work

Both school "teachers" and university "professors" generally pretend to "teach" and administrators pretend to be able to differentiate "good" teachers from "bad" teachers. All three groups thus embrace an illusion but while that illusion may be functional for administrators dedicated to dividing, conquering and managing their "teaching" staff and students, it is deadly for those who actually try to teach. For in reality no one can teach, all that a schoolteacher or university professor can do is to help students learn. They can lecture and provide materials on various topics but whether or not students learn anything from those lectures and materials depends entirely on them. Many of the frustrations of "teaching" derive from this illusion. Professors gather materials, prepare a syllabus and present lectures and are then appalled at how poorly students do on tests. As a result some believe they are failures and take their frustrations out on themselves in the form of self-doubt and low self-esteem; others, probably most, blame students and take their frustrations out on them in the form of impatience and contempt.

For learning to take place, students must integrate new knowledge and understandings into their existing fabric of knowledge and understanding. They must take what is new and see if and how it fits with what they already believe they know and understand. If it doesn't fit then

* This essay began as part of a response to a critique of *Reading Capital Politically* by the editors of *Aufheben*, an English Marxist journal. I've decided to detach it from that response and make it an open-ended document to which I will add observations from time to time. When those additions are substantial a new dated copy will be created.

they must figure out what needs to be adjusted: what they thought they knew or understood, or what they have just discovered. In one-on-one situations those presenting new information, ideas, approaches, etc., can, with experience and care, craft their presentations in the light of what they understand about the individual student's knowledge and understanding. Even so, ultimately, only the student can do the comparing, contrasting, evaluating and integrating necessary for the new knowledge or understanding to become part of their grasp of the world. But in large classes it is impossible for any "teacher" to do this. They can evaluate their "audience" and try to gauge their lectures to it, but most of the time they will be presenting things using words and in ways that do not fit with the particular needs of most individuals. Schools are not organized to take this situation into account; on the contrary they are organized in ways that undermine the any effort on the part of professors to help students learn and whatever efforts students make to learn.

So, having found myself in an impossible situation, I have been forced to ask, "Just what am I and other professors supposed to be doing vis-à-vis students?"

Given the framework within which I am expected to "teach", I have become acutely, and uncomfortably, aware that the most fundamental aspect of the job that I am paid to do vis-à-vis students is the imposition of work and its discipline. The ultimate vehicle for this imposition is grades. The expectation of university officials is that I give high grades to students who work hard and low grades to students who don't, including failing those who refuse a substantial portion of the work they are asked to do. In the language of Marx, as a professor I am supposed to produce and reproduce labor power.

In the language of George Caffentzis' essay on "The Work/Energy Crisis and the Apocalypse" I am expected to play the role of "Maxwell's Daemon": sorting low from high entropy students - giving high grades and to the former because they have demonstrated their willingness and ability to work and giving low grades to the latter who either can't or won't do the work demanded of them. My provision of this information about their level of entropy - of the degree to which they are willing and able to make their energy available for the work capital wants done - is the final element of the work that I am expected to do vis-à-vis each set of students in each course I teach.

Although it happens that grades can be based on class participation, for the most part they are based on the performance of specific tasks, e.g., papers and tests, but that performance also reflects prior work done without any evaluation (study, research). Because the imposition of grades is absolutely unavoidable - in the sense that if I refuse to give grades I lose my job - I do this. But at the same time, being clear about the alienating consequences of grades, I am as up front and as clear with my students about the class politics of the imposition of work and of grades as I can be. I discuss with them this key component of the work I am supposed to be doing and the problems that it poses both for them and for me.

Along the way to the periodic evaluations that produce grades, I am also expected to impose work in an ongoing manner. The main vehicles for doing this are the imposition of work in the classroom and the assignment of material to be studied outside the classroom. These involve for the students the alienations of the classroom and the prolongation of the working day beyond the classroom. The classroom is the primary place where we collectively interact; it is a space (a work site) and a set of behaviors (work) on which I dwell with my students.

