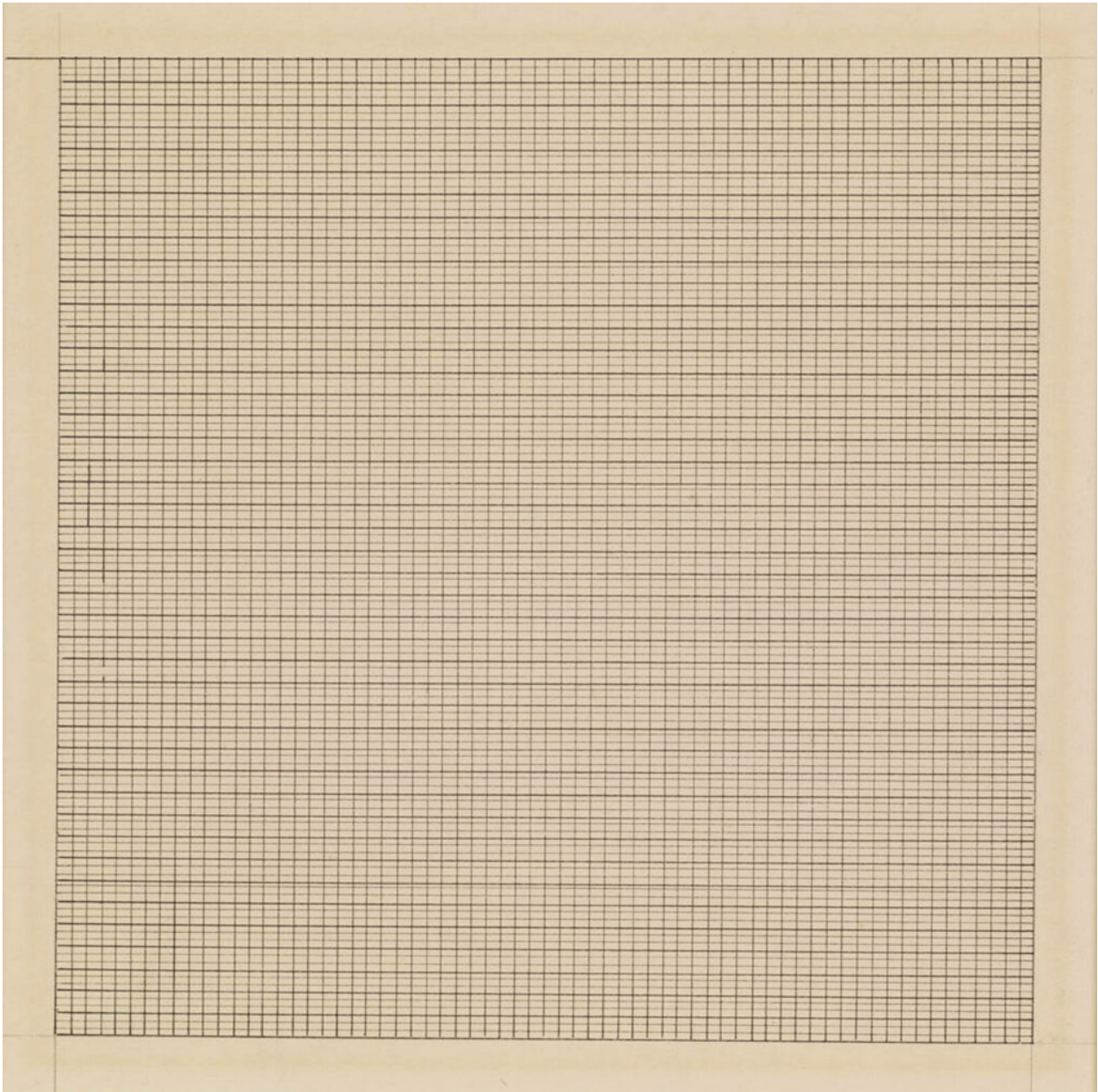


Our Consciousness and Theirs: Further Thoughts on the Class Character of University Worker Activism

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Agnes Martin, *Untitled* (1965)

i.

In a recent [editorial](#) in *Radical Philosophy* we explored ongoing debates around the class character of professional work, and the prospects of casualized (/adjunctified, or otherwise insecurely employed) university worker activism. We endorsed [Gabriel Winant's view](#) that professional workers are part of the working class. However, we received the criticism that to describe, as Winant does, the “professional-managerial-class [PMC]” as a “class fraction” within the working class still treats this group of

professional workers as a more distinctive and coherent category than it really is. To cut against this, we may observe an increasing similarity between so-called professional work and other forms of work, as part of capitalism's ongoing processes of deskilling; for example, the BetterHelp app recruits licensed, professional therapists to perform duties similar to live chat customer service agents.¹

