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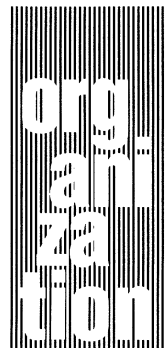
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speaking out

A Local View on Transformations within the Academic Labor Process

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One of the recent developments in the field of critical organization studies is the attention shown to studying the labor process of academic workers (Ehrensals, 1999). To date, most of the work in this area has analyzed the emergence of the 'new university' system within the United Kingdom (Jary and Parker, 1999). The results of these studies generally indicate that university academicians in the UK are experiencing working environments that are increasingly intensified, standardized, computerized, rationalized, and deskilled, in other words, more 'McDonaldized' (Ritzer, 1996). Common to this work is the finding that changes in the ways in which academicians generate and disseminate knowledge at UK universities are tied to global, national, and local institutional change, including the spread of free-enterprise ideology, increased market competition among universities to attract the best students, demands by 'customers' (i.e. employers) for students who are trained to help them meet global competitive challenges, and the development of information systems like the Internet.

However, these findings have not been 'replicated' in the context of other countries. To the extent that they do reflect broader globalization trends, similar developments should be evident in other countries. But, to the extent that the influences are national and local, there should be differences as well. I studied transformations within the academic labor process of a university in the United States. I then drew upon my findings to address theoretical and practical issues raised by my results and the UK-based literature. This story is based on those findings.

The Academic Labor Process: Historically and 'in Crisis'

I conducted a case study at a college of business within a public university in the southeast United States—one experiencing institutional change similar to other US universities—in order to gather data

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on the nature of its academic labor process.¹ Before 1995, the labor process that academicians at the college of business experienced was typical of many US teaching-oriented universities. Faculty were required to teach between nine and 12 hours of classes per semester, and hold at least 10 formal office hours. Faculty had wide latitude to determine course content, including choice over textbooks used, within the constraints of the course descriptions listed in the college catalog. Faculty served on at least two departmental and/or college committees. Faculty were also encouraged to perform service activities, such as organizing and advising student clubs and involvement in professional associations.

However, during 1995, college administrators came under external pressures to alter the college's mission, and thereby the labor process of academicians. Collectively, the Dean referred to these challenges as a 'crisis' for the college. First, the college experienced a decline in enrollment of almost 20 percent over the previous four semesters. This was perceived by the administration to be a result of the college's declining placement rate, which was in turn linked to a growing perception in the local business community that the college graduated 'under-qualified' students. Adding to the problem was that a new state-affiliated junior college was scheduled to open near the university in early 1998. The Accounting and Economics departments were particularly worried about this, since much of their enrollment came from teaching lower-division courses that would be offered at the new institution. The enrollment problem was becoming acute, because the state had recently passed a law cutting subsidies to low-enrollment colleges beyond the 1997–8 academic year. Thus, the college was under pressure to increase enrollment to at least self-sustaining levels.

Second, the college was attempting to achieve AACSB accreditation. This was perceived as crucial for two reasons. First, the state legislature had indicated that it would reduce the funding for any college within a university that was not accredited by 1998. Second, accreditation was considered important by two college constituencies—prospective students and business firms, both of whom tended to view a business degree from an unaccredited college as near valueless. Thus, the administration put forth every effort to meet the standards of the AACSB inspection teams. This had a significant effect on the academic labor process, since the AACSB requirements became a guiding influence on the college's response to the crisis.

Administrative Responses to the Crisis

To address these problems, the Dean hired a 'Big-Six' accounting firm to help it develop a Strategic Plan. The plan categorized the activities of the college into five 'areas of performance': People, Research, Instruction,



External Relations, and Internal Operations. Within each of these areas, the consultants, administration, and faculty jointly established a series of timed goals and objectives. These were to be achieved by targeted strategies assessed using quantitative measures. The purpose of the plan was, in the words of one of the consultants, 'to create a framework in which the activities and performance of the college of business will be, to the maximum extent possible, objectively measurable and documentable'.

The strategic plan impacted every aspect of academic work. Since the AACSB emphasized the standardization of a department's offerings, any department that offered course sections taught by more than one professor had to develop and use a common syllabus and textbook for that course. To achieve this, the college's standing Curriculum Committee was given the responsibility of reviewing all course syllabi on a semester basis to ensure compliance. Committee members reported 'reviewing over 30 course syllabi, page-by-page, to meet the AACSB mandate'.