The typical university classroom has two important features shaped to structure the imposition of work on both professors and students: first, its physical layout which is most often rigidly fixed to create and maintain a hierarchical and antagonistic division of power between the professor and the students, and secondly, the size of classes which is also shaped to the same end. The physical layout is almost invariably designed around the assumption that the professors will lecture and students will listen. Although professors may or may not have a podium, they almost always have what amounts to a stage upon which they can speak and move freely. The students, by contrast, are organized by chairs and desks, usually screwed into the floor and immovable, to be passive listeners. The typically large number of students assigned to each classroom (mostly varying at the undergraduate level from 50 to 500) is designed for, and almost always leads to, active professor lectures and passive student listening being the dominant overt behaviors.¹

While at the level of elementary and secondary school an essential day-to-day aspect of a teacher's work is the imposition of order (forcing students to be still, to keep quiet unless granted the momentary right to speak, to request permission to go to the bathroom, and so on), at the university level such order in the classroom is assumed and the primary forms of the imposition of work is the confining of students to a mostly passive listening via lecturing and strictly limited questioning. The lectures are, in turn, organized and ordered by the professor so the content and presentation that the students have to listen to is imposed by the professor. This ordering in each course is a moment in a larger ordering, namely of the curriculum as a whole in which professors, not students, set the content and sequence of studies. Students, therefore, are forced to select from one or another sequence of "studies/lectures" all of which have been designed by someone else.

The size of classes, the organization of the classroom, and the necessity of imposing work and grades all tend - as indicated above - to reduce professors' "teaching" to lecturing, to what is essentially a performance, a spectacle, designed at worst to test the limits of student tolerance for abuse and at best to inspire. While a few questions may be tolerated or even solicited, the vast bulk of the time in class is taken up delivering organized lectures on the topic of the day to students who sit quietly,

¹ It can also be argued that the large size of classrooms is at least partly a function of the cost minimizing practices of administrations and, in the case of public schools, of state legislatures. It is cheaper to have fewer professors teach more students than it is to hire more professors and have smaller classes.

listening, taking notes and wondering what of the material covered, if any, will be on the next test. This means that our work is similar to - but worse than - that of any entertainer before a paying live audience.

I walk into a the classroom at the beginning of a semester and find all kinds of students: those who are there because they are sincerely interested in the subjects to be covered, those who wish they could be absolutely anywhere else, those who are ready and willing to get as much out of the course as possible and those who will do the absolutely minimum amount of work to get whatever grade they deem acceptable. But regardless of their attitudes I know that the relationship of the active lecturer-test-giver-grader to the passive listeners-test-takers-graded is structured to create antagonism: I must impose work and grades and students suffer from that imposition whether it be willingly or resentfully.

In terms of ongoing homework, testing and evaluation, the work dynamics can be usefully understood in terms of Marx's analysis of piece wages. Grades, students come to realize, are effectively IOU's on future income/wages (the higher your grades the better certification and higher paying jobs you can get). Grades are not awarded according to the hours of work put in (like time wages) but according to the production of pieces (e.g., tests, papers) and I play the role not merely of taskmaster but of quality control inspector. As Marx points out in chapter 21 of Volume I of *Capital* on piece wages their beauty from a capitalist point of view is that not only do they hide exploitation and are conducive to competition but they don't require constant supervision, only quality control. By keeping piece rates low (whether monetary pay per unit of commodity production or grades for tests, papers and courses) workers/students are coerced into imposing work on themselves. Just as the managers of factories prefer piece wages to instill discipline cheaply, forcing workers to work hard and long to produce enough pieces to earn a livable wage, so the managers of universities find grades a fine vehicle for forcing students to work hard and long on their own, far from any direct supervision (say at home or in libraries or laboratories) to get high enough grades to pass a course or earn a degree.

I know, for example, that the most effective way to impose more work is to give students research papers and take-home tests with virtually no time or page limit. Some of them will spend an extraordinary number of hours crafting the paper or test to get a good grade. Making them take tests in a class period (limited say to one hour) will mean much less work - even though they may spend time before the test preparing for it.

