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Academic Work as Factory Work: A Former Blue-Collar Worker's Observations on Class and Caste in the Academy

Kenneth Atkinson, University of Northern Iowa

Abstract

What was it like to have come of age after the Glorious Thirty (1945-1975), an era Jack Metzger (2016; 2021a) describes as a time when the working-class bettered their lives? I had the misfortune to have worked in several Metropolitan Detroit factories during the period of decline after the Glorious Thirty. During that time, I witnessed what the journalist George Packer (2013) has called 'the Unwinding,' the unraveling of the social contract that has left the working class to their own devices to find success and salvation. In keeping with the tradition in working-class studies of sharing lived experienced of class (Linkon, 2021, pp. 20-31; Strangleman, 2005, pp. 137-51), I highlight my multiple working-class lives to show that academic life is increasingly becoming more like blue-collar labor. Through a discussion of the concepts of class and caste, and the uniqueness of working-class culture, I propose that working-class academic crossovers are essentially ghosts trapped in a liminal limbo in an intellectual version of a contemporary factory that is largely devoid of the benefits of working-class culture.

Keywords

Working-class academic, working-class culture, social class, caste, factory labor, crossover, deindustrialization, precarious work, globalization, Detroit, Metro Detroit

Coming of Age and My Working-Class Life After the Glorious Thirty (1945-1975)

Jack Metzgar writes nostalgically of the period the French call *les Trentes Glorieuses,* which he translates as the Glorious Thirty.[1] He notes that this time, from 1945-1975, was a sort of golden age for the working class of all races and genders. During this era, those in the so-called blue-collar professions were able to better their lives and, for a time, achieve an amazing degree of freedom and dignity (Metzgar, 2021a, pp. 27-41).[2] The economist Mark Levinson describes this

[1] *Trente Glorieuses,* https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Trente_Glorieuses; Metzgar, 2016, pp. 23-27; 2021a, pp. 27-41.

[2] Metzgar appropriately acknowledges that this was not a golden age for all, particularly for African Americans, women, and non-cisgender persons, among others. Rather, he longs for this period's better qualities when working-class and middle-class alike prospered. Although, like Metzgar, I write from the perspective of a white heterosexual male, I have spent most of my working-class life and graduate education among minorities. My description of working-class prosperity during my youth, during the period also known as Fordism (described below), reflects a male employment model and the so-called male breadwinner. Few women where I grew up worked during my youth; those who did occupied positions in the lower economic realm of the working-class with few of the protections and rights taken for granted today. I grew up hearing horrible stories from women who worked in factories and other manual labor jobs. Working-class minorities of both sexes fared even worse where I grew up and also suffered from rampant

period as an 'extraordinary time' when jobs were abundant, food plentiful, decent housing affordable, and the social contract protected individuals during times of unemployment, illness, and old age (Levinson, 2016, pp. 4-5). Levinson believes the Glorious Thirty was a unique period of history that will never occur again. Metzgar remarks that its conclusion marked the end of rising standards for the working-class and middle-class alike (Metzgar, 2016, pp. 23-27; 2021a, pp. 34-41). It was my misfortune to have come of age shortly after the end of the Glorious Thirty, whose passing Metzgar and others rightly lament.

When I was a child during the 1960s, I knew I was destined to be a factory worker. This is because nearly everyone in my hometown worked in a factory. The Michigan city in which I grew up, Sterling Heights, is one of Detroit's suburbs, and part of the tri-county region known as Metropolitan Detroit, commonly referred to as Metro Detroit.[3] Sterling Heights is an odd place because it has no downtown. Its center is a six-mile-long and one-mile-wide corridor of automotive and industrial factories that extend to Detroit's border, '8 Mile Road,' a street the local rapper Eminem made famous when he named a song and movie after it.[4] My father, grandfathers, and great-grandfathers labored in factories on both sides of 8 Mile Road. With no other options available, I became the fourth generation in my family to work in a factory: a place where I labored off and on beginning four years after the Golden Thirty's end until late 1989. During that time, I thought I would never leave the factory and my rather gritty industrial town with its many social problems.

The working-class communities of Metro Detroit and the nearby city of Detroit during my youth were places of great racial tension. One of my most vivid childhood memories is sitting on my grandmother's porch watching armed troops of the U.S. Army pass by on their way to Detroit to suppress the 1967 riot: an event accurately depicted in director Kathryn Bigelow's 2017 film, 'Detroit.'[5] I recall wondering why it occurred since my working-class relatives and neighbors told me that all races worked together in the local factories in oppressive conditions yet got along quite well.

The public-school teachers in my working-class town did not encourage me or my classmates to chase our dreams since they assumed we would end up working in the local factories. There was no reason to think otherwise since the prosperity of the Glorious Thirty still reigned. Factory-working families in Metro Detroit during my childhood paid off their mortgages, had fully funded employer healthcare, guaranteed pensions, and sufficient money left over for a modest family

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discrimination: I too grew up hearing many of them share their tragic stories. Although the Glorious Thirty was perhaps the best period for the working-class, the experiences of my youth taught me that we should recognize it was not a prosperous or fair period for all.

