Translator's Foreword

Cognitive Capitalism and the University

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What is the status of the university in an era when knowledge, communication, culture, and affect have been "put to work" with unprecedented intensity? This is the question that Gigi Roggero's text confronts, beginning with the premise that it is impossible to grasp the contemporary transformation of the university without considering the equally seismic shifts that are occurring in the condition of labor. *The Production of Living Knowledge* offers us the first extended analysis of the transformation of the university as read against the hypothesized emergence of cognitive capitalism and the forms of labor sustaining it. As such this book adds itself to a growing body of post-*operaista* ("post-workerist," or autonomist)[1] research that has been inquiring into this planetary, knowledge-intensive, and deeply unstable paradigm of capital accumulation over the past decade.[2] Roggero's critique of the contemporary university is a valuable contribution to the debates surrounding the politics of knowledge production within cognitive capitalism, and this Foreword aims to offer the reader some context for his challenging book and the perspective that animates it.

Post-*operaismo* is characterized by a double analysis of the present. Central to its political and epistemological approach is that it

begins its analysis of the labor–capital relation with labor's resistance and search for autonomy, a force that its hypothesis (consistently since the irruption of *operaismo* onto the Italian scene in the postwar years) suggests anticipates and provokes capitalist restructuring. The present is therefore read through a conflictual genealogy of the contemporary relation between forces. As Roggero is keen to remind us, however, post-*operaismo* does not thrive on nostalgia. Ever present in the autonomist tradition is the search for new and unusual forms of struggle, self-valorization, and the production of the common, a useful quality in a world where the spatial and temporal coordinates of political and economic production have shifted and realigned, sending us into unfamiliar terrain.

To look at the university in the era of cognitive capitalism, Roggero observes, is to witness a series of convergences. Foremost among these is that occurring between the university and the firm, a process in which the former is increasingly run like the latter. Corporate executives are well represented on university boards. Private consultants are brought in to restructure the academy, eliminating unprofitable programs and intensifying the labor of everyone else through increasingly intricate measures of the productivity of academic workers, who join the ranks of the precarious in the economy at large. The university seeks its niche, markets itself, and relentlessly commodifies the results of the intellectual production occurring within it. At its most advanced points it becomes—as Andrew Ross[3] has observed—a global university, transcending national borders and catering to an elite international market. Yet this convergence goes both ways. It is not a coincidence that the spaces of corporate high-tech production are referred to as "campuses": the transformation of the university occurs against the backdrop of a changed economy, in which the production process within firms at its cutting edge is increasingly knowledge- and communication-intensive but also collective and flexible. Software firms feed off the free productive activity of open source enthusiasts, video game companies incorporate gamers' modifications into the next version of the franchise, and recording labels harvest the collective preferences of fans in order to launch new pop stars. Within this scenario, the university no longer monopolizes the liberal-democratic role it fulfilled in modernity, as the sole purveyor

of authentic knowledge and the forger of elite classes within the boundaries of the nation-state. Rather, Roggero argues, it becomes the cipher of broader transformations within the economy and thus a privileged space to assess their contours.

Reading the transformation of the university from the perspective of the composition of living labor, Roggero traces the outlines of another key convergence—that occurring between the student and the worker. That two of the central figures of the global revolts of the 1960s and 1970s appear to be melding across the increasingly porous frontiers between the university and the labor market is another facet of the advent of cognitive capitalism, in which the distinction between work and life becomes increasingly tenuous. Laid-off manufacturing workers are sent back to school for endless job retraining in a process of "lifelong learning," but students also fuel the dead-end, precarious jobs of the service economy. There is no difference between the university and the "real world." While access to the university was dramatically expanded as a result of the struggles of the 1960s, the degrees universities offer have been devalued as a response, becoming, as the author points out, necessary even to access the most tenuous and exploited forms of employment. For the student/worker of cognitive capitalism—the "paradigmatic figures of a *hybrid condition*," Roggero observes—increasingly saddled with debt and facing a future without guarantees, the university becomes only one of many possible sites for the production, acquisition, and sharing of knowledge, one where knowledge is subjected to a regime of artificial scarcity in a context of growing abundance.

Yet even as students are encouraged to be entrepreneurial subjects and shrewd investors of their human capital, the cynical and disenchanted relationship with both the academy and the world of work that is produced by the generalization of precarious employment carries with it some serious risks for the governance of the rapidly changing academic sphere. Students have been the protagonists of some of the more compelling and vital revolts against their conditions of permanent existential insecurity, the devaluation of their education, and a lifetime of debt through the extortion of student loans. Graduate students, faced with diminishing prospects of a secure job in the academy are increasingly confronted with their status as relatively

cheap and plentiful labor in the provision of undergraduate education, a factor that creates growing affinities with those whose service work keeps the lecture halls clean, the courses running on time, and the cafeterias pumping out food. Not surprisingly, the years during which the research for this book was carried out have seen an acceleration of struggles within the sphere of postsecondary education around the world: occupations in the United States, Austria, Greece, and the United Kingdom; mass demonstrations of students in Italy, Ireland, and France; labor organizing drives across North America; strikes in Ontario, Quebec, Puerto Rico, New York, and Italy; and so on. After decades of university restructuring, there are signs of the recomposition of student movements along new lines, within and beyond the borders of the academy. These struggles have increasingly intersected with the development of autonomous education activities occurring outside of universities, from free schools to the bottom-up construction of alternative spaces for learning dedicated to the production of what Michel Foucault spoke of as knowledges "from below," or those "that have been disqualified as nonconceptual knowledges, as insufficiently elaborated knowledges: naïve knowledges, hierarchically inferior knowledges, knowledges that are below the required level of erudition or scientificity."[4] The common must be produced before it is defended, and in these experiments lie the seeds of a different model for the production of what Roggero calls *living knowledge*.