I also know that the university monitors me (and other professors) to determine just how much work we impose. It does this casually by keeping an eye on course syllabi and it does it methodically by keeping track of how we award grades. Every semester at the university where I work, the university records the grades that we give and generates summary statistics about how many "A's," how many "B's" and so on. When the time comes to consider promotion the university committee that makes such decisions hauls out a black binder that contains these

statistics for each professor, for each course, for each semester and examines it to see if the professor is imposing enough work. They measure this by the distribution of grades - the more "A's" and fewer "F's" the less discipline a professor is assumed to maintain. If over time an increase in the percentage of higher grades can be identified, then the professor is branded a "grade inflator" (that professor's "A's" are deemed to be declining in value, like currency during a period of inflation, but in this case those "A's" are seen as of declining in their value as indicators of work performed - by both students *and* the professor). On the other hand, if a professor is seen to be giving fewer and fewer high-level grades, then that professor is deemed a "grade deflator". One year, the Dean of the College of Liberal Arts awarded permanent \$1000 wage increases to a handful of professors that this process identified as "grade deflators." Such practices, obviously, put pressure on professors to be hardnosed disciplinarians, to impose lots of work on their students. The results, also obviously, are to intensify the antagonism between students and professors. Within such contexts it never surprises me that some students go "postal" and kill their professors, nor that so many professors hold so much contempt for students (which rationalizes their own otherwise unpleasant tasks of selection, reward and punishment).

To the above aspects of professoral jobs should be added the additional work for those who try to teach against the stream, to provide students with materials and opportunities for critical thinking and discussion about the limitations of and alternatives to capitalism. One way to minimize the amount of time and energy you put into your job is to just "teach the text book" - however boring it may be for students. (Especially at the introductory or intermediary level there are very few significant differences in textbooks because their commercial editors demand that they be written for the largest possible market.) But teaching the textbook means, for the most part, teaching a set of ideas designed to produce and reproduce the kind of labor power desired by capital. Teaching "outside" the textbook involves at the very least systematic critique of the book itself and more usually the work of seeking out, sorting and sifting through texts and other resources to find materials that will provide points of view different from, and critical of, those provided in standardized textbooks.

I should also point out one consequence for teaching of the administrative emphasis on research and publication in universities that pride themselves on being "research" universities. In such universities - and I am employed by one - because promotions and wages/salaries are awarded overwhelmingly on the basis of research and publication, those of us who teach (and not all those with the title "professor" do) are under constant monetary pressure to divert our energies away from teaching to research, to getting research grants, to writing and to publishing. Concretely this means pressure to devote less time to preparing course materials and lectures, less energy to lecturing, and to find ways to shift the burden of work onto students - all of which increases the alienation and antagonism between students and professors.

It is also useful to note that such work is imposed on those of us who are professors much the way we are supposed to impose work on students. We are not subject to constant supervision but instead, as with students, we are subjected to the logic of piecework and piece wages. Because promotion and wage increases depend on publishing, and publishing is competitive and quality controlled through “peer review” (i.e., other professors evaluate articles submitted to professional journals or books to publishers) we are under pressure to devote lots of time and energy to our research and to crafting publishable articles. As with students we are expected, and things are set up to guarantee, that we impose vast amounts of work on ourselves. So intense can this pressure be that it leads to quantities of work that undermine not only our teaching but our health, our families and our relationships with others more generally. I even know of a case where no woman who has a child, or expects to have one, can be hired because the department head doesn’t want any such diversion of energy away from waged work.

Although the current structure of higher education formally provides several months a year of ostensibly free vacation time (at Christmas, Spring Breaks and Summer), such pressures often have the effect of provoking professors to give up such free time and to continue to work at their research, writing and attempts to get published. This is especially true for untenured assistant professors, although, by the time they have achieved tenure many have entered so deeply into the alienations of professional competition that they continue to work endlessly for further promotion, research grants, and salary increases.

Students at Work

Within the classroom, given its structure and the patterns of behavior associated with that structure, students initially find their only commonality as part of what Sartre called a “serial group”, that is to say a group of people with nothing more in common than having to sit through the same lecture and be subjected to the same tests and be graded by the same professor. In Marx’s terms they constitute a moment of the working class in-itself, defined by their common experience of having work imposed on them.