While we take for granted that the working class can be, and is, divided in various ways, we also acknowledge that the notion of a "class fraction" (employed to suggest that there is *not* an entirely separate "professional-managerial class") still risks solidifying a distinction between the so-called "middle classes" ("white-collar," "mental" workers, or "professionals") as a coherent grouping and the working class. In other words, the idea that professional workers form a "class fraction" within the working class may still imply that they are fundamentally distinct from other workers, potentially leading to a vulgar and inaccurate analysis of their actual class character. In contrast, we believe a genuinely class struggle political approach requires working to overcome both apparent and real divisions in the working class, while attempting to understand its members' contradictory range of consciousness and activity. When we view our own labor in universities as different from that of other workers, yet analogous to that of other "professionals," we are likely being misguided by ideology or "professional class consciousness," which is antagonistic to actual class consciousness. It is this idea which we will pursue further here.

ii.

Our *RP* article discussed how, as insecure academic workers in the UK, our experiences of the pandemic provided the basis through which we developed the #CoronaContract campaign, which put forward a demand for two-year contract extensions for insecurely employed university staff. #CoronaContract has helped shape our union's pay claim and the growing anti-casualization movement taking place through local and national disputes and strikes. Unlike in the United States, where grad students or lecturers tend to share similar contractual conditions, our union (University and Colleges Union, or UCU) is a national, "vertical" union including a wide range of job types, and representing both permanent and insecurely employed education workers across the sector, which means that our demand cuts across divisions within our profession and our union; both calling for solidarity and exposing tensions. For example, a Graduate Teaching Assistant (GTA), their manager, and that manager's manager might all be members of UCU. In this context, it is incumbent on organizers to make ending casualization a core priority for our union.

However disturbing narratives of precarity in academic work may be, we should not assume that they are inherently a form of class consciousness. While downward mobility can play a role in *creating the conditions* for worker activity and consciousness, anti-casualization activists often complain about how our colleagues identify with their potential or imagined career trajectories rather than their current (and likely, future) hardship. Class consciousness does not automatically develop from poor working conditions (nor, as we will address, should an analysis of our working conditions be restricted only to questions of hours, pay, etc., without including ideological aspects of

work); rather, consciousness develops when individual demands are actively made political and collective: in other words, through class struggle. This process is an ongoing one which can be aided or defeated by the development of working-class fighters and a strong working-class and socialist movement as a whole.

Both on the left and in our union, there is often an expectation that when things get worse, workers will automatically be pushed into action. Under worsening conditions, therefore, there is often a perceived inevitability that workers will “finally see” how bad things have become and end up moving into defensive fights. (Admittedly, we’re also sometimes told that “things are so bad right now, how could you possibly tell poor casualized workers to strike and sacrifice pay at this time?”, which is really the bottom of the barrel, but we’ll ignore this “argument.”) While it’s true that people tend to dig in further when they need to protect an existing right, we should not view the process of drawing radical conclusions as inevitable. At best, worsening conditions may open up opportunities for conscious organizers to create vehicles for organizing, but these opportunities can be easily squandered. This is one reason we’ve taken steps throughout our campaign to highlight opportunities as we see them for our union nationally to take action, even while knowing that we as a grassroots group of workers can’t determine the shape of this action by ourselves. Furthermore, while union messaging typically frames the struggle against worsening conditions as automatic when defensive,² some spontaneous tendencies on the left can overreach even further, expecting worsening conditions to inspire workers to (1) get motivated and become self-aware, (2) come to the ‘correct’ conclusions, (3) develop campaigns, and (4) take action to win demands – without recognizing that if we do not actively intervene in these processes and help shape them, none of this will happen. To quote Georg Lukács, “History is at its least automatic when it is the consciousness of the proletariat that is at issue.”

In fact, the supposed “internal” consciousness-raising around precarious work that moves workers into acting on “external” demands more often runs in reverse. Very few workers have a sudden epiphany about their exploited status that turns them into organizers, regardless of how precarious they become. Instead, an “external” demand or campaign (sometimes quite specific) may be the very thing that initiates a process of “internal” development or consciousness-raising.³ From a particular demand or campaign, organizers can come to better understand and generalize from their experience, eventually shaping class consciousness. #CoronaContract, for example, *began* with our demand for contract extensions. Only after gaining experience and beginning to organize collectively around the demand, did we feel capable of drawing conclusions about the necessary strategy to win. Awareness of ourselves as *workers* (rather than solely insecure/underpaid academics), far from being a motivating factor, has actually come last in this series, as the growing militancy of casualized staff, and the development of a strengthened layer of union activists, has developed throughout the process of fighting for more.