Roggero's approach to his topic is thoroughly immanent given his close involvement in the movements he writes about. The author has been part of the Italian Anomalous Wave movement (*Onda Anomala*) that shook Italy with a series of occupations, mass marches, and demonstrations in 2008, offering the only credible opposition to the Italian state's imposition of the Bologna Process, or the construction of a pan-European market for postsecondary education. He is a founding member of the Edu-factory Collective, a complex and ever-changing political machine that began as a transnational mailing list dedicated to the themes unpacked in this book. The list has thus far hosted two temporally circumscribed and themed rounds of discussion: the first on conflicts in the production of knowledge and the second on the hierarchization of the postsecondary education market and the construction of autonomous institutions. At the time of

publication, preparations are under way for a third round of discussion, this time centered on an emergent global campaign to contest the expansion of student debt, a model that is seen as a panacea within the restructuring of university education. The Edu-factory Collective has published a collected volume of articles from these discussions in English, Spanish, and Italian,[5] and has most recently embarked on the production of a Web journal.

The method of co-research that animates this book and the Edu-factory project also comes from the Italian context, tracing its roots back to the detailed worker inquiries into the changing composition of labor in the factories carried out by workerist militants in the 1960s.[6] Co-research, or *conricerca*, is the contemporary incarnation of radical research in the era of cognitive capitalism and has experienced a renaissance in feminist, labor, and student movements over recent decades. As Roggero suggests in the chapter dedicated to its discussion, co-research is at once the production of knowledge and organization, in which the boundary between the researched and the researcher dissolves, producing yet another convergence, transforming the object into a subject, and turning subjectivity into the new terrain of struggle just as it becomes a site for capitalist accumulation.

In the late 1960s, exponents from *operaismo* and veterans of the American Marxist tradition of analysis known as the Johnson-Forest Tendency came into contact in London, England.[7] They had a great deal in common. Both traditions had denounced the course of Stalinism and the blindness of Communist parties that supported the Soviet Union in their respective countries. More importantly, each was at the heart of struggles within and against its respective variants of Fordism, including the trade unions whose elites were busy selling unpopular collective agreements to increasingly militant and unpredictable industrial workers. For both tendencies the way forward was to be found in the organization of autonomy, one in which feminism mingled with anticolonial struggles and the refusal of labor mingled with self-organization on the factory floor and in the halls of the university. In their composition, the two forces sought out the lineaments of a radical politics for their times, one that could overturn Fordism and move beyond it.

Four decades later, as Roggero notes, Fordism has indeed collapsed, and no return to it is either possible or desirable. Capital's response to the crisis thrust upon it during the 1960s and 1970s was to transform itself, extending into previously inaccessible regions, eliciting different forms of subjectivity, and capturing new types of social relations. Faced with this transformation, the tradition of *operaismo* has mutated as well, gathering around the collective analysis of a new constellation of concepts—*multitude*, *precarity*, *subjectivity*, *biopolitical production*, and *the common*. Roggero's keen attention to the global transformations of labor furthers autonomist Marxism's longstanding interest in traditions, concepts, and struggles lying beyond Italian borders. This text's discussion of the relationship between struggles for Black Power and the institutionalization of black studies in the university, its careful reading of postcolonial literature and themes, and its attention to the transformations occurring in the production of knowledge in areas beyond the American and Italian case studies, which are the book's primary focus, are signs of post-*operaismo*'s will to develop political concepts and forms of organization that are capable of confronting the transnational scope of capital's new configuration. It is therefore only fitting that the research in this book has reactivated and energized the transatlantic currents of resistance once more, linking Italian and North American social movements together despite and beyond the variations in their specific contexts. The Edu-factory Collective has since become veritably transnational, linking a new generation of scholar-activists within or on the boundaries of the university from Minneapolis to Moscow to Taipei. Its e-mail list, dedicated to the conflicts and transformations within the university, now counts over a thousand subscribers, linking the struggles of the academic precariat and producing collective reflection on the new features of knowledge production under cognitive capitalism.

Some explanations are needed for the terminological choices made in the translation of this book. The original text is written in the first person plural, a practice that is much more common in Italian than it is in English, where the conventions of academic writing have dictated the removal of the author from the text's object of analysis. While the direct translation of this into English may strike the reader as somewhat awkward, the "we" Roggero speaks from is far

from royal: its use is meant to indicate a collective trajectory of analysis and production of counter-knowledge that is embodied within the practice of *conricerca*, of which the author is but one part. *Segno di parte* has been translated as the "partisan sign," indicating a genealogical reading of history in which the search for autonomy is seen to mark historical transformations and determine the restructurings of capital. *A monte* (literally, "facing the mountain") and *a valle* (literally, "facing the valley"), terms commonly used by theorists of cognitive capitalism to refer to the organization of the labor process before the fact (as is seen to be dominant within Fordism-Taylorism) and the harvesting of value after the fact (as is seen to be the tendency within capitalism's knowledge-intensive configuration), have been translated as "upstream" and "downstream."