[3] For the city's population, income level and racial composition, see Sterling Heights: Quick Facts (2021): United States Census Bureau. https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/sterlingheightscitymichigan/POP010220. For Metro Detroit, see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Metro_Detroit#:~:text=The%20Detroit%20metropolitan%20area%2C%20often,Detroit%20and%20its%20surrounding%20area.
For Macomb County, in which Sterling Heights is located, see Data USA: Macomb County, MI. https://datausa.io/profile/geo/macomb-county-mi.

[4] 8-Mile: Internet Movie Database (2002). https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0298203/. For major Sterling Height's major industries, see Sterling Heights Economic Development. https://www.sterling-heights.net/1373/Top-Employers.

[5] 'Detroit': Internet Movie Database (2017). https://www.imdb.com/title/tt5390504/. Detroit has burned to the ground three times because of race riots: 1863, 1943, and 1967 (Boyd, 2017, pp. 31-32, 150-53, 202-09).

vacation each summer. I recall the parking lots of the local factories full of workers, and the city of Detroit thriving. No one expected the working-class prosperity of the Glorious Thirty to end.

Because nearly everyone in my town worked in a factory, public education was essentially a training ground for future factory workers. Consequently, schools focused their instruction on the skills students needed to survive in the factory: listen to the boss and do not do anything stupid or else you will lose your job, my teachers often said. I recall as a young boy a teacher showing my class industrial prints by such famed twentieth-century photographers as Paul Strand, Alfred Stieglitz, Alvin Langdon Coburn, and Margaret Bourke-White, all of whom sought to portray the factory as a modern wonder (Freeman, 2018, pp. 148-54). The intended message was that we should be thankful to the factories for the prosperity they provided for our families and communities. The image that most impressed me was Charles Sheeler's photograph of the Ford River Rouge auto plant in nearby Dearborn with its intricate crisscrossed conveyors and giant smokestacks.[6] The site was an architectural and industrial wonder, our teacher said. Later, I had a different impression of this photo when I made occasional deliveries to the Rouge plant. While there, I marveled at the giant flames in its foundry and the thick layers of dark soot covering its walls and the clothing of its workers; I felt like I was in a place of sheer horror.

I recall some of my classmates asking my teacher why the famed industrial photographers whose pictures we looked at in class did not include workers. None documented the frenzied movement and clamor of the factory. Rather, they created images that one critic, commenting on Sheeler's photographs, referred to as 'the industrial landscape pastoralized' (quoted in Freeman, 2018, pp. 152-53). Who, we wondered, operated these factories? We found out during a field trip to the Detroit Institute of Arts to see Diego Rivera's fresco 'Detroit Industry' (Freeman, 2018, pp. 155-59). While standing before this colossal masterpiece that fills the museum's courtyard, our teachers pointed out Rivera's majestic portrayal of the strength of man and machine. They stressed that Rivera was celebrating our factory-working families and neighbors. I ignored their commentary along with my young classmates. Instead, we marveled at Rivera's depictions of the factory workers' contorted faces as their bodies struggled to keep pace with the assembly line, while others strained their muscles to operate heavy machinery.[7] We all grew up hearing tales of this toil from our factory-working families and neighbors. This, we knew, would likely be our lot in life. When I took my first job in a factory, the Glorious Thirty had ended four years earlier.

During my time as a factory worker, I witnessed a period of global decline for the working-class and a profound decay in their lifestyle. Like everyone else in Metro Detroit, I watched as what the journalist George Packer (2013) has called 'the Unwinding' began: the unraveling of the social contract that has left the working class to their own devices to find success and salvation. As layoffs and unemployment became rampant, I also saw terror in the faces of the working class as they feared that what Studs Terkal referred to as 'the planned obsolescence of people' (Terkel. 1974, p. xxviii) had begun. Since the end of the Glorious Thirty, millions of laid-off factory workers have failed to find new jobs (Alden, 2016, pp. 107-26; Stockman, 2021, pp. 265-81): I still see the desperation and hopelessness in the faces of many of them whenever I return home.

[6] Sheeler (1927) https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/265132.

[7] Rivera (1932-1933) https://www.dia.org/art/collection/object/detroit-industry-murals-58537. My recollection here refers to the struggling workers depicted in the central panel of the mural's 'north wall.'

I began my life as a factory worker while a community college student in the late 1970s, a time the American historian Jefferson Cowie describes so well in his classic book of working-class life in that decade, appropriately titled *Stayin' Alive.* Cowie writes that the 1970s marked the end of the postwar boom (Cowie, 2010, p. 12; see also Levenson, 2016; Thompson, 2017, pp. 192-216). While in 1972 earnings for factory workers in my hometown peaked, starting in 1973-1974 the entire Metro Detroit region experienced layoffs, plant closures, union decertification drives, and the replacement of many workers with industrial robots. I am old enough to remember the prosperous Detroit of my childhood before the 1967 riots and during the Glorious Thirty, when my factory working family and neighbors lived far better lives than those employed in manufacturing today. Nevertheless, the warning signs of impending doom were there. Between 1954 and 1960, over 90,000 jobs were lost in Detroit alone. However, this statistic does not take into account the trauma caused by the decimation of the city's minority urban districts through the construction of highways to the suburbs where many industries moved their operations (Thompson, 2017, pp. 26). Following the 1967 riot, Detroit's population dropped from 1.7 million to 1.2 million within a decade (Maraniss, 2015, pp. 89-92, 367-69; Sugrue 1996). I literally watched the city empty out as entire blocks suddenly become abandoned as there was little work for anyone. Consequently, when I entered the factory, I knew that something profound had changed and that the age of prosperity for blue-collar workers was over. Life in the decade after the Glorious Thirty was a horrible time. It was particularly grueling and unstable for the industrial working class.

