Begging and bragging: the self and the commodification of intellectual activity

Inaugural professorial lecture by Ursula Huws, Professor of International Labour Studies, Working Lives Research Institute, London Metropolitan University, 7th June, 2006 at the Graduate Centre, London Metropolitan University

There are always risks involved in giving a lecture like this. There is a risk that, in assembling such a broad range of people from so many different parts of one's life one ends up, in the attempt to interest and please everyone, boring or annoying the entire audience. There are the twin risks of under or over preparing: the first leading to drying up; the latter to the woodenness of delivery that comes from remembering (or, worse, reading) words having almost forgotten the meaning they were originally intended to convey. And of course there is the general occupational risk that every writer, teacher, preacher and politician takes, of simply making a prat of oneself.

Being more of a fool than an angel, I have managed to add several further risks to these. I have chosen a title that, even allowing for the vogueishness of self-referentiality, offers a hostage to fortune. The very act of giving this lecture, of course, exposes me very directly to the risk of being accused of bragging, if not begging. More seriously, I have taken the much bigger risk of venturing into territory which, for me, at least, is rather poorly charted. It would have been much safer to have picked a topic about which I have written and spoken many times before: a topic where every crack in the masonry is familiar and it is possible to predict which arguments will surprise and which will reinforce an audience's expectations and ensure that every assertion is suitably defended against the usual run of counter-arguments. But, as John Berger once said, 'the first time you say something, you're discovering a truth; the second time you say it, it's a little less true'. So I have chosen instead to present something that is very much work in progress. It draws on a number of different strands in my work over the last thirty years or so, but these are so disparate that I am not at all sure they can be knitted together very coherently. I suspect that the fabric has some knots in it, as well as holes. But at least that gives you something to pick at, or stick your fingers through.

The strands that make it up come from my life as well as my reading. They include the experiences of trying to function with a reasonable degree of integrity and autonomy in most of the places intellectuals have earned their livings in Britain over the last forty years or so: in publishing, in television, in the voluntary sector, in quangos, in local government, in universities and private research institutes, as an employee, as an employer and as a freelance. The mental activity involved has carried a similarly disparate range of occupational designations: editor, writer, journalist, artist, researcher, picture researcher, project officer, director, consultant, reviewer, evaluator, independent expert, manager, lecturer … and now professor. But across all these occupational groups and in all these settings I have seen similar developments, many of which sit in tension if not contradiction with each other: increasing intensification of work, standardisation of processes, the introduction of performance indicators and targets, short-term contracts, project-based work, lengthening of working hours, and stress. During this same period there has been a great deal of

rhetoric about removing the rigidities of the Fordist era and creating more individualised and flexible working conditions. We have been told by Richard Florida that we are witnessing the rise of a 'creative class'[1], and by innumerable policymakers that we are entering a knowledge-based society where we can all become 'digital nomads'[2] or 'symbolic analysts'[3] or even 'portfolio men'[4]. Yet everywhere I look what I see is more, not less bureaucratisation and less, not more autonomy.

The idea of slowly building a career and reputation on past achievements seems to be crumbling. Your credentials have to be proved anew every time you pass 'Go'. Whether you want to get a job or a pay rise or a research contract, whether you want to publish a book, obtain sponsorship for a film or funding for a conference, the first thing you have to do is fill in an application form. This involves an extraordinary act of mental contortion. First you have to understand the logic of the form designer, then you have to critically analyse your own nuanced and contradictory life and self and reduce its complexity to something that can be squeezed into the steely categories this logic has constructed. The more creative people are, the more interdisciplinary their methodology, the wider their knowledge, the more broad-ranging their experience, the less likely they are to fit the preconceptions of the bureaucrats who designed the forms. A really original idea will, by definition, be something that nobody has yet thought of, so the chances of finding a ready-made category for it in a call for proposals is vanishingly unlikely. Similarly, if someone has made a really big theoretical breakthrough linking two previously quite disparate bodies of thought then their chances of finding a home for it in a peer-reviewed journal will be much less than those of someone who is following a well-trodden track within a recognised discipline (or, these days, more probably a sub-sub-discipline). Even more frustrating is the position of someone who wants to do something exploratory – following a train of thought without being sure where it will lead. How can they possibly get started in a system where you are increasingly required to specify in advance what it is that you will produce (usually broken down into 'workpackages' with specified 'milestones', 'deliverables', 'outcomes' or 'verifiable measures'). Trying to explain in advance why an innovation might emerge from a particular process is as tortuous and self-defeating as convincing a committee that an as yet untold joke might be funny.

