

Authoritarian neoliberalism and the alienation of academic labour

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As one response to the secular crisis of capitalism, higher education is being proletarianised. Its academics and students, increasingly encumbered by precarious employment, debt, and new levels of performance management, are shorn of autonomy beyond the sale of their labour-power. This talk takes a Marxist political economic analysis of the implications of this lack of autonomy, in terms of the conception of subsumption (Hall and Bowles 2016; Marx 1867/2004). Movement towards real subsumption, revealed in financialisation and marketization, enables us to reconsider the utility of neoliberalism as a theoretical framework for analysing the re-engineering of the governance of higher education and the re-production of academic labour in the name of value (Clarke 2005; Davies 2014). In particular, this reflects upon ideas of authoritarian neoliberalism in the coercive orchestration of social relations in the name of markets (Bruff 2014). This reflection discusses the imposition of architectures of subsumption through which academic labour becomes a source of both overwork and anxiety. In analysing these connections it is possible to situate abstract, alienated academic labour alongside its psychological impacts, including anxiety and feelings of hopelessness (Hall 2018). The talk closes by examining whether narratives of solidarity, in particular from marginalised voices, might help academics and students to analyse and then move beyond their alienated labour (Johnson 2017). This frames such solidarity in terms of mass intellectuality, or socially-useful knowledge work, as a potential moment for overcoming alienation (Dinerstein 2015).

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