I held a variety of positions in several factories, including working as a drill press operator, an aluminum grinder, a sand blasting equipment worker, performing heat treatment of metals, assembling car breaks, manufacturing automobile dashboards, doing industrial painting, packaging spaghetti, and other manual labor jobs. Like many employed in industry after the Glorious Thirty, I often worked in precarious short-term contracts. While struggling to get by in the factory, I watched as the great economic downturn of the early 1980s resulted in massive unemployment for Metro Detroit, as Detroit was named the arson and murder capital of the nation (Thompson, 2017, p. xiii).[8]

During the mid-1970s and into the 1980s, a factory worker at Ford's Wixom plant named Dewy Burton became a local hero when the *New York Times* and other media outlets picked him to represent the typical disgruntled factory worker in my area because of his ability to provide reporters with succinct newsworthy quotes. Commenting on the time when I worked in the factories, Burton remarked:

> Something's happening to people like me—working stiffs, as they say—and it isn't just that we have to pay more for this or that or that we're having to do without this or make do with a little less of that. It's deep, and hard to explain, but it's more like more and more of us are sort of leaving all our hopes outside in the rain and coming into the house and just locking the door—you know, just turning the key and 'click,' that's it for what we always thought we could be (quoted in Cowie, 2010, p., 12-13).

[8] For statistics of Detroit's decline, see Gowman (2014); https://the-other-america.com/stats.

I shared Burton's frustration as I worked extremely hard but felt I was struggling to get by in life with little hope for the future.

Factory work is exhausting. It is physically and psychologically draining in ways other types of labor are not. The twentieth century French philosopher Simone Weil (1909-1943) grew up in an upper-class family but spent much of her career advocating for the rights of the oppressed. She felt she could no longer write about labor issues unless she experienced the life of the working class. In 1934, she he took a twelve-month leave of absence from her teaching position to operate machinery in an engineering factory and in the Renault auto plant. She wrote of her typical workday:

> [The] Body may often be exhausted evenings upon leaving the factory, but [my] mind is more so and invariably so. Whoever has experienced this exhaustion—and remembers it—may read it in the eyes of nearly all the workingmen filing out of a plant (Weill, 1946, p. 371).

But what most upset Weil was not the conditions she faced in the factory, which nearly destroyed her health, but society's attitude towards her fellow workers.

Working class of all backgrounds have encountered the common middle-class stereotype that manual laborers are lazy: success, it is commonly held, is something that is earned (Jensen, 2012, pp. 193-95). I believe that the local factory sage Dewey Burton summed up best the lot of the factory worker as I experienced it when he described his failed effort to leave the factory and pursue college at night after working a full shift: 'It takes so much to just make it there's no time for dreams and no energy for making them come true—and I'm not so sure anymore that it's ever going to get better' (quoted in Cowie, 2010, p. 11). I recall many times being so tired that I had to summon up what little energy was left in my body to make it to the time clock to punch out at the end of my shift. This was life after the Glorious Thirty, a time some have dubbed the Post-Fordist era.

Fordism is another name for the period Metzgar and others refer to as the Glorious Thirty, the long postwar boom between 1945 and the early 1970s when the working class prospered (Barrow, 2015, pp. 2-45; Heffernan, 2000, pp. 39-71). The Post-Fordist era began during my childhood; it continues to the present. Post-Fordism marked the start of globalization, the implementation of technology that increasingly displaced workers, and the casualization of labor that eroded the social safety net and opportunities for the working class. During the Post-Fordist era, factory jobs increasingly disappeared as the locations of production were rapidly moved offshore. Since these changes, the share of social wealth enjoyed by wage-earners has consistently diminished, along with many benefits (Heffernan, 2000, pp. 1-28). Watching the effects of Post-Fordism in my community, I feared I was doomed to a lifetime of toil so vividly described in Ben Hamper's (1991) autobiographical account of working-class life on the General Motors assembly line in Flint, Michigan, *Rivethead: Tales from the Assembly Line* (I occasionally made deliveries to this plant and witnessed the oppressive conditions Hemper described.). Desperate not to remain in the factory for the rest of my life, I did what many working class before me have done to escape their plight and joined the military.