How has this state of affairs come about? How is it that anyone who wants to receive any income whatsoever for doing something with their mind has to spend a working life jumping through these bureaucratic hoops? It is not just a question of the tedium and frustration of remembering innumerable passwords and pin numbers, retrieving innumerable reference numbers, keeping records of the time and place and duration and monetary value of every activity, however trivial, to be re-entered repeatedly in ever-so-slightly different formats into those forms. Something much deeper and more damaging is taking place: we are being forced, over and over again, to go through a dual process which I have called begging and bragging. Even the lucky few in permanent jobs can't escape it. Look, for instance, at the Research Assessment

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[1] Richard Florida (2002), *The Rise of the Creative Class and how it is Transforming Work, Leisure, Community and Everyday Life,* Basic Books, New York

[2] Tsugio Makimoto and David Manners (1997) *Digital Nomad*, John Wiley, Chichester

[3] Robert B. Reich (1991), *The Work of Nations,* Vintage Books, New York

[4] Charles Handy (1989) *The Age of Unreason,* Hutchinson, London

Exercise currently going on in universities. Even – or perhaps I should say especially – the most senior professors are regularly required to select their best publications (by whose standards?), list the conferences they have spoken at and the grants they have brought in and brag about the 'esteem' in which they are held. Being told that this esteem is actually rather low is no doubt a minor humiliation compared with the psychic damage that results from being rejected outright for a job, or having one's research application turned down but there is a cumulative battering of the ego that cannot be good for anyone's self-esteem even for those who (by definition a minority) emerge from the process as winners most of the time. The harm doesn't just come from the inordinate amount of time that is wasted or the external rebuffs; for many people there is also pain, or at least discomfort, that arises from within: from the forced over-riding of the ethical codes with which they were brought up. 'Modesty is a virtue', 'don't show off', 'nice girls don't flaunt it', 'don't blow your own trumpet', 'the empty vessel makes most noise', 'the meek shall inherit the earth' or similar phrases told most of us in childhood that bragging is not what a well-brought up person does. Similar injunctions, at least in countries with a protestant tradition, tell us that begging is demeaning and bad for the character: 'stand on your own two feet', 'neither a borrower nor a lender be', 'don't spend what you haven't got'; whilst 'beggars can't be choosers' makes it pretty clear that in entering a relationship with a funder or boss as a supplicant one is saying goodbye to any notion of a dialogue between equals.

It is my contention that the need to repeatedly take part in those peculiar rituals of boasting and supplication that are embodied in the processes of applying for jobs, grants and commissions do violence to the personal values of those who subscribe, consciously or unconsciously to ethical codes grounded in notions of honour, comradeship, self-respect or the teachings of the great world religions. Responses from the morally sensitive range from a mild discomfort at having done something one's grandmother wouldn't have approved of to a strong sense of shame or disgrace, tantamount to sin. But, I would argue, they also inflict terrible damage even on those who have no such scruples and lack even utilitarian ethical codes. And they do this by exposing just about everyone to repeated experiences of rejection. If we postulate, for the sake of argument, that twenty people on average apply for every job and four are shortlisted, then nineteen of those people, having been forced to go through the process of saying how wonderful they are told 'well, actually, no you're not wonderful at all' and a further three have had to endure the ritualised humiliation of a job interview needlessly.

In the past, such repeated rejection was only experienced by a relatively small minority of the population (for instance day labourers). Most people, at least most men, had continuous work that reinforced their sense of themselves and their own value, although of course this was not without its petty humiliations. Now it is the dominant experience we must ask ourselves what sort of a society it is producing. What kind of armour plating do we require to survive this repeated battering of our self-esteem? Are we producing people who cannot express vulnerability or empathy and never dare admit that they are wrong? And what kinds of relationships can such people enjoy?

Reflection on such work experiences and puzzling over their causes is, then, the first strand in this lecture. A second strand also derives from personal experience but here it is my experience of unpaid work over the years as a campaigner and activist in trade unions, women's organisations and community organisations. And it is here,

ironically enough, that with hindsight we can see that some of the bars of this particular iron cage[5] were forged. I say ironically because, for many of the generation that came to adulthood in the 1960s, the strongest impulse behind the involvement in radical social movements was the desire for liberation from rigid and oppressive rule systems. It is of course dangerous to extrapolate too broadly from one's own experiences to those of an entire generation and I would not wish to claim too much authority for my own memories. However there was one institution of the 1970s – more or less unique to that period - that does give some justification for generalising at least to a subset of that generation and that is the women's group. Of course not all women defined themselves as feminists at the time, and not all of those who identified themselves as part of the women's liberation movement joined women's groups. Yet quite a few did, and because those who did were also those most likely to be actively involved in campaigns for equality of opportunity, women's groups deserve some special attention as sites for the exploration of the contradictions that arose between the conflicting desires for individual expression and for solidarity, for autonomy and for fairness and, in a kind of dress rehearsal for the broader policy debates of the 1980s and 1990s, between the desires for security and stability on the one hand and adaptability and flexibility on the other.

