

KNOWLEDGE-BASED ECONOMY AND ITS LOSERS

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MARION VON OSTEN: The concept "cognitive capitalism" has been introduced by the economist Antonella Corsani. With this notion, she tried to constitute an understanding for the contemporary changes in the accumulation of wealth and the new ideology of a self-reliant information worker or artist. But in all kinds of ideologies there are possible ruptures, where not only affirmative, but also new revolutionary subjectivities can emerge. Students and precarious knowledge workers are a potential group today. In the western societies the neo-liberal concept of education puts the emphasis on individual economical success. This is being imposed on young people. For example, some of the US-American universities - like Santa Cruz or Berkeley - are nowadays on strike. In Austria, all the universities are squatted and the students demand that the educational system should not be exclusionary against social groups like working class people, with migrant backgrounds, from non-European countries, etc. We can witness that the change is already happening now and that this is a global movement, which - in terms of numbers - has already involved even more people than the student movements of the 1968. And perhaps if we could change our way of thinking from the "oppression perspective" and focus much more on the struggles again, we would come to new conclusions. Here we can see that new forms of subjectivity can emerge from the present situation. Although the structures are oppressive, there is still a possibility to change them.

TERESA ŚWIEŹKOWSKA: It will be very interesting to see what consequences those student protests around Europe will have. Right now, we don't have this kind of protests in Poland. I am also a university teacher and what I observe is a kind of political passivity among students.

KUBA SZREDER: You are right, and I guess this problem comes back to the questions raised in your presentations. One of the issues is that being a culture producer in Poland - which too frequently means importing some new forms of culture production from the western societies - is still perceived as a kind of privilege. The concepts like "precarity," working over hours, self-autonomy, etc., have not yet been identified as problems. Even culture workers who are clearly exploited or people who are paying a lot of money for a poor quality education still consider themselves - when they compare themselves to their parents - as the privileged ones. And I think that it is a question of "governmentality" or of "distinction" in Bourdieu's sense: To whom do you compare yourself? What kind of life do you imagine for yourself? What kind of desires do you have? This "passivity," Teresa has mentioned, is actually not passivity. It's even worse - it's rather a false belief people have, that they are on the side of the winners and that, for this reason, they don't need any kind of political movement against the status quo.

TŚ: But this belief is paradoxical. Thinking that they are on the side of the winner is against the facts, because there is huge unemployment among people who leave universities and only few of them have the chance to find a good job.

KS: That is right - it is paradoxical. Let's think about the art scene. It would be much better for young artists and culture producers to fight together for their common rights, identify the problem and try to find the solution. The majority of them choose a totally opposite strategy; they support the current system. Young artists take part in this super-competitive market of skills and abilities. Only a very small group of people, let's say a 1% of the art scene, will be able to lead a decent life in this system; the others will simply be deprived of the basic resources, being forced into working in unjust, precarious conditions. Still, paradoxically, the majority of future losers support it, believing that they will be the ones to make it as winners.

MVO: But the current situation can suddenly change. For example, in Vienna at the Academy of Fine Arts, the concrete revolt came unexpectedly. But my suggestion is that the reason for these contingencies are the many paradoxes in the present situation. The introduction of the gender equality and anti-discrimination directives by the EU, for example; meanwhile, the certificates of higher education increase in value and the so-called "Excellence Clusters" are introduced at universities for the very few. And

me, as an academic teacher, I am actually "teaching critique" - I am in a dominating role and I am telling young people that they should be critical and that it is positive when we revolt. A great paradox. We can overtly talk about our privileges, and we can problematize them. This is something that was not possible in the past, because the positions of the people in power were stable and unquestionable. We are living and acting in ambiguities today. I think that this is all an entirely new quality and young people understand it. I never imagined that in Vienna they would ever protest, but now we have already reached a critical mass, and even many of my colleagues have decided to take a critical position, too. It went off unpredictably and I think that eight weeks ago I would have never talked like this. People just understood that the present situation is no longer acceptable.

TŚ: And what are the demands?

MVO: There are several demands. The societal demands are that knowledge should not be produced as a commodity and that education should not be competitive or exclusionary.

TŚ: What kind of support do you get from the society or the media?

MVO: I think the attitude has changed recently because of the financial crisis. Half a year ago people would have claimed that the police should beat the students out from the streets. But today there are as well many positive reactions. People say that students are right, that they study, but they have no perspectives; that there is a pressure placed on them. But I cannot say I am entirely optimistic. I observe, for example, that student movements today accept some specifically neoliberal ideas and concepts. They demand "excellent mass universities," "better" or "more efficient education." I would call this, ironically, the emerging of a "post-fordist soviet." They fight for their rights as students, but actually they want education under better conditions and by optimizing efficiency. The radical, leftist demand would be: "Education for all!" But what is demanded is: "Make education better!," or "Give more money to the universities!," etc. I think that this is a serious problem, that any critical moment can transform into a normative concept, too.