My transition to life in the U.S. Army as a private was easy because the military is essentially a working-class community. Nearly everyone I encountered during my time as a soldier joined the Army to flee the limited options available to them in their working-class communities following the Glorious Thirty's end. I was fortunate to receive an elite assignment during the Cold War in West Berlin, where I transported classified documents for the military and U.S. government through the Berlin Wall, across Communist East Germany, and past the Iron Curtain.[9] It was an exciting job that brought me into frequent contact with high-ranking military and civilian personal, as well as spies and numerous interesting working-class locals.[10] I received special status, despite my low rank, to walk through Checkpoint Charlie into East Berlin at will: I visited the city, its historical sites, and museums frequently, always followed by government agents.[11] While strolling through Communist East Berlin, I often marveled at the statues and murals celebrating the working class. Reflecting on my four years in the army, I realize how much the military, factory work, and working-class communities are alike: all are cultures that emphasize community and collaboration rather than individuality (Jensen, 2012, pp. 28-50; Metzgar, 2021a, pp. 77-131; 2021b, pp. 100-31, 231-41).

Working-class culture is based on cooperation in which family, community, social and religious institutions, and getting along are paramount.[12] Unlike middle-class culture, and the world of academia I now inhabit, the working class eschew competition whenever possible. Rather, everyone is expected to pitch in to get the job done. In the factories in which I worked, only a few supervised a vast legion of laborers. There was no need for throngs of bureaucrats to oversee workers, for everyone knew what had to be done and always pitched in whenever there were problems. Likewise, I found the same true in the army as I transported some of the nation's most sensitive documents by myself: everyone trusted me to do the job. Whenever I needed help, all I had to do was ask.

After my military service, I moved to a kibbutz in Israel, where I worked as an avocado picker, a chicken handler, a foundry worker, and as a manual laborer.[13] Once again, the transition was

[9] Berlin Brigade, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Berlin_Brigade. Berlin Wall, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Berlin_Wall. Iron Curtain, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Iron_Curtain.

[10] Capital of Spies, https://www.deutsches-spionagemuseum.de/en/espionage/capital-of-espionage.

[11] Checkpoint Charlie, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Checkpoint_Charlie

[12] Culture is a notoriously difficult concept to define. My approach to culture combines insights of sociological and anthropological theory (e.g., Bourdieu, 1984; Geertz, 1973, pp. 3-83; Lamont and Lareu, 1988, pp. 153-68; Marcus and Fischer, 1986, pp. 45-76) and several working-class scholars (e.g., Case, 2017, pp. 16-35; Jensen, 2012, pp. 51-145; Metzger, 2021a, pp. 77-131; 2021b, pp. 231-41; Linkon and Russo, 2016, pp. 4-13; Streib, 2021, pp. 242-51). For this study, I define culture as a way of being, relating, and thinking. It is a system of inherited conceptions often expressed in symbolic forms by means of which people communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes towards life. What makes culture difficult to define is that it encompasses nearly everything, from the way we relate to others, speech, dress, food, hobbies, and much more. For reasons described in this article, I believe the working-class constitute a distinctive culture that is characterized by, what Jensen identifies as, 'being and belonging' in contrast to middle class culture that emphasizes 'doing and becoming.' I have found middle class culture more individualistic in orientation. In contract, the working class with whom I have toiled and lived prefer not to stand out but to seek solidarity with their community. From my own industrial working-class experiences, I have discovered that non-verbal clues and solidarity are essential features of working-class culture. This is particularly true in noisy industrial environments where non-verbal expressions and signals often function as an insider language that is frequently meant to go undetected by middle-class management.

[13] Kibbutz Kfar Hanassi: https://www.khanassi.org.il/objDoc.asp?PID=309259&OID=325018. Kfar Hanassi is the most British kibbutz in Israel and is associated with the Habonim Dror socialist movement. See,

seamless as the kibbutz is perhaps the closest place to a working-class paradise one can find. It is a collective society that regards manual labor and cooperation as the most prized of virtues. The sense of belonging I experienced on the kibbutz is unlike anything I have encountered in my life. It was a settlement comprised entirely of working-class individuals who lived, dined, and labored together in physically taxing jobs for the mutual benefit of all. During my time on the kibbutz, members frequently held sessions discussing the kibbutz's socialistic ideology. At these gatherings, working-class values were praised and held up as a model for the middle-class world. Although as with any society personalities sometimes clashed, the mutual bond of kibbutz life and its members' commitment to socialist principles generally resolved disputes.

After my kibbutz experience, I pursued and realized my dream of becoming an archaeologist in the Middle East and Europe, working my way up to a supervisor overseeing major portions of large excavations. During that time, I discovered a temple in a biblical city visited by Abraham, uncovered a city where Jesus stayed with his twelve apostles, excavated battle sites from the Roman and Crusader periods, unearthed a gladiator arena, and worked on excavations from the prehistoric era to medieval period. I count these experiences too as part of my working-class history since archaeology is like factory work: it requires intense physical labor and cooperation. Having saved my money during my military service, after my kibbutz experience, I put on my backpack and wandered between Europe and the Middle East for nearly 2 ½ years. This too was very much a working-class experience as I largely lived and interacted with the working class and poor. I traveled mainly on foot to many remote places, frequently sleeping alongside roads, in parks, in train and bus stations, and in many undesirable lodgings often filled with vermin where I sometimes had to share a bed (always with a male!). I was fortunate to meet and stay with several tribal communities, who lived in tents and mud houses. They and the other working-class and poor I encountered often helped me by providing shelter and food: I never once asked anyone for assistance. Up to this point in my life, having lived and worked among the working class in several countries, I had always felt part of a community wherever I found myself. All this changed when I returned to the U.S., completed three graduate degrees, and entered a place more exotic and hostile than any of the remote, dangerous, and distant locations I visited during my travels—the academy.