Between 1972 and about 1987 (the last two faded out gradually so it was difficult to date their final demise) I was a member of several women's groups, in London and in Yorkshire, which spanned an often overlapping range including consciousness raising groups, personal support groups, study groups, caucus groups, solidarity groups and campaigning groups. None documented their work systematically but enough of the members participated in the great outpourings of feminist writing of the period to make it possible to access their thoughts at the time without the distorting lens of individual hindsight. From these writings, and those of our contemporaries, it is clear that the name 'Women's Liberation Movement' was adopted at least in part because it resonated so well with a dominant preoccupation as the 1970s dawned. This was a generation in full revolt against the staid social rigidities of the 1950s, when cloth-capped manual workers and their pinafored wives knew their place – below that of the bowler-hatted men and white-gloved ladies of the middle classes - when a child's place was in a uniform behind a school desk, a young man's place was in the army and a woman's place was in the home. The image of the prison was frequently used to describe social institutions, including the family, as in Lee Comer's 'wedlocked women'[6]. As Liz Heron pointed out[7], these young women were the first products of the post-war welfare state with its free secondary education and low rates of unemployment, and had grown up witnessing the end of British colonialism. Their lives, compared with those of their parents, really did seem to be materially easier and there was little reason for them to doubt that progress would continue to deliver plenty and inequalities would wither away (although the first encounter with the realities of the labour market often delivered a nasty shock to these expectations). Asked what they wanted, many would have replied simply, 'Freedom'; freedom to wear what they wanted, to have sex where, when and with

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[5] Max Weber, *The Puritan Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism,* quoted in Sam Whimster (2004) *The Essential Weber,* Routledge, London

[6] Lee Comer (1974), *Wedlocked Women,* Feminist Books, Leeds,

[7] Liz Heron (1985), *Truth, Dare or Promise: Girls Growing up in the Fifties,* Virago Press, London

whom they wanted and to express themselves how they wanted. Insofar as they shared these libertarian values, they can be seen as part of the same movement that gave us hippies, a movement that was anti-bureaucratic in the extreme. However this was only part of the story. The first anthology of papers from the British women's movement, *Conditions of Illusion*[8], whose title refers to Marx[9], had, by 1974, already dropped the word 'liberation' from its subtitle and, along with the articles about 'vaginal politics', psychiatry, sexuality, abortion, violence, child-rearing, marriage, the family, sex-role conditioning and art, included a number of descriptions of campaigns, charters, manifestos calling for equality in the workplace and an end to discrimination.

Here, manifest right from the infancy of its second wave, is an illustration of the central contradiction of feminism: that it tends to give rise to precisely those characteristics which it initially sprang up to oppose: the collapsing of half the human race into a single, undifferentiated category labelled 'women'. The impetus for liberation sprang, for many, from an insistence that women as autonomous subjects, have as much right to express their own unique views, to shape their own destinies and leave their own distinctive footprint on the world, as any man. Underlying much early feminist writing one can detect a great yearning to speak for oneself, not as a representative of any abstraction of sex, race or class, but simply as a unique and individual voice which will be listened to with respect. It is essentially the same dream as that expressed in his famous Washington speech by Martin Luther King for his four children, that they will be judged 'not by the colour of their skin but by the strength of their character'. Yet in the search for the expression of this individuality, women came up, again and again, often at first with a terrible shock, against the hypocrisy of the ideas of democracy and equality they had been brought up to believe in, against forms of discrimination and stereotyping which were not just damaging economically but wounding to the psyche. The girl who had worked hard at school to excel in her exams and then found that it was her brother, with much poorer results, who was sent by the family to college; the student who thought her professor was interested in what she had written and discovered too late that he only wanted to get her into bed; the production-line worker who realised she would never be promoted to supervisor however hard she worked: all experienced the same reaction: it's so *unfair*. And, in struggling to make sense of this individual injury, at least some of these women were led to make generalisations: to see that they were prevented from fulfilling themselves in the way that they wanted *because* they were women (or, in some cases, *because* of their religion, class, ethnicity, colour, disability or some other variable). From this, it followed that they had a collective interest with others who shared the same characteristic, and from this realisation, in turn, followed forms of organising which were based on these shared identities. In this process, slowly but surely, the collective identity took precedence over the individual one. But not without a struggle: there was always a tension between the values of solidarity, co-operation, knowledge-sharing and collective struggle and those of individualism, competition and the desire for personal recognition and attempting to resolve this tension presented huge challenges for individual behaviour.

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[8] Sandra Allen, Lee Sanders and Jan Wallis (eds) (1974), *Conditions of Illusion: Papers from the Women's Movement,* Feminist Books, Leeds

[9] Karl Marx's words 'the call to abandon their illusions about their conditions is a call to abandon a condition which requires illusions' are quoted on the title page.