Thus, we should be clear that an analysis of the economic realities and workplace dynamics to which workers are subject does not actually account for the processes of *organizing* struggles, nor does it always directly help us navigate these struggles, which

depend on decisions that workers collectively make. While we argued in *RP* that our deteriorating work conditions (including an increasing lack of control over our work) open up new demands and new fronts of struggle for us as workers and socialists, we should avoid seeing this as a fixed process. Class struggle (and its opposite) occurs in real-time through workers' activity, political thinking, and decision-making.

iii.

These remarks on the collective agency, self-awareness, and struggle of workers lead us back to the question of class consciousness, and how it's developing in our union, provoked by a recent [panel](#) with Roberto Mozzachiodi and Alex Coupe for the Historical Materialism 2021 conference. Mozzachiodi commented, in particular, on the “dual character” of the academic worker: “The work of pursuing intellectual contributions and valorizing academic status [comes] at the expense of recognizing and challenging their conditions of work. Casualized academics identify first as academics before workers, if they identify as workers at all.” We agree it is useful to draw attention to the “informal” components of intellectual and academic activity (networking, research, publishing, etc.) which condition workers ideologically and promote professional consciousness rather than class consciousness, but again, as above, we do not believe that this identification is inevitable or insurmountable, providing we organize and formulate demands that push against it.

The 2018 strikes in UK Higher Education, which moved our union into unprecedented national action against threats to pensions, were also informed by detailed, professional (literally: in many cases from pensions experts) critiques of management. This also led to the emergence of union networks structured around existing academic values of expertise, data analysis, and discussion – resembling research groups as much as political factions (although things have significantly changed since then). We believe that this perhaps overly “academic” approach to political action was an important stage in the development of consciousness, combining both professional ideology and class consciousness: a professionalized union discourse which appealed to the existing values of the workplace made it easier for a number of union members to go on strike for the first time. While initially some colleagues were engaged in futile efforts to demonstrate how much cleverer we are than university managers, this has largely given way to a more confident approach to industrial action, as members gain experience and repeatedly crash against the structural antagonism between ourselves and the ruling class.

While such a “policy expertise” position has some place in relation to the technicalities of the pension scheme, fighting casualisation requires a different approach – especially because making casualization seem technical and complex plays into management's hands, by dividing different kinds of precarious workers and avoiding the core issue of exploitation. Furthermore, while we have vociferously argued that the disputes over pensions and casualization need to be fought together, the struggle against casualization and for secure employment poses the need for broader demands that will unify different groups of workers. Generally, we have tried to suggest that demands on casualization should be straightforward and apply to the largest possible number of casualized workers despite the reality of fragmented and disparate contractual arrangements (including lack

of a formal contract) among these workers.⁴ Demands must also be concrete but ambitious, able to practically motivate workers to fight: this is why we put a number on our contract extension demands and called for 24-month minimum contracts, for example. As our struggles progress we can make new and bolder “transitional” demands.

A fighting approach also contradicts the imperatives of academic professionalism. For one, it is a near-compulsory gesture in contemporary academic research to suggest that questions are never fully closed or that an answer is only potentially indicated, that more research is needed, that the research merely poses further questions, etc. This unsureness and hedging in articulating our position, while sensible or at least strategic in the realm of research, is the opposite in the field of organizing. We were criticized at one point for being too “certain” of our positions, with the implication that we had taken a problematic stance of mastery. In truth, we inherently have to test ideas and seek feedback as we build towards a position, but we should sharply distinguish this form of “research” from the deferential and obscure behavioral formulas of academia. As Zac Lancaster suggests, “hedging formulas” are “used in academic writing as a mode of “interpersonal tact”; rather than “naming your naysayers” or engaging in adversarial arguments, academics are prone to put the argument indirectly to preserve relationships with other researchers. The converse is required of political debate, where we should clearly articulate our case, openly and directly confronting counterarguments, without getting lost in overwhelming technical detail. Furthermore, arguments from authority, whether quoting Marx or McAlevey, should have less influence in organizing, as workers must evaluate the available arguments and strategize based on their own collective intuitions and experience, developing their capacity for leadership from below in the process. Unlike in academic debate, our positions will stand or fall based on their appeal, and will be tested by workers in the arena.

Despite our attempts to draw out principles here, organizing is not a fixed or mechanistic process, as both the right and, at times, the left mistakenly believe. The conservative approach generally sees our forces in a purely numerical way (“if we don’t get X turnout, then employers won’t concede”), neglecting the emergent, subjective properties of action, and action’s ability to transform worker capacity and consciousness – how smaller action can spur on further, larger action. There is also an assumption that we conserve energy and resources by not taking action, when this is not always the case, particularly when *not* taking action subjects workers to further attack. This is why we have repeatedly argued for the dispute around the Four Fights (pay, equalities, workload, and casualization) to keep its momentum rather than to “pause.” Some left positions in the union can be mechanistic in a different way, calling indiscriminately for a range of activity on the assumption that this will automatically build consciousness rather than focusing on the most effective and strategic activity for building worker power (particularly industrial action and strikes) and the necessity for organizers to actively intervene to shape struggles. We believe organizers must be attuned to when workers are able to mobilize and when they’re exhausted, but also to remember that particular kinds of action, rather than waiting to act, may actually be the best solution to our exhaustion.