Class, the Working Class, and the Academy After the Golden Thirty

Those from the working class who successfully navigate the unfamiliar world of academia and its middle-class culture to achieve tenure often find the process leaves them psychologically wounded and traumatized. In the acclaimed and appropriately named book, *Strangers in Paradise: Academics from the Working Class,* Jake Ryan and Charles Sackrey write:

> In short, our conclusion is that the academic work process is essentially antagonistic to the working class, and academics for the most part live in a different world of culture, different

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Habonim_Dror. During my six-month stay as a volunteer, residents were still talking about the future British Prime Minister Boris Johnson and his sister, both of whom also worked as volunteers there. Elmas, 2019, https://www.israelhayom.com/2019/07/24/when-boris-johnson-visited-israel-as-a-20-year-old/. Like many Kibbutz settlements in Israel, Kfar Hanassi is no longer a collective society following the country's economic crisis that began in the 1980s. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kibbutz_crisis.

> ways that make it, too, antagonistic to working class life (Ryan and Sackrey, 1984, pp.112-13).

In a recent study of working-class academics' perceptions of the academy, several researchers found that little has changed:

> Working-class academics described the academy as prestige-obsessed, snobby, exclusive, ego-driven, pretentious, and relying on arcane jargon. Authors wrote of discomfort in professional settings because of these class-based differences between themselves and the perceived dominant, hierarchical, middle-class culture of the academy (Pifer, Riffe, Hartz, and Ibarra, 2022, p. 8).

While I share most of these sentiments, what most surprised me about academia is its lack of cooperation. But what I find most disconcerting is that I view academic work as similar to factory work after the Glorious Thirty, but without the communal benefits of working-class culture.

Frederick Winslow Taylor's book *Principles of Scientific Management* (1913) largely created the prosperity of the Glorious Thirty and the modern factory workplace. But Taylor's philosophy, which helped generate the economic benefits the working-class enjoyed during this period, came at a great cost to the workers by stripping them of their independence and pride. According to Taylor, managers should assume the burden of gathering all knowledge, then classify, tabulate, and reduce it to rules, laws, and formulae that workers must follow (Taylor, 1913, p. 36; see further Freeman, 2018, pp. 107-08. 174-79). The following is a brief distillation of the central elements of Taylor's philosophy, followed by selected observations on how it now plagues academia.

1. Separate planning and doing.
2. Management should limit an individual to a single task.
3. Preparation and servicing tasks should be stripped away to be performed by unskilled and cheaper workers as far as possible.

By removing the cognitive aspects of a factory job from the workers and making it the exclusive provenance of a separate management class (#1), Taylor deprived the working class of the creativity to improve their products and take any control of how they performed their labor. To facilitate the manufacturing process, he urged management to subdivide complex jobs into individual repetitive tasks that could be easily taught thereby reducing training costs (#2). Ultimately, Taylor argued (#3), skilled jobs, as much as possible, should be simplified to be performed by unskilled laborers at a lower rate of pay (Taylor 1913, pp. 37-39; see further Crawford, 2009, pp. 38-40; Littler, 1978, pp. 185-202). In his drive for obsessive optimization of individual factory operations, Taylor disregarded the human side of work by rigidly separating thinking from doing. Workers were required to do exactly as they were told (Gibson, 1992, pp. 149-57; Locke, 1982, pp. 152). In conjunction with this principle, Taylor emphasized that the most important job of managers should be training the worker to perform '…at his fastest pace and with the maximum of efficiency' (Taylor, 1913, 12).

The early twentieth-century social theorist Antonio Gramsci recognized that Fordism was based on Taylorism. Although he highlighted its increase in wages and benefits as positive, Gramsci

believed that society's adoption of Taylorism came at great cost to the working class. He emphasized that Fordist elites knew the physically and psychologically demanding nature of Taylorism, yet they did not care (Gramsci, 1971, pp. 277-318; see further Antonio and Bonanno, 2000, pp. 33-77). The consequence of this indifference has resulted in the dangers of industrialization Marx warned about, namely the current precarious position of workers as all security has been removed from the workplace: labor is in constant flux and workers are forced to continually adapt to their oppressive conditions (Marx, 1976, pp. 794-802). But Marx's observations today are not only true of the working-class, but of academia as well.