It is difficult to demand of anyone that they make personal sacrifices for a collective cause and it seems likely that the limits of the appeal of feminism for many women can be found in this contradiction. A movement which bases itself intellectually on a rejection of the conventions that dictate how a woman should be a chaste daughter, a dutiful wife, a compliant worker or a good mother must have something better to offer than an alternative set of 'oughts'; it is not good enough to replace rule by patriarchy with rule by guilt-trip. This, perhaps, partly explains the demise of the women's movement *as* a 'movement' explicitly aiming for personal liberation, although of course this demise must also be linked with the general defeat of working class and other emancipatory movements during the Thatcher years.

What concerns me now is the legacy it left behind. To the extent that it was successful, the women's movement, along with other campaigns of the 1970s for justice and equality both within and without the labour movement, contributed to the development of a wide range of action plans, equal opportunities policies and procedures designed to avoid discrimination, many of which are still extant. Like other regulations and formal rules of fairness, these procedures are a bit like the barbed wire and earthworks that mark the front line in trench warfare. Whilst the war is actively being fought, they show how far one side has managed to advance, and the extent to which the other has resisted, just as the labour legislation in a given state demarcates the state of play between capital and organised labour the last time they clashed. If the war is no longer actively being fought, however, these procedures may be experienced as an irritating hazard in the landscape; something that has to be stepped around and impedes personal progress. There are of course many workplaces, especially in the public sector, where the troops are still on the ground, in good spirits, still pushing the front line forward, or actively resisting its pushing back. In others, though, it seems possible that these hard-won rules of fairness have become so embedded in the normal bureaucratic procedures that many people are not even sure why they are there beyond a general sense that 'they are for your own protection' (rather like the passwords and pins that we now have to remember to get access to just about any service whether it is the use of our own bank accounts or of our own computers or telephones).

Bureaucratic rules are usually seen as taking their forms primarily from top-down pressures to rationalise and make efficient. It is of course a commonplace of sociology that such pressures do not go unresisted and that institutions are shaped by the agency of those who inhabit and use them as well as by structural forces. But to my knowledge nobody has ever systematically studied the role of bottom-up pressure for rules of fairness in the formation of bureaucratic structures. I mention this now partly to avoid the accusation of adopting an overly structuralist approach in the next part of this lecture and partly to draw attention to the ways in which these structures do not take a single inevitable form but are capable of being reshaped in a variety of different ways if the political will is there to do so.

Having touched on the things I have observed in my employment history and through my involvement in various campaigns, I would now like to move on to some of the actual research and writing I have done. This too is rather diverse and does not follow a simply trajectory. It can be grouped very broadly into three categories: first, theoretical work mostly undertaken as a spare time activity outside the scope of any academic employment or research funding; second, empirical research, mostly focused in some way on the restructuring of work and carried out within the framework of formal research and consultancy contracts; and finally some more

reflexive work on research methods, ethics and practice, some of it developed through my teaching here at this university during the early 1990s and some more recently through the RESPECT project[10] and participation in various evaluation and ethical panels. These activities have of course cross-fertilised each other but I cannot claim to have linked them into a single coherent whole. Nevertheless, each of them has yielded some insights into my topic so I am going to try now to make a first stab at bringing them together.

First, the theoretical work. One of the most important concepts in the development of my thinking has been that of commodification as an engine of economic, technological and (in consequence of these) social change. By commodification I mean the tendency in capitalist economies to transform ever more activities into products or services that can be delivered in multiple standardised versions, thus enabling profits to grow in proportion to the volume of sales. The search for new activities to commodify is not the only driver of capitalist expansion. It is interlinked in complex ways with the need for expansion for other purposes: to find new markets, to find new sources of cheap labour, to find new sites of capital accumulation and to find sites for the exploitation of natural resources as well as places to dump the waste resulting from all this destructive economic activity. I will concentrate here, though, on the commodification imperative. This expansion does not only take the form of spatial extension into relatively underdeveloped parts of the world (although this is nevertheless important). It also entails the extension of market relations into areas of life that have previously been outside them. This can be conceived as a transformation of use values into exchange values. When I first started thinking about this, sometime in the late 1970s[11], the sort of use values I mainly had in mind were those produced by unpaid labour in the home. This sort of commodification is still important. For evidence of this one only has to look at the continuing growth of the markets for convenience foods, domestic appliances or do-it-yourself products. However in the current, neo-liberal, phase of capitalist expansion, another form of use value has also become a very attractive field for the development of new commodities. This is the public sector, where a range of activities, including education, health and social care are currently being commodified.

Although it is often associated with privatisation, this form of commodification does not necessarily involve a change of formal ownership. It nevertheless brings about enormous changes in the nature of the work, in how work is managed and in the relationship between workers and the users of their services (increasingly likely to be referred to as 'customers'). Using principles of 'scientific management' fundamentally unaltered since they were developed in the 19th century by the likes of Babbage and Taylor, work processes are analysed and broken down into standardised units. Once these standardised units have been defined, performance indicators can be identified and standard protocols or quality control procedures introduced. These standardisation processes make it possible to use information and communication technologies more extensively, for instance by introducing standard reporting

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[10] This was a project funded by the European Commission to develop ethical and professional guidelines for social research, concluded in 2004. See www.respectproject.org for more information.