In classrooms students may find themselves collectively amused, or, more commonly, subjected to boring lectures on subjects only superficially of their choosing. While a few professors are entertaining, and even fewer inspiring or thought provoking, a great many - because of the pressures to which they are subject - have done very little to prepare for lectures and merely repeat the material of textbooks making classes a tedious repetition of familiar material - and not even worth taking notes. If students have the initiative to go beyond listening to actually think and query the lecturer (to some small degree taking control over their work process) they can get more out of the class but risk being ridiculed or belittled by an insecure and abusive teacher. Obviously students try to

avoid such professors, but with so many courses being required that is not always possible.

Moreover, given their years of experience not only of abusive professors but of other students who snicker at “dumb” questions most students simply remain silent, neither asking questions nor challenging what is said. Whatever efforts they may make to grasp the material at hand in ways that make sense to themselves takes place privately and in silence. In the most boring of lectures many follow the time-honored tradition of sitting in the back of the room where they can doze, read newspapers or study for other courses.

Listening to lectures may be a more or less collective experience but being tested and graded is almost always an individual one with cooperation considered cheating. Each individual student faces tests alone, and each receives an individualized grade. Because such things as the admission to some specialized programs, academic scholarships, admission to graduate school (or Law School, or Med School, etc.) and future job prospects depend, at least in part, on good grades, students rarely take a relaxed or nonchalant attitude toward being tested and graded. On the contrary, not surprisingly, test time and pre-test time, are often periods of stress and varying degrees of anxiety. Such stress can itself sometimes produce harmful physical side effects, such as migraine headaches, cold sweats, hives, and outbreaks of herpes. It can also lead to behaviors and habits with deleterious results, e.g., the use of drugs (caffeine or speed to stay up to study, nicotine or downers to reduce nervous tension and so on) or eating disorders.

Moreover, because students (and professors) are habituated to the notion of a grade hierarchy, of rank ordering, the structure of evaluation is conducive to competition. It’s not just that students are encouraged to understand the material and get good grades, they are told they must get better grades than their peers. *In extremis* such competition can generate such alienating behaviors as an individualistic refusal to help others for fear of undermining one’s own position in the hierarchy. Economics professors, in particular, teach their students to beware of “free riders” who might take advantage of their work. Another example is the resentment of many students towards those few who, during lectures, ask questions designed to meet their own particular intellectual needs. The resentment derives from the perception that the questions lead to “getting off the subject” that takes time away from the planned lectures that they hope will tell them what they need to know for upcoming tests.

Beyond course specific testing there are the standardized tests to which students are increasingly subjected. In the US these include the SAT necessary to college applications, the GRE necessary to graduate school applications, the LSAT necessary to Law School applications, and so on. These tests, which come at critical moments of transition for students are even more subject to the pressures of competition than those in particular classes.

In all of this we can see the various forms of alienation that Marx first laid out in the 1944 *Manuscripts*: alienation from the work itself (studying what you are told to study in the way and order someone else requires - instead of following your intellectual nose to meet your own needs), alienation from the product (labor power or the ability and willingness to work becomes merely something you do because your professor or your future employer requires it - instead of a something you are doing to meet your own needs - individual and social), alienation from other workers (competition among students and antagonism toward professors - instead of cooperation within a framework of collectively self-defined learning) and finally alienation from species-being (the lack of freedom to realize one's own self-determined social being, both individually and collectively).

As just indicated with respect to test-taking, these alienations can and do cause serious harm to many students. The isolation, lack of control over their own lives and estrangement from their fellows contribute to personal misery, desperate willingness to engage in self- and mutually destructive behaviour to gain social acceptance, self-mutilation, eating disorders and in some cases suicide or murderous violence. University counseling and intervention centers are regularly swamped by students barely hanging on. While the alienations of school are rarely the only sources of such problems, they often contribute greatly, sometimes being the final bunch of straws that breaks the camel's back.