The modern university operates in a strict hierarchical manner in accordance with Taylor's principle to separate planning and doing. Management has taken over many functions of the faculty, from the design of syllabi, the revision of curriculum, the determination of course content, the requirement of administrative-led assessments, to the implementation and increasing control of on-line teaching. This is nothing less than the adoption of Taylor's principle that management should limit the tasks workers perform; consequently, faculty no longer have full control over how and what they teach. Administrators, moreover, simplify academic labor so that contingent faculty can perform work formerly done by full-time faculty. The increased replacement of tenured faculty with contingent labor fulfills Taylor's recommendation that managers decrease costs by replacing more expensive full-time employees with cheaper workers on a contingent basis, whose contracts can abruptly be terminated depending on budgetary needs. To be blunt: in today's academy, in keeping the tenants of Taylorism, the faculty is expendable.

Today's world of academia reminds me of the years I spent struggling to get by in Metro Detroit when most industrial jobs were temporary, pay was low, and the pace of operations swift. I see little difference between academic employment and the factory as the academic workforce has become subjected to a form of domination that has become an intrinsic component of capitalism: the at-will contract (Kaufman-Osborn, 2021). Today's university operates increasingly like a factory: it is to be run in the most efficient and cheapest manner possible (Ginsburg, 2011, pp. 167-99). Contingent labor has made the academic workforce as vulnerable as factory workers in today's global economy as well as those in the gig economy who toil worldwide with few benefits or security (Bousquet, 2008, pp. 3-70. 186-209; Greenhouse, 2009, pp. 184-220). Marginally employed academics are subject to many systemic abuses such as the inequitable distribution of labor, working for free to publish and prepare courses, and the stress of not knowing when or if their contracts will be renewed (Prior, 2017, pp. 136-42; Reynolds, 2017, pp. 143-54; Towers, 2019, pp. 98-115; Vossen, 2017, 121-35).

In addition to Taylorism, the academy suffers from an equally pernicious malady that Henry Ford's factory workers in Detroit dubbed 'Forditis.' Ford's workers used it to refer to the increased speed, dexterity, and endurance required to remain employed. They also came up with this term to describe the increasingly inhumane conditions on the auto assembly lines to combat the hypocrisy of Ford's public statement of how management should oversee labor: 'Reasonable work is natural; work is all right if it is not man-killing or too prolonged' (Ford, 1923, # 7). The pace of Ford's assembly lines aged workers quickly and left many unsuited for their jobs before middle age (Freeman, 2018, pp. 126-32; Meyer, 1981, pp. 1, 40-41). I too have felt its consequences, as well as suffered the pernicious effects of what Barbara Jensen (Jensen, 2021, p. 253) has referred to as the 'colonized culture' of the working class in which the pains, toils, and disabilities of manual

labor are the scars left behind by the conquerors. Those over forty were rare in the many factories in which I was employed: excessive workloads and the increased speed of production led to workers' physical, mental, and spiritual decline.

In a recent article titled 'What Is the Real Cost of Academe's Fixation on Productivity?,' Maria L. Wisdom (2022) writes that faculty struggle with institutional pressures to produce as much as possible, as fast as possible, and at any cost. As academics witness the increasing adjunctification of their profession, academic work is rapidly becoming the equivalent to blue-collar labor in which managers rather than professionals control the workplace from hiring, to teaching, to the length of employment, and the pace of work (Chin and Senter, 2011, p. 122; Clark and Filinson, 2011, p. 127; Johnson, 2003, pp. 61-89). Just like I once struggled to keep up with production quotas to manufacture a minimum number of dash boards per hour during an eight-hour shift, I now struggle to keep up with the increasing workload and expectations of my academic job from expanded service obligations, growing publication expectations, requirements for the creation of on-line curriculum, and an ever-growing 'Faculty Handbook' whose numerous job expectations seem impossible to fulfill. But there is one important difference between academic and factory labor: academic labor never ends. Liz Mayo (2019) laments of the current expectations of professors: 'We are not people who require sleep and food to persist; we should be available at all hours and willing to pick up a late shift if needed. We are service-industry workers.' Like factory work, academic work too exhausts the body, but the mind more so. This is especially true for those who have left behind their working-class life to crossover to the academic middle class only to find that they suffer from the pernicious effects of caste.[14]

Caste, the Working Class, and the Academy After the Golden Thirty

In her best-selling book *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents,* Pulitzer Prize winning author Isabel Wilkerson defines caste as an artificial construction that ranks human value and sets the presumed supremacy of one group against the presumed inferiority of other groups. Caste, she notes, uses arbitrary boundaries to keep ranked groups apart, distinct from one another, and in their assigned places (Wilkerson, 2020, pp. 99-164). But what Wilkerson warns is the greatest threat to the caste system is not the lower-caste failures, but the lower-caste successes, which undermines the core assumptions upon which a case system is constructed to which the identities of people on all rungs of the hierarchy are linked (Wilkerson, 2020, pp. 224-37). Those with lower-caste status are expected to adjust to the expectations of the dominant caste and be willing to remain in their present position to thrive.

