



RESEARCH REPOSITORY

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EDITORIAL

The cognitariat

Today's world of disorganized capitalism or post-Fordism relies on a cognitariat of highly-educated, occupationally-insecure workers who are both voluble and newsworthy. The cognitariat was conceptualized by the lapsed-leftist Reaganite futurist Alvin Toffler (1983). The author of numerous technocentric, deterministic works, Toffler wandered the same conceptual Cold-War corridors of futurism as former US National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski (1969), American Academy of Arts and Sciences prelate Daniel Bell (1977), and professional anti-Marxist Ithiel de Sola Pool (1983). Each of them praised information and communication technologies for ensuring the permanent removal of grubby manufacturing from the Global North to the South and the permanent continuation of US cultural and technical power, provided that the blandishments of socialism, and negative reactions to global business, did not create class struggle.

The concept of the cognitariat has since been redisposed politically on the left by Antonio Negri (2007), who uses the concept to describe people mired in casualized labor who have heady qualifications and live at the complex interstices of capital, education, and government. This tertiary-trained cognitariat plays a key role in the production and circulation of goods and services by creating and coordinating culture as musicians, directors, writers, journalists, sound engineers, editors, cinematographers, graphic designers, and so on. The cognitariat also features audiences and consumers, who pay for content, interpret it in order to give it living meaning, and elide real barriers of entry to media production through their dubious anointment as prosumers. These groups operate within institutional contexts: private bureaucracies, controlling investment, production, and distribution across the media; public bureaucracies, offering what capitalism cannot while comports themselves in an ever more commercial manner; small businesses, run by charismatic individuals; and networks, fluid associations formed to undertake specific projects. Cognitarians typically engage in dreamy self-exploitation and autonomous identity formation such that they appear to be autotelic subjects who regard being part of the gentry poor and dedicated to the life of the mind as fulfilling in themselves or as passports to a labor market that will ultimately reward them fairly.

It would be churlish to rain too heavily on this parade. The utopic prospects proposed by working for pleasure and creating things with relative autonomy from state and capital are well appreciated by anyone on the cultural left. At the same time, a dose of realism is required to temper the excitement of today's technologists. At a moment when the claims of the computer age to being green are brought into

question, and the horrors of labor exploitation in offshore computer manufacturing are exposed around the globe, the delights of post-industrial identity are less pleasurable for some than others.

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