These alienations involve two obvious forms of antagonism. The first is the antagonism among students associated with the alienation between them - that can take forms ranging from personal animosity to collective racist or sexist behaviors (e.g., Fraternity treatment of women and racial "minorities"). The second is the antagonism of students towards those of us who are professors - who are their immediate taskmasters, who impose alienated work and all the other associated alienations on them, who act as reflexive mediators defining the students to themselves via grades (whether we do this arrogantly - like the abusive teacher in Pink Floyd's *The Wall* - or sympathetically - like the title characters in the films *Goodbye Mr. Chips* and *Mr Holland's Opus*).

These antagonisms, of course, mask deeper ones: namely that between the students and the institutions that impose grades and require those of us who are professors to impose work and that between we professors who find ourselves forced to impose work and incur student antagonism and the institutions that make this an integral part of their jobs. These antagonisms are masked by the mediated organization of the imposition of work such that students rarely see or understand the institutional pressures on professors and such that professors who accept the organization of the university, become blind to its alienations and only see and experience the antagonism of students as irresponsible personal laziness and reproach. (There is more on such syllogistic mediations in chapter five of *Reading Capital Politically* on the form of value.)

In the current period in many countries, including the United States (and from what I have heard Britain since Thatcher), students are subjected to ever greater pressure to work harder and longer, to both extend their working day and intensify it (two classic capitalist strategies usually associated with absolute and relative surplus value). At the level of the length of their entire university work-life they are also subjected to speed-up, not only working faster and harder but with less freedom to change the direction of their studies, to take time off from those studies, etc. They are pressured to choose a single course of study and to complete it as quickly as possible and are penalized (even monetarily) if they deviate from the chosen path.

Because the situation is so full of alienations many students want to minimize their misery by at least being entertained; they prefer lectures to be funny, stimulating and perhaps even inspiring. They would also like, of course, little work to be required, that work to be easily accomplished and highly rewarded. They want, quite reasonably, the least obnoxious working conditions possible. They don't want me to be a Captain Bligh or Simon Legree but rather a Seinfeld with funny gag lines or a Robin Williams capable of not only funny but dazzling and uplifting rhetoric. Indeed, many will tolerate an outrageously high imposition of work outside the classroom if only I am entertaining enough in the classroom - effectively shifting the workload from themselves (of dealing with boring lectures) to me (producing entertaining lectures). The pressure, therefore, is on me to do the work necessary to meet these expectations, or to do the work of dealing with a classroom full of people whose desires are not being met. In either case I am doing the work of handling what is structured to be an antagonistic situation.

To these general alienations and antagonisms we must add those of gender and race, ethnicity and national origin - as in the rest of society. Some students are subjected to additional pressures either from other students or from their professors. The cruelties of some students are as well known as the predatory behavior of some professors - in both cases it is mainly students who are the targets.

The above are a few observations of the organization of work and its consequences within the university workplace, with a focus on students and professors. (To have a more complete understanding of the class composition in the educational industry and its factories we must also, of course, investigate the work and conflicts among managers and staff within individual institutions - in and of themselves and in relationship to students and professors - as well as the overall hierarchical structure of the collective set of institutions of "higher learning" and their relationship to the rest of the social factory.)

Students in Struggle

I now want to turn from discussing how things are supposed to operate to how students and professors struggle against the work that is imposed on them and

against the various institutions and mechanisms of that imposition - to turn, in Marx's words, from an examination of students (and professors) as part of the working class in itself, to their role as part of the working class for itself. Let me begin with students, for the sake of continuity with the previous section. (I spent something over 20 years of my life as a student (12 years elementary and secondary school, five years undergraduate college, and four years plus of graduate school).

At universities students initially confront courses, their professors and the work those professors impose as individuals, individuals very low in the hierarchy of power. As such they generally have very little ability to resist other than through absenteeism (skipping classes - physically or mentally - or dropping out) or other forms of isolated refusal. In my experience it is very rare that an isolated individual student has the courage to openly challenge the way a professor organizes a course, lectures, grades or treats students (inside and outside the classroom). It is also rare to find a student with enough self-assurance and developed sense of their own intellectual agenda to engage in what the Situationists called "detournement" or the diversion of a mechanism of domination (imposed schoolwork) into a building block of their own autonomous intellectual development.