I became acutely aware of academic caste a few years ago when I received a joint invitation from a distinguished Oxford don, from an elite academic dynasty, and a Regius Professor, to speak on my recent book at the University of Oxford. During my visit, my hosts invited me to High Table in the famed Christ Church dining hall, the inspiration for the Harry Potter movies (the paintings do move and talk!).[15] It was thrilling to witness the majestic traditions of the occasion and meet

[14] I prefer the term crossover rather than straddler (Lubrano 2014) since I do not believe it is possible to have dual affiliation and identity with my former working-class community. Rather, to crossover to a new social class is to erase much of one's working-class self, making it impossible to return (see further Eribon 2013; Hurst, 2010; Jensen, 2012; Metzgar, 2021a, pp. 88-95).
[15] Christ Church Hall. https://www.chch.ox.ac.uk/visiting-christ-church/hall.

many of Oxford's elites. However, an experience during my visit reminded me that I did not belong in this upper middle-class environment, but to a lower academic caste.

My intellectual hosts were elated at my presentation since a knight came to hear me speak. Unfortunately, I had little contact with students or ordinary faculty. The distance my distinguished hosts placed between themselves, faculty with lesser status, and students made me realize how different the hallowed halls of Oxford were from the sense of community and belonging I felt in my working-class life. An accidental encounter between one of my hosts and two working class employees made this clear.[16] When we arrived at the prestigious center he directs, a truck with numerous large boxes next to it on the pavement blocked access to his reserved parking spot. Although there were plenty of other spaces, my host excused himself and said he needed to dismiss these folk. He pointed to the reserved parking sign bearing his name and demanded the two workers move their boxes into their truck and immediately move aside so he could park in his spot. The two workers politely asked if he could wait until they were finished moving their heavy boxes into the basement. I enjoyed the smirk on the workers faces as he repeated his request to no avail, this time informing them of his prestigious academic title. My host angrily returned to his car and parked in an adjacent spot while making a rude remark to me about the working class. I have wondered what his reaction would have been if he had known his invited guest was a working-class crossover who has spent many hours moving similar heavy loads.

Academia is increasingly become a caste in which a few from elite universities, like my distinguished Oxford colleague, make up an increasing percentage of the professorate (Schultz and Stansbury 2022). Academic castes follow the rules the sociologist Max Weber observed in his classic study of India's caste system, namely a strict distribution of occupational positions and the reproduction of status hierarchy (Weber, 1916, pp. 396-415). This results in inferior treatment of those holding lower caste positions, which over time acquires ritual sanction. Today, the acceptance of the academic caste system, and the growing distinction between tenured and tenure-track faculty members on the one hand and tenure-illegible faculty is undermining the *raison d' être* of contemporary institutions of higher learning. In the opinion of two academic philosophers: 'This system is capricious, discriminatory, and unjust' (McHenry and Sharkey, 2014, p. 35). The academic caste system has become a self-perpetuating hierarchy through the widespread tendency to dole out full-time positions to those with prestigious degrees: institutions which working-class academics are less likely to have attended. Yet, the tragedy of this unjust system is that there is no correlation between faculty productivity, success, and degree status (Burris, 2004, pp. 239-64). But it is a system in which the working-class suffer the most (Case 2017; Lee, 2017).

In a job market where only an estimated 7% of PhDs will find academic employment, the current academic caste system leaves little opportunity for working-class academics other than marginal employment (Craig 2021). In their recent study of the academic gig economy, several academics lament:

> Non-tenure track faculty members, now 70 percent of the faculty within US higher education, average pay of $22,400 for teaching eight courses, making less than most fast-food workers and often with less job security and benefits than fast-food workers (Kezar, DePaola, and Scott, 2019, p. 1).

[16] I have deliberately avoided all departmental affiliations to obscure this person's identity.

This proliferation of temporary academic employees leaves fewer long-term and stable faculty to interact with students thereby depriving them of a community that is central to a quality learning environment (Kezar, DePaola, and Scott, 2019; Tolley, 2018). With part-time and non-tenure track positions exploding at a rate of 600 percent more than tenure lines between 1975 and 1995, those fortunate enough, such as myself, to have a full-time academic position face oppressive and demoralizing workloads (Angulo, 2008, p. 13; Spalter-Roth and Scelza, 2009, p. 3). But it is worse for those marginally employed in academia, who are clearly made to feel that they occupy a lower-caste status (Prior, 2017, pp. 136-42; Reynolds, 2017, pp. 143-54; Towers, 2019, pp. 98-115; Vossen, 2017, 121-35).

To survive in today's hostile factory-like world of academia requires all the resilience the working-class academic can muster from his or her past. But living in this middle-class dominated world comes at a great cost, especially for those from industrial working-class backgrounds who live in a state of perpetual trauma. They are haunted by the ghosts of a lost future: having abandoned their working-class past to become academics they suffer from the melancholia caused by the injustices of the academic caste system, which prevents them from achieving the sense of belonging they expected in their new environment. Unable to return to their working-class homes, they are trapped in a state of limbo deprived of the future they expected with no true home (Derrida, 1994, pp. 61-95, 156-221; Fisher, 2014, pp. 2-29).