[11] The first time I wrote about this was in a paper for the Conference of Socialist Economics Microprocessors Group, written in 1978 and entitled 'New Technology and Domestic Labour', since published in Ursula Huws (2003), *The Making of a Cybertariat: virtual work in a real world'*, Monthly Review Press, New York, pp 24-34

procedures which make it possible to compare performance over time or between different locations, by making it possible to pool knowledge in common databases or 'knowledge banks' and by making it possible to overcome the limits of space and time. In a mutually reinforcing process, the use of these technologies encourages further standardisation, which in turn makes more intensive use of the technology possible. With each stage in this development, the nature of the activities becomes more generic.

Once processes have been standardised (or 'modularised'), it becomes possible for the units to be reconfigured in different permutations and combinations. They can be decentralised to scattered locations or they can be concentrated into centralised ones. They can continue to be carried out in-house or they can be outsourced or delivered through some partnership arrangement. Administrative tasks that used to be carried out in one central department may be broken up into small separate sub-tasks, each with its own targets, each of which could be the subject of a separate specification and a separate call for tender. Each of these could be carried out by a separate entity, but it could be (and increasingly, is) the same giant multinational company that ends up winning the majority of these contracts which can then be reintegrated in a new configuration, with the work spread across a global network of back offices. This explains the apparent paradox that both fragmentation and consolidation processes can be at work simultaneously.

This is not the place to try to map the full scope of this restructuring (although this is addressed in some of my past and current research). What I would like to concentrate on here is the impact on what might be called mental labour, or intellectual activity. At the simplest level, it can be postulated that if commodification is the engine, then intellectual labour is the spark that fires it. Without human ingenuity and co-operation none of the processes I have just described could take place. However the story is much more complicated than that. Intellectual labour is not only crucially important for the further development of commodification; it is also itself subject to commodification processes and hence to the discipline of the market.

In order to understand what is happening to intellectual labour it is necessary to take a broader look at the technical division of labour across the economy and the way in which it is constantly being restructured through the combined impact of technological change, standardisation and 'scientific management' processes. This changing division of labour has to be understood as a contradictory phenomenon. The commodification process drives a continuous process of restructuring which always has a double edge. Each innovation simultaneously requires a new cohort of creative 'knowledge workers' who, in the very process of developing new innovations, bring about, albeit indirectly, the routinisation of the work of others. 'Upskilling' therefore goes hand in hand with 'downskilling' and new forms of specialisation accompany the development of increasingly generic activities. Arguments about whether the development of an ever more technologically complex capitalism results in deskilling or reskilling are therefore beside the point. Skill does not just have a double-edged character for labour; it has an equally ambiguous meaning for employers. The innovation process which forms the necessary motor of change for capitalist development is deeply contradictory in its need for skill. Before a task can be automated, it is necessary to draw on the expertise and experience of someone who knows exactly how to do it, to anatomise every step in the process and work out how it can be standardised and how a machine can be programmed, or a less skilled worker

trained to repeat these steps. Once expropriated, the knowledge and experience (or 'craft') of these workers can be dispensed with, and cheaper, less skilled workers substituted to operate the new machines or administer the new systems.

We can therefore see the pool of intellectual workers as a diverse group, whose members at any given time play different roles in the economy. There are new groups in emergence, created as a result of new divisions between 'head' and 'hands' arising from the automation and/or deskilling of traditional craft-based activities. In addition to various technical tasks, this includes people involved in the training and management of manual workers, as well as the 'customer service' workers who could be said to be involved in the training and management of the general public. Then there are people involved in the invention, design and testing of new products and processes or in customising them for new applications. There are also people whose role is connected with the governance of the system or mediation between the various different parts of it. And there are people whose work involves providing content for a wide range of products and services, and communicating with, caring for, educating, informing, distracting, and entertaining the population. Although some of these roles are strongly delineated by the need for specific professional qualifications, technical knowledge or less explicit structures of inclusion and exclusion, the boundaries between many are shifting and fluid. The very processes of change which are taking place mean that it is increasingly common for people to switch between public and private sector employment and to be required to exhibit an increasingly convergent range of 'skills', 'abilities' and 'competences' ranging from the use of standard software packages to 'being a good team-player' or possessing 'good time management skills'.

The processes of standardisation and the introduction of new management methods also contribute to some commonality of experience as many of these functions are themselves subjected to processes whereby the knowledge of the workers is expropriated and incorporated into computer programs or databases so that the tasks can be carried out by fewer, or less-skilled workers. In this category, for instance, we could include the knowledge of university lectures who are asked to convert their lectures into content for standardised eLearning courses. The transformation of tacit knowledge into codified knowledge is a crucial part of this process. The question of who this knowledge belongs to therefore becomes critical. If it is the property of individual workers, this places limits on the extent to which it can be appropriated. It is no accident that intellectual property rights are as strongly contested in the 21st century as land rights were in 18th century Scotland .