Not surprisingly, high on many students' agenda is the acquisition of friends and networks to escape from isolation, to break the alienations of schoolwork and the classroom and to get some enjoyment out of their sojourn at school. Sometimes such network formation takes place in particular courses as students collaborate to help each other cope with the work imposed - by forming study groups and such. (Collaboration that overcomes the alienation among students may be aimed at minimizing the amount of work imposed, but it may also be simply an attempt to form coalitions to improve the competitive edge of those in the group or network - the kind of contradictory phenomena portrayed in the TV series "The Paper Chase" about law students at Harvard - and thus still very much within the capitalist logic of the school.)

Sometimes the escape from isolation takes place within the larger university communities through a great variety of student organizations - from the apparently purely social to the overtly political. Both provide students with backup and support for whatever forms of resistance and crafting of alternatives they may undertake - from organized mutual aid in study through what Doug Foley calls "playing around in the class room" to collective cheating and overt collective challenges to the organization and content of a course (or of curriculum) or to the policies and behaviours of professors.

When such networking becomes sufficiently wide and challenges the power structures of hierarchy and alienation openly we begin to speak of student "movements" - such as the Free Speech Movement at Berkeley in the mid-1960s that challenged the power structures of that university and demanded an unheard of autonomy of student control over their own studies and extracurricular activity. Or, more recently, the massive, year-long student movement at the National Autonomous

University of Mexico, in Mexico City, where tens of thousands of students challenged neoliberal policies aimed at dramatically increasing the imposition of work. They occupied the many university campuses and carried their struggles off campus into the wider community.

Within the overall student movement of the 1960s there were a wide range of interlinked struggles: the attacks by anti-war protestors on university complicity with the Pentagon and capitalist strategy in the Pacific Basin, Black and Chicano Student Union demands for open admission, for more financial aid, and for a transformation of the curriculum to meet their needs, feminist struggles against gender discrimination and for their own needs, demands by all kinds of militant students that various curriculum be changed to meet their needs (e.g., demands for radical economics, insurgent sociology, bottom-up history). As a student I was involved in some of these struggles and as a professor I sometimes benefited from them, e.g., three years of struggle by radical students in the economic and political science departments resulted in my getting my present job at the University of Texas to teach Marx.

Within this wide array of student struggles we can see both resistance to the imposition of alienating work and efforts at self-valorization via the imposition of alternatives that meet student needs.

In such struggles within the university you can also see examples of the circulation of struggle among autonomous groupings, e.g., from Black student struggles to anti-war protests, from feminist struggles to ecological struggles, as well as such circulation to and from struggles elsewhere in the social factory, e.g., in black ghettos of US cities, in rice paddies and jungles of Southeast Asia.

We can also trace of the rise and fall (or cycles) of struggle, e.g., the anti-Vietnam War protests expanded rapidly in the late 1960s, swelled to a peak at the time of the Cambodian Invasion and then subsided as the US began to withdraw from Vietnam. Black and Chicano student struggles circulated rapidly in the late 1960s and 1970s continuing the momentum of earlier civil and labor rights movements as well as the insurgencies of the great urban centers and subsided with the successes in achieving Black and Chicano Studies. (Such achievements were sometimes lasting and sometimes transitory. At the University of Texas, for example, you can find both Black and Chicano Studies programs - the enduring fruit of those struggles. But it is also true that many "radical" professors hired during the years of struggle were subsequently purged.) Black student struggles then swelled again in the 1980s attacks on university investment policies in international solidarity with the struggle against apartheid in South Africa - to subside once more with the end of apartheid. Just as Piven and Cloward have chronicled the cycles of "poor peoples' movements", or Italian Marxists have chronicled the cycles of the struggles of the mass worker, so too is it possible to write a history of the cycles of student struggles and movements.

Every day I can see the struggles of individuals and small groups of students coping with the alienations of school: the physical and mental withdrawals of individuals and the small collective collaborations, in class and outside of class. Some are creative and rewarding; too many are merely self-destructive.

From time to time, I am confronted by efforts at detournement via questions based on students' own needs or demands for changes in the course materials (e.g., this last Spring the overwhelming desire expressed by students to include in my course on international crisis the case of the Bush Administration's invasion of Iraq).