Mourning and Melancholia among the Working Class and in the Academy after the Golden Thirty

The working-class poet Cynthia Cruz describes the melancholia that ensues when a person abandons his or her working-class background as a symbolic death because leaving one's working-class origin means assimilation. It entails becoming a ghost trapped in a liminal limbo, becoming a form of the living dead, caught between deaths, as the working-class academic is neither a member of the working class nor the new class in which he or she lives and works (Cruz, 2021, pp. 1-10, 102-09 103; see also Case, 2017, pp. 23-25). Cruz describes her transition from working-class to the academy as a tragedy that still haunts her because: 'What I lost, haunts, because, as it was happening (as my working-class origins were being lost), I did not experience it' (Cruz, 2021, p. 65). But the greatest tragedy is that the working-class academic largely does not exist.

Although working class academics are among the elite of the working class, they are ironically an invisible minority group (Pelz, 1995, p. 284). They are what Simon Weil referred to as 'truly uprooted beings, exiles in their own land' (Weil, 1946, p. 369). The irony is that our neoliberal society insists there are no social classes, hence there is no working class (Cruz, 2021, p. 7). In his examination of media perceptions of the working class, Christopher Martin, professor of digital journalism, writes: 'But with few exceptions, America's working class is invisible, deemed no longer newsworthy' (Martin, 2019, p. 5). The gradual erasure of social class and class difference in the media and society, and our focus on meritocracy, has largely removed social class from public discourse to such an extent that the term 'working-class' is largely avoided (Martin 2021). Consequently, culturally constructed stereotypes of the working class continue.

In his study of the working class, the economist Michael Zweig writes that to be working class is to be in a place of relative vulnerability—on the job, in the market, in politics, and in culture (Zweig, 2012, pp. 4, 11). In our society that values equality of opportunity, the existence of a distinct class is a contradiction, which perhaps is why so many are reluctant to say working class. Yet, the working class comprise a unique caste with its own history, namely one characterized by resilience: it is nothing less than a distinct culture (Jensen, 2012, pp. 51-78; Metzgar, 2021a, pp. 8-14, 77-99; 2001b, pp. 231-41). It is a culture I have observed growing up in my hometown, in the factory, in the military, in the kibbutz, and during my travels, but not in the academic world.

Caste and classicism are rapidly diminishing opportunities for the global working-class community to make the great, painful, leap forward and crossover to the middle-class world of the academy (Towers 2019). Academic class and caste perpetuate the injustices of the modern workplace by either ignoring the working-class academic's existence, or by making the academic environment so intolerable that the working-class academic feels forced to assimilate and erase his or her identity. The irony is that because education is a marker of class, and to some extent moral worth as well, it cannot be open to all (Hurst, 2010, pp. 137-56). This is true of academic caste: those from the working-class who reach the upper echelons of academic success remain a threat to those at the top who no longer feel superior because they are employed alongside colleagues from a working-class background who hold the same academic position.

Professors from the working class find themselves trapped in what the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu refers to as an 'ill-gotten' culture, for they have abandoned their world to adopt the ethos and language of their new class (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 91). Yet, these working-class academics realize they will never be fluent in the language of the middle-class-dominated academy as their performances always reveal them (Eribon, 2013, pp. 169-79; Fisher, 2014, pp. 30-47; O'Dair, 1995, pp. 203-04). As the philosopher Didier Eribon has written of his own working-class origin: 'Whatever you have uprooted yourself from or been uprooted from still endures as an integral part of who or what you are' (Eribon, 2013, pp. 17-18). Those from the working-class can never truly assimilate, for they are constantly reminded of the past they have struggled to leave behind. All they can do is try to persevere.

The psychologist Barbara Jensen has written what is perhaps the best description of working-class resilience: 'Working-class people are iron weeds that sprout out of cracks in the cement of inequality, contorting but continuing to survive' (Jensen, 2021, p. 222). It is tough to be in the working class; however, it is a place of great creativity and strength whose members have much to teach the middle class, if only they would acknowledge the working classes' existence and recognize it as a distinctive culture that should be cherished by all.

Conclusion

Academia is not the paradise I expected it to be, but it is a far better place than the many factories in which I worked. But I did not leave the factory and obtain my present position because of my resilience. Rather, I attribute it largely to luck. Although I have crossed over to a new social class that provides grater pay, creativity, and that does not require me to perform what I consider real work, namely manual labor, I still feel a sense of guilt when I think of those more talented I left behind in my former working-class community. The irony is that I find my present position as an

academic increasingly resembling my former working-class life, but devoid of the clamor, soot, oil, grease, dangerous machinery, and oppressive heat of the factory. My working-class past makes it difficult for me to acknowledge the successes of my current life. But I am not alone in harboring such feelings. There are many of us from the working class in the academy, although we are largely invisible and uncomfortable in our positions because many of us feel it necessary to assimilate to survive. However, as working-class academics, we are acutely aware of injustice and oppression more so than our middle-class colleagues. Therefore, we need to identify ourselves as working-class, and denounce the injustices and subjugations of the modern academy for the good of all. If we band together and acknowledge that we do exist, who knows what we can do with our resilience and our experiences. Although we cannot make academia a paradise, perhaps we can make it a better place for all.

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