

Winter 2021
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FIMS 9620
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UNIVERSITY OF WESTERN ONTARIO
Faculty of Information and Media Studies

The Politics of Labour in the Knowledge Economy

Overview of course

This course seeks to study the politics of labour within the context of neoliberal networked capitalism. It takes a critical historical approach, seeking to situate labour – both organized and unorganized – within the context of capitalism’s ongoing deployment of technology to enhance the circuit of production, distribution and exchange of commodities. It seeks to answer the following questions: How do we understand labour in relation to capital? In what ways has the development of new technology affected the relations of power between employers and labour? What normative discourses are used to legitimate the use of new technologies in the accumulation process? What are their effects? Attention will be given to the strategies used by labour to assert independence from capital. Special focus will be given to understanding the unstable labour market in the wake of the 2008 financial collapse. There is a growing body of literature arguing the hegemony of neoliberal discourse has come to an end, and that current labour struggles are occurring in what political theorist Antonio Gramsci called the “interregnum” – a moment in which the consensus of dominant social factions no longer holds sway. Course readings will explore this thesis alongside actual examples of union mobilization.

Evaluation

TBD

Required Readings:

Copies on hold in GRC

PART I: HISTORY AND THEORY OF THE KNOWLEDGE WORKERS

Wk 1 Course Introduction

Jan. 06

Readings: None

Wk 2 Labour & Freedom

Jan. 13

Readings: Marx, Karl (1844) “Alienated Labour,” in *Karl Marx: Early writings*, 120-134

Cohen, Gerald A. (1988) “The Dialectic of Labour in Marx,” in *History, Labour, and Freedom: Themes from Marx*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, pp. 183-208.

Giddens, Anthony (1971) “Social Differentiation and the Division of Labour,” in *Capitalism & Modern Social Theory*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 224-242.

Recommended:

Marx, Karl (1844) "Wages of Labour," in *Karl Marx: Early writings*, 69-84

Marx, Karl (1844) "Private Property and Labour," in *Karl Marx: Early writings*, 147-151.

Wk 3 **Theories of Labour in the Knowledge Economy**
Jan. 20

Readings: Bell, Daniel (1973) "The Coming of Post-Industrial Society," *Business and Society Review/Innovation*, Spring 73, Issue 5, pp. 5-23.

Mosco, Vincent and Catherine McKercher (2008) *The Labouring of Communication: Will Knowledge Workers of the World Unite?* Lanham: Lexington Books. Chap.1-2

Recommended:

Webster, Frank (2002) *Theories of the Information Society*, Chap. 4, London: Routledge, pp. 38-67.

Castells, Immanuel (1996) *The Rise of the Network Society*, "Conclusion: the Network Society," 501-509.

Wk 4 **Technology, Hegemony & Common Sense**
Jan. 27

Readings: Fisher, Eran (2010) *Media and New Capitalism in the Digital Age: The Spirit of Networks*, New York: Palgrave MacMillan, Chap. 1-2.

Fraser, Nancy (2019) *The Old is Dying and the New Cannot Be Born*, London: Verso pp. 7-40.

Recommended:

Anderson, Perry, (1976) "Antinomies of Gramsci," *New Left Review*, Nov/Dec. pp. 5-33; 44-48.

Wk 5 **Knowledge Workers, Circuits and Struggles**
Feb. 03

Readings: Dyer-Witheford, Nick (2015) *Cyber-Proletariat: Global Labour in the Digital Vortex*, London: Pluto Press, Chap. 1-5.

Huws, Ursula (2014) *Labour in the Global Digital Economy*, New York: Monthly Review Press, Chap. 5 "Expression and Expropriation: The Dialectics of Autonomy and Control in Creative Labour," pp. 101-125.

Recommended:

Mosco, Vincent and Catherine McKercher (2008) *The Labouring of Communication: Will Knowledge Workers of the World Unite?* Lanham: Lexington Books. Chap. 4

Wk 6 **Knowledge Workers, Feminism and Political Economy**
Feb. 10

Readings: Mosco, Vincent and Catherine McKercher (2008) *The Labouring of Communication: Will Knowledge Workers of the World Unite?* Lanham: Lexington Books. Chap. 3

Arruzza, Cinzia, Tithi Bhattacharya and Nancy Fraser (2019) *Feminism for the 99 Percent: A Manifesto*, London: Verso.

Huws, Ursula (2019) "Social Reproduction in Twenty-First Century Capitalism," in *Socialist Register 2020: Beyond Market Dystopia: New ways of living*, London: Merlin Press, pp. 161-181.

Recommended:

Huws, Ursula (2003) "Material World: The Myth of the Weightless Economy," *The Making of a Cybertariat: Virtual work in a real world*, London: Monthly Review, 126-151.