There is something faintly ridiculous about the suggestion made by some in our union that we could “pause” and “regroup” in the midst of the current crisis when – as later union messaging correctly identified – “we are at breaking point.”⁵ In reality, we currently have two options at our disposal: we collectively drown under the ever-increasing expectations of our jobs, handing management a free pass to plan “objectively” justified redundancies or fire-and-rehire schemes which further entrench casualization; or, we transform our inability to succeed in the workplace into collective work stoppages. Contrary to those who argue that some staff are too vulnerable and precarious to contribute to organizing strike action, we would argue that the only way to attend to the severe vulnerability that many university workers currently face under capitalism is to move from individual inability or failure, to collective refusal.

iv.

The range of “clever solutions” and “better management” that academic colleagues often propose to create more sustainable universities – while almost certainly helpful if implemented in an imaginary universe – are often not terribly clever, in that they ignore the actual incentive structures of capitalism, which our un-clever managers understand quite well as they try to ransack universities for every last cent of potential profit, at times openly courting the demise of individual departments and institutions. Although the ruling class, through bourgeois political economy and the state, sometimes attempts to pull things back from the brink to preserve their interests, they cannot permanently stabilize the “anarchy of production.” As managers’ complete unwillingness to even pretend to give a shit about us demonstrates (0% pay offer anyone?), social partnership is dead. Given this, we should be brutally dismissive of proposals that are “both good for us and the bosses,” as if the bosses see us as anything other than a line item to be slashed, while they call for blood to spill in union negotiations.

In his writings on class consciousness, Lukács addresses the reification of rationality within capitalism, in which every individual aspect of its systems undergoes constant refinement and specialization, while becoming increasingly alienated from the material reality it creates. He argues that this process is mirrored in bourgeois consciousness and philosophy. For example, the Kantian antinomies, which demonstrate reason’s separation from phenomenal reality, exactly mimic the development of bourgeois thought (for example, bourgeois political economy) towards specialized analysis detached from material experience. Nevertheless, Lukács asserts that this is not due to an error in thinking but due to the actual way in which capitalism is structured (“In reply to allegations that ‘the various factors are not treated as a whole’ Marx retorts that this criticism is levelled ‘as though it were the text-books that impress this separation upon life and not life upon the text-books.’”). Our managers are entirely divorced from the experiential reality of collectively worsening work conditions (which, as we regularly sloganize, entail worsening education) by their economic analysis of their own interests. The deteriorating conditions of higher education may seem supremely self-defeating from a policy perspective, particularly given the role the sector plays in the UK economy – just as the ruling class has failed to solve the climate crisis, Covid-19, and other existential threats,

despite their objective interest in doing so. We should not assume that anyone actually has the capacity to view and shape the system as a whole outside of the inherently reified thinking of that system – other than, of course, the working class.

References

- ↑1 Our article observed the deskilling of university work through dividing academic contracts between research- and teaching-only, but this can, and likely will, go much further. For example, the private equity/venture capital investment firm Matrix Partners suggests further subdividing the teaching role into separate “content instruction” and “inspiring and motivating” job functions: “Offline, the best teachers excel at two things: (1) teaching content and (2) inspiring and motivating students. Online, we can decouple these two roles, thereby scaling our supply of educators further.”

- ↑2 While this practice was widespread for a period, we recognize the shift from “we are being forced to strike” towards our General Secretary’s statement during the recent strike ballot that these fights are “too big to lose,” alongside slogans like “our backs are against the wall”/“we’re at breaking point.”

- ↑3 There may be a psychoanalytic insight here about consciousness and subjectivity taking place “externally” through relation to objects. As Joan Copjec writes, “it is the subject, the ‘I’, the ‘forger of new passions’ that appears only indirectly among the objects of the world.”

- ↑4 In this regard, as we support worker militancy in the US from afar, we are closely observing the future of the legislative campaign to expand tenure-track faculty at public institutions to at least 75% through the College for All Act, and pessimistic about its likelihood of motivating serious struggle from below. While many currently precarious workers would undoubtedly benefit from obtaining tenure, we see few opportunities for workers to organize to push through this and more expansive demands under Biden at present, and believe industrial action, unionization, and mass movements (which could put pressure on elected officials) offer more effective means of achieving lasting gains.

- ↑5 This also applies to attempts to popularize the notion (which we worked hard to combat) that previous strike action “failed” and that organizing and mobilizing for strikes was a waste of workers’ energy, without any awareness of the demoralizing nature of this message or how it might exacerbate the situation it supposedly describes.

References