Insofar as it involves the expropriation of their knowledge and its incorporation into knowledge bases, teaching materials or cultural products, what is happening to intellectual workers now is not different *in kind* to what happened to craft weavers when their skills were incorporated into Jacquard weaving machines in the early 19th century. What is distinctly different, however, is the much broader and more diffuse nature of their occupational identities. It is, perhaps, in the nature of 'knowledge work' that the worker does not expect to be doing the same thing over and over again but expects to progress either vertically, within the same organisation or profession, or horizontally to other activities within the broader category of mental labour which is, at least numerically, continuing to expand, even though many of the workers in it may be being deskilled. It is, in other words, much harder to identify who are the winners and who the losers from change processes. Indeed, it may often be the case

that the gains and losses are so intermingled that it is hard for any individual worker to determine what the net effect has been.

Complex trade-offs are involved here: working longer hours in exchange for more autonomy in determining when you work them; shedding some administrative tasks in exchange for more travelling to meet customers; being given your own unit to manage in exchange for being moved into a different department under a less congenial manager; giving up your intellectual property rights in exchange for the chance to do more cutting-edge research; earning more in exchange for agreeing to meet certain targets; slightly reducing your teaching hours in exchange for teaching much larger classes. The impacts of these developments are contradictory and differentiated so we cannot draw large conclusions that life is necessarily getting worse across the board for all intellectual workers. At any given time, some may being upskilled whilst others are downskilled, some jobs may be becoming more creative and autonomous whilst others are being routinised. Nevertheless, there is mounting evidence of some trends that seem to be increasing across a broad range of these activities.

The first is a general intensification of work. There is a lot of evidence, for instance from various European surveys of working conditions, working time and quality of life[12] that working hours are increasing and stress levels mounting across a range of white-collar jobs. Recent studies in universities have consistently shown that academics are overworked, overextended and often on the point of burnout. One study in Canada by Janice Newson and Heather Menzies[13] looked not just at how many hours academics are working, including at home, in the evenings and weekends, but also at the demands on their time, including new reporting requirements, the shift to self-service administration as increasing numbers of tasks have migrated on line and been left to academics, the need to fund-raise for research, and the need to meet rising expectations for immediate email responses from students, administration and local and global academic colleagues. They found that not only are a sizeable number suffering from headaches, insomnia, memory lapses and other symptoms of stress, but most were also increasingly incapable of functioning as public intellectuals. When asked whether they were reading as deeply and reflectively as they used to, 64 *per cent* said no, whilst 79 *per cent* said they were not reading as much as they would like. A sizeable minority (42 *per cent*) reported that their capacity for original and creative thinking in writing or in the classroom was fading. 'I can't slow down enough to think' was a typical comment. Communication with colleagues also suffered. The authors conclude that 'there is a dangerous suggestion here that the knowledge production academics are participating in is becoming less a process of knowing that emerges from themselves in ongoing dialogue with colleagues and, increasingly instead becoming a more fragmented process centred in remote knowledge systems, with academics themselves acting more as its extensions'.

A second tendency – by no means unique to intellectual work – is for employment to become increasingly precariousness. In the private sector this is evidenced by a growth in fixed-term contracts and, in some industries, in self-employment. Even

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[12] See for instance, Arnold, Reidmann, Harald Bielenski, Teresa Szczurowska and Alexandra Wagner (2006) *Working time and worklife balance in European companies,* European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions, Dublin

[13] Janice Newson and Heather Menzies (2005) 'findings from the time, technology and academic work' study, presented at the *Gender, Work & Organization* Conference, Keele University, June 22-24

where workers have permanent jobs, they are aware that they may be threatened at any moment by a merger or takeover or some other form of corporate restructuring. The increasingly generic nature of the skills required, in combination with the use of information and communications technologies to deliver work remotely have resulted in the development of what is, in effect, a global reserve army of white-collar workers. Even if a job is not moved to India or China, the fear that it might be acts as a powerful disciplining force on labour. Another source of job insecurity is the development of new kinds of internal labour markets within large companies related to the increasing use of project work. Instead of having a permanent job, workers are, in effect, if not in name, employed on a project by project basis. When one project comes to an end, it is necessary to be picked for the next (normally on the basis of a *c.v.* posted on an internal company website). Failure to be picked can put your future with the company at risk. Neither is the public sector immune from these developments. Outsourcing can involve a shift of work to another location leading to actual redundancies, or a transfer of personnel leading to a change for those workers from a public to a private employer. In addition, of course, the public sector is itself an employer of casualised workers, whether these are agency nurses, sessional lecturers, or researchers employed on fixed-term contracts for the duration of a particular project.