PART II: Knowledge Workers & Institutional Change

Wk 7 **Family Day Holiday/Reading Week – No Class**
Feb. 17

Readings:

Wk 8 **Networked Labour, Neoliberalism and Freedom**
Feb. 27

Readings: Fisher, Eran (2010) *Media and New Capitalism in the Digital Age: The Spirit of Networks*, New York: Palgrave MacMillan, Chap. 3-5.

Roberts, John Michael (2014) *New Media and Public Activism: Neoliberalism the State and Radical Protest in the Public Sphere*, Chap. 2 "Creative Digital Capitalism? Exploitation, Information and Finance," Bristol: Polity Press.

Recommended:

Terranova, Tiziana (2013) "Free Labor," in Trebor Scholz ed. *Digital Labour: The Internet as Playground and Factory*, New York: Routledge. Pp. 33-57.

Wk 9 Organizing Knowledge Workers – How To?

Mar. 09

Readings: Smucker, Jonathan Matthew (2017) *Hegemony How-To: A roadmap for radicals*, Chico, CA: AK Press. Chap. 5, 7, 8.

Scholz, Trebor (2017) "The Rise of Platform Cooperativism," *Uberworked and Underpaid: How Workers are Disrupting the Digital Economy*, Cambridge: Polity Press, pp. 155-192.

Recommended:

Wirsig, Karen and James Compton (2017) "Workers, Contradictions and Digital Commodity Chains: Organizing with Content Creators in Canada," in Meil, Pamela and Vassil Kirov eds. *Policy Implications of Virtual Work*, Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave MacMillan.

Wk 10 Social Movements, Labour & Struggle

Mar. 16

Readings: Mosco, Vincent and Catherine McKercher (2008) *The Labouring of Communication: Will Knowledge Workers of the World Unite?* Lanham: Lexington Books. Chap. 6

Dyer-Witheford, Nick (2015) *Cyber-Proletariat: Global Labour in the Digital Vortex*, London: Pluto Press, Chap. 7-8.

Recommended:

Bennett, W. Lance (2012) "The Personalization of Politics: Political Identity, Social Media, and Changing Patterns of Participation," *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 644 (1), pp. 20-39.

Wk 11 Current Struggles – Teachers & Journalists

Mar. 23

Readings: Blanc, Eric (2019) *The Red State Revolt: The Teachers' Strike Wave and Working-Class Politics*, Brooklyn, NY: Verso, Chap. 3 "The Militant Minority."

Comor, Edward and James Compton, (2015) “Journalistic Labour and Technological Fetishism,” *The Political Economy of Communication*, 3(2), 74-87.

New York Times Innovation Report, March 24, 2014

Masters, Marick F. and Raymond F. Gibney (2019) “The Tactics Media Unions Are Using to Build Membership,” *Harvard Business Review*, January 29, 2019.
<https://hbr.org/2019/01/the-tactics-media-unions-are-using-to-build-membership>

IMPORTANT

Some Notes and Advice

- (1) Your assignments must be submitted on time. **Late assignments will not be accepted without documented medical, legal or similar reason.** So please take careful note of the relevant deadlines. It is not enough just to present a note saying that you visited a doctor or clinic. Late assignments without documented excuses will lose 2% of the assignment mark per day late, and will not be accepted more than one week late.
- (2) As a protection against misplacement of term papers, or should problems of authorship and acknowledgement arise, you are strongly advised to ***retain your research notes and an extra copy (or computer file) of your assignments*** until final grades have been submitted.
- (4) **Plagiarism:** Students must write their essays and assignments in their own words. Whenever students take an idea, or a passage from another author, they must acknowledge their debt both by using quotation marks where appropriate and by proper referencing such as footnotes or citations. Plagiarism is a major academic offence (see Scholastic Offence Policy in the Western Academic Calendar). The University of Western Ontario uses software for plagiarism checking. Students may be required to submit their written work in electronic form for plagiarism checking. Ignorance will not be accepted as an excuse.
- (5) In addition, even if they may not strictly constitute intellectual dishonesty, **unethical research procedures** (eg. violating the confidentiality of interviews, or stealing or defacing library material) **could adversely affect your mark.** See the instructor if you are at all in doubt.
- (6) Your formal **written assignments should each be typed** or word-processed, double-spaced, using acceptable academic style for footnotes and bibliography.
- (7) The FIMS expects that the grades awarded in this course will bear some reasonable relation to established university-wide practices with respect to both levels and distribution of grades.
- (8) **Email:** I am more than happy to discuss the course readings and lectures with you during my office hours. But I will not respond to questions about course material via email. Email is not a useful pedagogical tool. Please come and talk with me.
- (9) **Laptops & Cell phones:** The use of electronic wireless devices in the classroom is severely frowned upon. Web surfing and phone calls are disruptive and disrespectful of your fellow students who wish to learn.

(10) Finally, the success of the course will depend, in no small part, on the ability of students to complete the required readings for each week. The theoretical nature of much of the material means it will be *extremely difficult* to play catch-up if students skip readings. Consider yourself warned.