Another response involved the introduction of updated information systems. These technological changes—the result of AACSB demands that facilities be upgraded—included new computers for faculty, an enhanced computer lab for students, and Internet access for everyone. Many faculty members experienced spatial liberation, as Internet access made it easier to collaborate with colleagues at other universities, and proved to be an excellent research resource. Likewise, the computer lab made it easier for faculty to grade the newly instituted standardized tests—students take the tests on the computer and the computer grades them instantly. This dramatically reduced the time needed to administer exams. Additionally, video teaching technology was installed to allow for 'distance learning', enabling the college to reach more students at off-campus sites.

Finally, the plan added new activities for academicians to perform. It established a six-month goal of increasing enrollment in the college by 5 percent in the first semester following its implementation, and 5 percent annually thereafter. Faculty were to play an important role in achieving these numerical benchmarks: the plan called for faculty members to be assigned the names of five applicants interested in enrolling in the college of business. Faculty were required to call each applicant three times in the four months preceding the beginning of the next enrollment period. The caller was instructed to be 'upbeat' about the college, and attempt to highlight its attractive qualities in order to sell the student on enrollment. To assess and control these efforts, faculty were warned not to 'use language that could be construed as sexual harassment', and were required to keep a log of each call 'detailing the date and time of the call, its length, the issues covered, and the scheduling of a follow-up call'. These records were turned in to the Dean's office at the end of the calling period, and then compared with later enrollment decisions to determine



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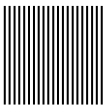
the 'percentage of customer enrollment' each faculty member had achieved.

The UK and US Situation in Comparison²

My analysis indicated that the strategic planning initiative caused academic work at the college to undergo processes of standardization, intensification, and both deskilling and new skilling. Generally, this evidence is consistent with the findings reported by the UK studies (see Jary and Parker, 1999, for a review). However, differences were evident concerning the issue of deskilling. Several academicians, reflecting on the student recruitment and placement activities initiated by the Dean, remarked that these activities changed the skills needed to be successful as an academic worker—one must now be able to 'put on a show' for prospective students and business managers in order to market the college to students, and students to employers. Thus, contrary to the findings of much of the UK-based research, I saw evidence of 'new skilling', not just deskilling.

Concerning the influence of global, local, and national institutional influences on academic work: first, some of the institutional forces identified in UK research were in evidence here. A decline in the available student population, government budget cuts, and the influence of important constituencies all played a role in the actions of the faculty and college in transforming the labor process. However, in this study, the institutional pressures for change came as much from private-sector and 'independent' organizations (employers and the AACSB) as it did from governmental bodies. This suggests that critical theorists need to expand their analyses of influences to institutional factors beyond the realm of the state when studying the labor process of public-sector academicians (e.g. Edwards and Miller, 1999).

Also, I found that inter-collegiate competition was driving many of these changes. Whereas the British university system is characterized by traditional 'turf boundaries' that give each university an informal but recognized territory from which to draw students (Scott, 1999), the US situation is becoming more competitive (Sacks, 1996). The opening of the new Community College was clearly perceived by administrators as a threat to enrollment. Furthermore, the use of video-satellite teaching has made it easier for universities to invade each other's territories by offering televised courses. Even as the Dean was commenting on the threat the college faced from one university in the northern part of the state that was planning to offer televised courses in her area, she was initiating plans to do the same, and was also initiating an invasion into a major metropolitan area in the southern part of the state. She also pointed to the recent establishment of a University of Phoenix branch in the southern city as another challenge facing the college. These trends point to the likelihood of ever-increasing competition among colleges for students.



Speaking Out . . . But What Should Be Said?

During the 1990s, researchers were able to document the changing nature of academic work. While some nuances remain unexplored, enough evidence is in to pose the question: so what is to be done? Should academicians embrace these changes or resist them? For me, these were the most important questions raised at the 'Re-Organizing Knowledge/Transforming Institutions' conference. I'll address these questions by using the heuristic of distinguishing between theory and action, because I think that, by understanding them separately, we can move towards an effective praxis.