A third trend is an intensification of the conflict between competition and collaboration. On the one hand, there has been an individualisation of contracts leading to a breakdown of collective structures and solidarities; on the other – and in tension with it - there is an increasing requirement for team working. The standardisation of processes I referred to earlier has produced a situation where each individual is now exposed to the highly contradictory requirement to simultaneously demonstrate both sameness and difference. On the one hand there is a need to give up autonomy and creativity and perform according to the ever more stringent standards laid down from above (defined in terms of protocols, performance targets and quality standards). The anonymous ways in which performance is measured usually mean that only that which is specified is credited. No recognition can be given for any extra value added by personal qualities that nobody thought to design indicators for into the system. On the other hand, there is an increasing need to be competitive and to stand out from the crowd. The process of form-filling I referred to in my introduction becomes an expression of this contradiction, and camaraderie, idea-sharing and mutual support may become its victims. As I said earlier, this cannot be blamed simply on structural factors. Bureaucratic processes are produced and reproduced in a complicated and dynamic interaction between demands from above for efficiency and control and demands from below for fairness and transparency. And tensions between competitiveness and collaborativeness exist wherever human beings have to share scarce resources. Nevertheless, the evidence is that these conflicts are intensifying.

A fourth tendency that is visible, especially in the public sector, is a change in the relationship between workers who provide a service and the people who receive it. When a service is provided directly to a user for what Marx would have called its 'use value' then it is possible for the worker to be motivated directly by what, in an updating of Weber's ideas, Scandinavian feminists would call 'care rationality'. Thus, teachers want their pupils to learn, nurses want their patients to be comfortable and get better, cooks want people to enjoy the food they prepare and so on. Once a process has been standardised and commodified, even if it remains under public

ownership, the logic under which the work is done is changed. Whilst there may well be a 'mission statement' declaring, for instance, that Pret a Manger is 'passionate about food' or the Odeon cinema 'fanatical about film' or even the London Metropolitan University 'committed to social justice', the reality is that what Weber would have called 'economic' or 'institutional' motivation has taken over to a greater or lesser extent from motivation which is more ethical or affective. Even if the workers still care personally about the people they serve, they are no longer able to express this freely in the way that they serve them. Their work processes are determined by the need to follow the standard protocols and meet their targets. If the work has been transferred to the private sector from the public, then the ultimate over-riding aim is to maximise profitability, even if this is moderated by intermediate demands, for instance, to meet the specifications laid down in the contract with the public sector client, or to achieve high customer satisfaction ratings or expand market share. It is one thing to wish someone a nice day because you happen to feel in a good mood and feel warm towards them; it is quite another to do it because it is in the standard script and you might be sacked if you don't.

The impacts of these four trends can be observed, to a greater or lesser extent, in many organisations, but what is their cumulative effect at a societal level? I would like to draw attention here to three general social phenomena to which I believe these processes have contributed.

The first of these is the demise of the independent intellectual. This is a phenomenon that certainly cannot be blamed only on the commodification processes I have been describing and has to be placed in a much broader historical context. Indeed, the very notion of an independent intellectual is quite recent, and specific to certain cultures and milieux. As Virginia Woolf pointed out in 1929[14], it was an identity that was largely restricted to people with an independent income and a private space and leisure in which to write – mainly men of the bourgeoisie. In the same year, Antonio Gramsci, started developing, in his prison notebooks, a much broader concept of the intellectual encompassing a range of people engaged in paid mental work and posited the idea that it would be possible for 'organic intellectuals' to emerge from the working class and develop a counter-hegemonic view of society[15]. During the next decade, there was a growth, at least in most large cities of the developed world, in what might be termed an alternative intellectual culture, often characterised as 'bohemianism', still largely bourgeois in origin but sustained economically by a variety of means including journalism, work in the nascent mass media (especially the cinema), small publishing houses, theatres and art galleries as well as more traditional means such as the patronage of the rich and employment in universities. In the United States, state funding for the arts played an important role, under Roosevelt's New Deal, as of course it did, in a very different way, in the Soviet Union.

In retrospect, it is the period following World War II that can be seen as a golden age of the independent intellectual, as it was for so many other social institutions (including full employment, the family wage and various aspects of the welfare state). In Britain, there was not only a commitment to Government funding for the arts, but

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[14] Virginia Woolf (1929) *A Room of One's Own,* Hogarth Press, London