KS: So you are not entirely optimistic. There were a lot of discussions about the potentially revolutionary role of cultural producers and very often people seem disillusioned with it. They say that this model of artistic subjectivity is not radical enough and that it usually stops somewhere in the middle, without making any serious change. At the Free/Slow University we had a long discussion about cultural production. And the question we asked was: Are the Polish culture producers descendants of the privileged position of the intelligentsia? In other words, are they rather associated with the dominant classes of society? Or maybe they form any sort of new, cognitive proletariat, and, if that's the fact, will this "Prekariat" play any revolutionary role in changing the social structures in Poland?

MVO: But I think you should also take into consideration that, in the moment of struggle, it is sometimes very important that you have a privileged position, like ours. For example, it is very important that I am taking part in the protest. It is important that there are not only students over there, but also people holding privileged positions who come not to represent the students, not to speak for them, but to take part in the struggle and protest with them.

Of course, we have to critically reflect on our power position. But, on the other hand, there are many ways in which we can effectively support the struggle. And this is what the students taught me, as they want us to be with them, because - with us - their protest has more value. I think the same goes for culture producers. Peter and me are very good examples of this kind of paradoxical situation. We both come from the leftist positions, but we also made some careers. And then suddenly there emerged a possibility of transforming and using our new, privileged positions to bring a change.

TŚ: Perhaps the situation in Poland is different because in the last decades, during the transformation, we experienced a kind of betrayal by the intelligentsia. The working class was betrayed. David Ost described this very well in his book *Kłęska "Solidarności"* [The Defeat of Solidarity]. And I guess it is this experience which makes us suspicious of our privileged positions as academics and, in general, of the privileged positions of culture producers.

MVO: I don't want to make any simplifying comparisons, but I myself grew up in the Ruhr area, with working class people who are today the complete losers in our society. That's why, I understand very well what kind of position you are talking about. But, on the other hand, I have to say that the working

class people hold a very white male conception of labor. Of course, when I go back to the Ruhr area and I see what happens when factories are being closed, I – for sure – am against it. But I could not really fight for this kind of labor. That was the operaist insight; the factory is something we want to leave, but, then, we also need to know how and what for we want to work.

TS: I understand. But, at this point, I would like to ask you another question. Do you think that your activity in the sphere of academia and in the art world has an impact on the wider society, I mean, in terms of social change? Does it make any difference outside the field of art?

KS: Teresa, let me reverse your question: Do you think that the regular trade unionists, or the regular politicians, or the regular activists have an impact on the wider society? And if yes, what kind of impact is it? I think that the question you are posing is based on the quite old idea of the "messianic, enlightened intellectual" who, because of his or her privileged position in society, too often picks up the role of the preacher or the savior of the masses. His or her voice is considered to have a bigger impact on the society than other involved in the same social game. And I am not sure if it's correct.

MVO: But you see, what I am trying to say is that it is necessary to think differently about the role of culture producers. If we say that, for example, the fordist industrial production is a certain normative conception of labor, then I would say that our form of knowledge production is like this as well. The most important problem here is, I guess, the division between theoretical thinking and manual labor. And this is the problem we should solve. I can say that in my life as a culture producer there was no single moment when I worked only theoretically. Actually, what me and Peter are doing is production – we produce images, spaces, videos, events, exhibitions, socialities. We do not work theoretically only; we produce things; we constitute spaces and socialities. And there is no strict division between the manual and the theoretical work here, not at all. That is why, I think it would be very interesting to think about the culture producer as a new figure of how labor could be conceptualized today. With the emergence of this new model, the idea that some people have to go to the factories while others can go to the universities becomes problematic. We should try to understand this new social possibility. For me, this is the most important problem at the moment: How could we imagine different economic and social relationships? How could we inhabit capitalism? Of course, I have no answer ready, but I would like to start thinking about it.