From time to time I also see wider student mobilizations: political meetings and protests, the querying of the relationship between materials and ideas covered in class and ostensibly unrelated struggles, critiques of university complicity with business or with the state in the exploitation of people and the earth, or in war profiteering.

Once in a while I see open rebellions - student sit-ins, marches, strikes or rallies - or major collective initiatives, e.g., for next Fall student activists have organized, on their own, a course on the class politics of higher education and student struggles. In that self-organization they asked for my suggestions as to readings and for my collaboration as the "official" teacher but basically they designed the course on their own to meet their needs as activists. They were prepared to do all of this outside any official framework but with a faculty member involved they can get university credit - thus converting institutional arrangements designed to impose work on them into vehicles of their own struggles.

Obviously there are limits to all of these struggles against the imposition of schoolwork and for the achievement of alternative goals. Isolated individuals can often achieve little other than survival. Small groups and networks are better not only at survival but at creating spaces and times for self-valorization beyond resistance. Large-scale movements, of course, often achieve the most marked results - such as fundamental changes in course curriculum as mentioned above - but such movements come and go and students move on, not always leaving even a history of their struggles, much less a living legacy in the form of a new generation of activists. Moreover, even when universities make concessions the institutions do their best to co-opt and instrumentalise such changes and channel ex-student activists into professional careers where their energy may be more effectively harnessed for accumulation. Such efforts to harness can be seen in the formation of Black, Chicano and Women's Studies that are forced to operate using the same hierarchical methods for the imposition of work as those employed elsewhere in the university. The students whose struggles forced the creation of those studies are put to work just like they were in other courses - only the content has changed. The most highly motivated, who work hardest and move on to graduate school and Ph.D.'s may, if all goes well, then be integrated into the system as professors imposing work on the following generation of students.

Professors in Struggle

Which brings me from the struggle of students to those of professors. Unfortunately, as far as I can see, in most universities in the United States professors are so thoroughly divided and conquered as to make collective struggle difficult and rare.

Individual professors cope with the alienations of their jobs - teaching and research/publishing in a variety of ways. As with students some individuals withdraw. Young professors living under the threat of being denied tenure and told most explicitly that "publish or perish" is the rule, withdraw their energy from their class preparations and lectures and channel it into research and publishing. Older, tenured professors sometimes withdraw from the fierce backstabbing competition for promotions and salary increases and re-channel their energies either into teaching or away from their work altogether.

Other individual professors, again like students, seek out networks of colleagues for mutual aid (e.g., in research, in publishing ventures, in reciprocal citation) both to survive - as in young professors trying to find a protective and productive niche - and to advanced their careers. In this we can see both a natural resistance to alienation and, all too often, a embrace of precisely that competition that the university uses to pit professors against each other.

In the classroom individual professors who design their courses, and departmental committees of professors who design curriculum (the sequence of courses leading to a degree) have some leeway or "academic freedom" in their choices - more certainly than the students upon whom they will impose those courses and that curriculum. Within typical mainstream courses professors can structure their presentation of material in a critical manner, challenging received wisdom and even attacking capitalism. A very few of us can craft whole courses, even sequences of courses, that explore bodies of ideas critical of, and struggles against, capitalism, e.g., my courses on Marxian theory.

But that "academic freedom" is usually dramatically overstated. The design of curriculum is overwhelmingly shaped by the styles and fashions of the professions of which the professors in a given institution are but one competitive part. Most feel compelled to teach courses whose content corresponds to the currently dominant approaches in their fields, e.g., in the post-WWII period most economics departments offered core sequences of neoclassical microeconomics and Keynesian macroeconomics. In the present neoliberal period of market-worship microeconomics has come to largely displace macroeconomics as a separate field and most other fields have been reduced to mere applications of microeconomic methodologies. The room for maneuver in such situations is limited - both by the amount of material that has to be covered the courses (leaving little time for critique) and by most professors' adherence to the fashions of their profession. Those of us who move entirely outside such fashions are few and we usually "pay" - quite literally by being marginalized, not promoted and excluded from

wage increases and other perks. Some of us, of course, find more than adequate compensation in the satisfactions of working with students willing and able to think critically, including student activists engaged in various struggles, and thus participating in, and contributing to, the circulation of struggle across time, space and experiences.