[15] Q. Hoare and G.N. Smith (eds) 'The Intellectuals', in *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. International Publishers, New York, pp 3-23, first published as Antonio Gramsci (1949) *Gli intellettuali e l'organizzazione della cultura*, edited by F. Platone, Nuovo Universale Einaudi, Turin

there was also a commitment to expanding and democratising higher education. By the later 1960s, when my generation came to adulthood, although intellectual life was still dominated by white bourgeois men, there were a number of places where, if they were determined enough and (if they were female) educated and childless, people could survive economically whilst functioning as independent intellectuals. One of these spaces was created by the slack in the relatively generous welfare state. It was possible (just) to survive on welfare benefits especially if one was lucky enough to have one's housing subsidised. Various forms of social cadging, including squatting and hitch-hiking were also practiced. These are long gone as viable strategies. A more respectable means of survival was to work in the voluntary sector where there was still scope for radicalism, experimentation and independent thinking. This too is now gone as an option, as the voluntary sector has become professionalised, bureaucratised and turned increasingly into an arms-length extension of the state, filling the gaps created by cuts in statutory services. A third option was to work in the media, still, in that period, either mainly state-run (in the case of radio and television) or, in the case of 'serious' publishing, dominated by small or medium sized firms that could distribute their products through a network of independent bookshops. The mass media empires we see now were already there and already dominant in some sectors, including recorded music and newspapers, but it was possible still to make some sort of a living from freelance writing and reviewing for weekly journals, producing radio or television scripts, or working in Arts Council subsidised theatres or galleries. Again, this is no longer the case except for a relatively small minority skilled in the arts of begging and bragging. The income to be derived from, say, writing a review for the *New Statesman* is many times lower in terms of its buying power than it was forty years ago. How has this come about? In part it is undoubtedly an effect of the dominance of the media by a small number of very large transnational corporations with access to a global workforce for the more routine work. In my research I have, for instance, come across editorial work for academic journals being done in India, graphic design in Malaysia and animation in Vietnam. However this need to compete in a global labour market is by no means the only factor. The decline in the real income to be derived from work in the media is also linked very directly with developments in a fourth place where independent intellectuals used to flourish: the universities.

One of the effects of the introduction of standardised performance measures into higher education has been a ratcheting up of the pressure to publish. In order to gain tenure, to receive research grants, to be promoted, to earn the discretionary portion of one's salary that is linked to performance measures, or to obtain a high research rating, it is necessary to publish, publish, publish. If your offerings are rejected by the leading peer-reviewed journals in your field, start a new sub-field with some like-minded colleagues and create your own journal. If you have finished a piece of research, why condense the results into a single article when with luck you can squeeze three or four out of it? With each generation of scholars, the journals (and the sub-disciplines) multiply, and the number of published articles grows exponentially. And these are writers who write, literally, for nothing. Imagine what it is like to be a freelance writer trying to compete with them. Homeworkers sewing tee-shirts are working in a global market where the competitors are women and children in places like Indonesia paid less than a dollar a day, but at least they are earning a wage, however low. But how is it possible to compete against free labour? And with the market so flooded, how is it possible for a book even produced for love to get noticed? I have already spoken about the way in which the commodification of higher education

has reduced the time and freedom of academics to play the role of public intellectual. It has also hastened the death of independent intellectual life outside the academy, crowding out of the public space the sort of book that could still be published in the 1960s and 1970s – the intelligent non-fiction paperback written for a non-specialist lay audience, exemplified in those turquoise-covered Pelicans that used to dapple the bookshelves of anyone with any pretension to an intellectual life.

The second phenomenon I would like to discuss is the impact of these development on ethical and professional codes of behaviour. I have already mentioned the way in which we are increasingly expected to violate the injunctions 'thou shalt not beg' and 'thou shalt not brag'. There is also growing pressure to disobey the commandment 'thou shalt not steal' when it comes to one's neighbour's intellectual property. I am not just referring here to out-and-out plagiarism but to those subtler forms of theft that include stealing ideas, failing to acknowledge sources and selective citation. This is not always done out of malice. More usually it arises from a combination of pressure of time, pressure of competition and the ease with which new technologies allow one to cut and paste from existing work. But the effect is to destroy solidarity and to create an atmosphere of suspicion and secrecy that is the enemy of collegiality and, incidentally, also of good teaching. Environments are being created where it is more and more difficult to behave with generosity, modesty and integrity and it is harder and harder to build those 'intellectual collectives' that Pierre Bourdieu saw as so essential for developing a critique of the prevailing norms, developing models of social alternatives and 'defending us against symbolic domination, increasingly backed by the authority of science'[16].

Finally, I would like to point to a third impact of these developments. This is the contradiction that lies right at the core of the capitalist development process: its insatiable need for innovative and creative thinkers. As science and technology become ever more complex, as the speed of change accelerates, as global competitiveness becomes more cut-throat, and as the world's demands for education, training, information and entertainment grow exponentially, there is an ever-increasing need for people who can think, as the cliché puts it, 'outside the box', who can see how the parts fit into the whole and how the whole could be redesigned, who can, in short, critique what is there, imagine alternatives and plan and implement changes. But the practices of 'knowledge management' that are developed to control them produce conditions that are inimical to that very creativity. Penned into little steel cages, the geese may stop laying their golden eggs. But allowed to fly free they might start to see what lies beyond the farm gates and hanker for change. In the resolution of this dilemma we might see the greatest hope for the future.

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[16] Pierre Bourdieu (2001), *Contre-feux 2*, Raisons d'Agir, Paris