PETER SPILLMANN: And there is also another important thing. This kind of knowledge we are talking about came over in practice and is actually not limited to us as culture producers, or as any other privileged class. In fact, this knowledge can emerge everywhere. And I think that this aspect is very often being overlooked when we define the working class in the fordist sense as simply workers in factories. In fact, even in the past there was a whole workers' culture, which produced its own knowledge, its own social connections, and its own way of living which was independent from the official politics. This kind of cultural labor emerges, of course, in many other fields. We observed it, for example, in the field of modern architecture and modern housing policy. People suddenly realized that they are able to creatively transform the buildings, which were designed for them as a part of a general master plan in the 1960s. Suddenly they started changing their houses, adapting them; they started producing something else out of this modern architecture. I think it is important to recognize these kinds of knowledge production and to realize that they are as important as what intellectuals do.

KS: During your presentation you asked what sort of labor is valued and defined as labor. What is the division between labor and free time? And this distinction is always connected with particular social classes in particular societies and in particular times. What in the past was defined as work, like, for example, building furniture, became a hobby, a free-time activity for the middle-aged people, sort of DIY bricoleurs. And if today you ask people from the upper classes about their "work," they would probably say that they are busy with organizing parties, changing clothes or the interior design of their residences. I am pretty sure that women from the upper classes would call it a labor. For us, it is a sort of privilege, but people can be "busy" with this kind of things.

MOV: And the important thing is that they are not able to be productive in their labor. Their problem is that, actually, they can only consume. They have lost the ability to create. And we are still able to create a sociality.

PS: Yes, but I must also say that at a certain point I realized that my work as a cultural producer is in a way privileged and I started to think critically

about my social role. That was at the beginning of the 1990s when I was finishing my art studies. As I was able to use the Macintosh computer, some advertisement companies asked me to work for them. They told their clients that they are already in desktop publishing, although, in fact, they were not yet able to do it. So they had to find students like me, who never had anything to do with advertisement graphics, and they paid us huge amounts of money to work for them. But, in fact, we were not skilled enough to use those computers professionally, so we read the manuals during the nights only to come to work in the morning and design some advertisements. This was the moment when I understood that this kind of work is nothing real, but rather something like a symbolic cloud of ideas and things which everybody knows. And I think we should be more critical about the situation we are now describing. Are we really the privileged ones? Or is it only a symbolic feeling of being privileged?

TS: In Poland this problem of being privileged as a culture producer is also related to the history. In real socialism when economical inequality was not visible so much, a special kind of cultural distinction emerged. Suddenly it became important to read Dostoyevsky and to have certain books on the shelves. Besides that, the social position of people with the university degree was relatively high because it had been decided to keep the percentage of the population with an academic education low. The situation has changed, but the image of high education as a way to a better life, cultural advancement and social upward mobility is still being cherished. And perhaps today young people are still seduced by this idea of university education and the idea of being a knowledge worker.

KS: For me, the question of the privileged position of cultural workers is an important and very up-to-date problem. At the beginning of the Free/Slow University in July we were talking to the editor-in-chief of the "Obieg" magazine, the main Polish online portal about contemporary art in Poland, published by the Centre for Contemporary Art in Warsaw. We asked him why there is no critical journalism on art and cultural production in Poland. His answer was striking: "It's quite easy, people feel comfortable within current system. They aspire after better positions and they acquire them." Moreover, many young people feel enthusiastic about the new age of neoliberalism in Poland, and this seems to be the voice of the new generation of the Polish culture workers. They believe in the art market.

MVO: And that's why we have to make our positions stronger. But now I have a sociological question to you: Is it true that in Poland there are no children of the working class people who would be cultural producers today? Do people stay workers? Is there no social mobility between the classes?

TS: Yes, but probably not industrial workers. Young people from the working class, from small cities or villages very often have a strong will to finish a university, but it is difficult to get access to the few good universities, so they usually finish poor quality universities, which, in addition, are private and cost fees. That is why, although we have very good statistics of scholarship in Poland, the situation at the universities reproduces the existing class relations. After finishing these private schools young people usually take service jobs or simply migrate.

MVO: So perhaps this is the main problem of our discussion. I think it is the matter of the relation between the educational system and the way certain social groups are being conceptualized and segregated.

TS: That's why, I think, we should raise the question of the political strategy in reference to these protests taking place at the universities now. Are we in any position to defend the falling project of the social democratic university? What kind of university do we want? Do we want it to be a kind of an exclusive, privileged and distanced institution under some special protection, while other spheres of social life are ruled by the capitalistic, neoliberal logic?

MVO: Last year, me and Peter did an artistic project with intellectuals whose parents were foreigners. Their parents came to Germany as the so-called guest-workers and were a highly discriminated group, but their children are now intellectuals and culture producers. So can I – from my privileged position as a white female knowledge worker – be against the social democratic university? No, I can't. I think I should defend it. This is something new to me, but now I know I should defend it. Perhaps it is not the solution, but rather a temporary, strategic position.