Concerning action, in my view we need to properly frame the political dimension of the problem before we can know what action to take. In most accounts, the political issue associated with the changing nature of academic work, and of the university-as-institution, is framed in terms of conservatives versus progressives; between conservative academicians who champion the McDonaldization of academe, and various progressive groups who are alarmed and call for 'resistance' (i.e. Miller and colleague's influential stream of research—Edwards & Miller, 1999; Miller, 1996, and Edwards, 1999). But this distinction oversimplifies matters. Conservatives who cheer the transformation of academia when it becomes marketized are highly critical when it involves revising the Humanities canon to include the work of women, minorities, and Third-World thinkers; or when diversity initiatives result in the inclusion of women and minorities as students and academicians. Progressives, of course, have opposite reactions. On different issues, therefore, progressives and conservatives find themselves both championing and resisting changes in academe.

It is naive to assume that these seemingly contradictory forms of change are fundamentally distinct. Marketization and the empowerment of marginalized peoples have increased concurrently. Is this just a coincidence? Perhaps not. The introduction of market-oriented 'objective' standards into academic life has caused psychic pain to academicians used to the power and privilege of 'traditional' academe, but has also reduced the influence of informal barriers to participation by people(s) who were/are marginalized by that tradition. If progressive academicians are going to resist these changes, we must first understand what both the costs and benefits of marketization are. We currently have no political calculus for doing so.

Parker and Courtney (1999) are more decisive than I am. They argue that too much attention has been devoted to arguing these issues, and the reason for this is that it's our own ox that's being gored. It is we, academicians, who are directly experiencing change, so it all seems very important and worthy of study. They suggest that academicians have selfishly prioritized our interests over those of taxpayers, students, and



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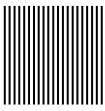
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other university employees (e.g. Game, 1994) who may benefit from the changes we find onerous.

However, one facet of the discussion that Parker and Courtney neglect is whether 'our' interests as academicians actually conflict with the interests of societal stakeholders. The academic community has made progress in documenting that the experience of academic work, and the structure and status of universities as institutions, have undergone significant changes. Again, what hasn't been accomplished is determining whether these changes have had, on balance, positive or negative consequences for stakeholders like students, employers, and taxpayers. Until this question is answered, it's premature to talk about a conflict of interests. It's also premature to endorse, or resist, efforts to endorse or resist these transformations. Thus, I think that an unexpected implication of Parker and Courtney's critique is the need for more, not less, research in this area.

Since a core aspect of the debate relates to the 'best' way to create and disseminate knowledge, theoretical work should proceed hand-in-hand with political activity. Recently, we have seen contributions from Foucauldian theorists (i.e. Jones, 2000) arguing for the reconceptualization of academicians as 'specific intellectuals'—knowledge workers who simultaneously abandon a claim to know 'general truths' about society as a whole yet utilize our grounding in specific, local discourses to bring about progressive change. They argue that, although academicians must eschew the 'grand theorizing' of the past, we are ideally situated to understand and alter the discourse of the academy, and, by inference, all societal sectors influenced by it. Conversely, we've also heard from Marxian-influenced theorists (e.g. Jacques, 2000) about developing a 'knowledge theory of value' to understand the academy's role in knowledge creation/dissemination in the information age. This would entail praxis at the 'grandest' level—a theory describing how knowledge contributes to value in every institution of every society, and a mass political movement to steer it in a progressive direction.

In my view, resolving the theoretical issues related to academic work requires coming to terms with some insights offered by Ritzer's (1996) McDonaldization thesis. Although I have disagreements with some of Ritzer's propositions—I think that the conclusion that hyper-rationalization is the inevitable fate of social institutions is too pessimistic—I agree with the call for both grand theorizing *and* local action. Because, in my view, postmodernist accounts that reject the viability of society-level theorizing must necessarily reject the notion that there are in fact institutions, like capitalism, that span society. I can't see how one can acknowledge societal institutions, yet claim that it is impossible to develop theories to describe them. So, I think the best way to develop knowledge that we academicians can use to develop our political practices is by engaging in theorizing at the level of the social developments we are trying to comprehend. The evidence from the



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studies reviewed here suggests that the transformation of academic work and the university-as-institution is a global, societies-wide phenomenon.

However, at this point, I am also more comfortable with local political action than mass-scale politics. I don't have the 'answers' yet, so I don't know what coalitions to join. Therefore, my 'political' strategy will be to continue to make these issues a focal point of my own work, and interact with those in the intellectual community who have similar concerns. The 'Re-Organizing Knowledge/Transforming Institutions' conference was a great way to do both. I look forward to keeping the conversation going with all of you.

Notes

- 1 The details of the study methodology are available upon request.
- 2 Obviously, the UK results come from a broad range of universities, whereas my study represents an 'N = 1', so I've tried to be cautious in my comparisons.

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