The pressures that shape research and writing for publication are even more acute. Only peer-reviewed articles, books and research grants are considered significant for promotion or wage increases and the “peers” who control professional journals, the editorial houses and the institutions doling out research monies almost systematically impose the very pro-capitalist fashions of the day as one choice criterion for accepting or rejecting submissions. Within such a situation creativity is sharply limited to crafting variations within a narrow theoretical and methodological sphere. Professors may be somewhat less alienated from their work than students - by having more control over how they teach - but they are also working according to others’ wills, both those of university administrators, those of the trend-setting “leaders” of their professions and those who fund both.

Those who resist such pressures to do what is necessary to get published in such a framework, even more than those who refuse to participate in preaching the dominant theories and policies, usually find themselves either excluded entirely from the university (refused tenure) or sharply marginalized in terms of income, perks and a voice in decision making. In rare instances, a small number of those who refuse to go along with the dominant fashions of their professions are able to carve out spaces for themselves - even becoming a dominant force in a few isolated departments, or creating new departments (e.g., Black Studies). But the price for this is usually submission to the rules and regulations of the larger institution to the point where they become - as I suggested above - just as much functionaries of the capitalist imposition of work and discipline on students as any mainstream group of professors.

As such dynamics suggest, it is extremely rare to find much evidence of collective resistance by university professors to either the imposition of work on themselves or to their role of imposing it on students. In a few instances, where state laws allow it, professors have formed unions to defend their rights and fight for better wages and working conditions. But mostly the intense competition among them effectively undermines such efforts and the best they can do is form such bodies as “Faculty Councils” to “advise” university administrators on faculty points of view - to which administrators may give lip service but are usually under no obligation to heed.

As can be deduced from the above description of the working conditions of professors, they suffer, though sometimes to a lesser degree, from all the alienations that afflict students: alienation from their work (as they find themselves pressured to teach such and such subjects, to research such and such issues, to utilize such and such

methodologies, to impose grades and incur the hostile antagonism of students - as opposed to having the “academic freedom” university ideology asserts them to have), alienation from their product (their students’ labor power - which at the graduate level may soon be pitted against them - and their own labor power and research results that contribute to the system of control that confines them), alienation from their colleagues (in competition for promotion, wage increases, research grants, and other perks) and ultimately alienation from their species-being (the free exercise of their will).

All this is true regardless of how professors feel about their work. It is probably not much of an overstatement to say that most professors identify with their work and only occasionally feel it as an imposition. Indeed, given the dedication required to work as hard as is necessary to compete and win in the academic market place, it is not surprising to find a large number of professors to be workaholics, to have thoroughly internalised the values of the system in which they work. This is a measure not only of their dedication but of the efficacy of a system whose “Maxwell’s Demons” (“peer” reviewers and university administrators) have carefully selected and promoted those competitors who have demonstrated through their work low levels of entropy and have excluded those less competitive, high entropy professors who have refused to channel as much of their life energy into their work.

At the same time, the contradiction between the conscious dedication of such workaholics to their jobs and the alienations that in fact constrict, narrow and poison their lives often lead to all the nasty consequences common to workaholics in any job category. They often suffer from chronic stress and anxiety with nasty consequences for their health. Endless hours of research may create isolation from and an inability to communicate with or meet the needs of spouses, children and friends that leads to further alienation and sometimes broken marriages, homes and friendships.

Not surprisingly in virtually all widespread resistance and rebellion on university campuses students take the lead and professors are either passive spectators or work with administrators to limit and constrain student actions. In some cases struggle may circulate from students to faculty and a few of the latter may speak up in support of student demands or participate in student organized struggles - as advisors, speakers, sources of information and so on, but the initiative almost always begins with students. In my experience - which runs from the Civil Rights and anti-Vietnam War movements of the 1960s through the anti-apartheid and anti-intervention (in Central America) movements of the 1980s to the anti-Gulf Wars and anti-globalization movements of the 1990s and current period, participation by faculty, much less leadership, has been the exception rather than the rule.

Austin, Texas
September 7, 2003