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Toby Miller¹

Abstract

What does the global financial crisis teach us about not just fictive capital, but fictive economics? What is the future of the cognitariat and for precarious employment in the media industries?

Keywords

cultural studies, globalization, labor and media, media, media studies

Marxist intellectuals enjoy freedoms beyond the wildest dreams of their predecessors. How many paid subversives were there, pray, in the classical heyday of revolution? The mass Marxist parties sprang from tiny beginnings. It was the force of their ideas, not the size of their CVs, that captured the imagination of millions. Twenty years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, it's time for the Marxists to enquire into their own part in their own failure. They have not been denied an audience: they have lost it. Marxism was not pushed out of the game: it walked off the field.

Alan Freeman (2010, p. 85)

I grew up in the shadow of the Depression. For my parents, it was the defining event of their lives, rather than the World War II. During their formative years in the 1930s and 1940s, no one had invented what U.S. TV anchors came to name “the Greatest Generation” (shorthand, I assume, for the 20 million Soviets who died in the War Against Fascism, and particularly those who passed away during the Battle of Stalingrad, which, last I looked, decided the War in Europe).

World War II saw my parents lose many people, but the Depression left a greater mark on them. My father was the only child in his elementary school who wore shoes, because his father worked in a bank and was not laid off. For her part, my mother left school at 13, never to return, because she could obtain work and hence support her

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family. Although my parents had class mobility in the 1950s, they never assumed it would last. My father was an agnostic social democrat, my mother an atheistic lapsed Communist. Between them they instilled in me what is of course a basic lesson of Marxism—guess what, capitalism breeds conflict and crisis as profits fall while the economy grows (Potts, 2010). I was forever being warned not about nuclear war, but about unemployment.

So when the oil crisis of 1973-1974 met the coalminers' class struggle in Britain, it almost seemed natural to live through a 3-day work week, to have commodity shortages, for there to be no TV after the 10 o'clock news, to study by gaslight, to bathe weekly, and so on. This was what my parents had always told me would come to pass. When the global financial crisis hit in 2008, it again seemed almost inevitable. The actual timing and nature of the event surprised me, but like the attacks of September 11, 2001, the chaos and destruction did not, so apparent were their triggers.

The latest crisis has confirmed the notion, active in my hearing since the early 1970s, that "the West" is the past and "the East" is the future. We know this today because (as was the case 40 years ago) White English speakers are busily writing state-of-the-nation, state-of-the-academy, state-of-the-globe books and articles that tell us so. Then it was about China emerging once Mao died, and Japan innovating through business nous. Now it is about China making things and subsidizing the people who buy them, and India making and subsidizing what's left over. Area-studies experts celebrate a renewed centrality, while closer to our own field, the new right of cultural studies, the creative-industry mavens, denounce the Left as old-fashioned and unrealistic in today's world of prosumers and a declining United States (for useful background on prosumption, see Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010).

But ordinary people see things rather differently. A Globescan poll for the BBC shows that in Pakistan, Egypt, and Russia, between 70% and 80% of the public regrets the decline of the Soviet Union. And global capitalism? The same poll discloses that a third of the population of Brazil, Mexico, Ukraine, Spain, and France deem capitalism "fatally flawed," while significantly smaller minorities in most countries think it "works well."

This suggests to me that there is a yearning for a true alternative. What might that be? All the anti-Marxists who were astonished by the September 11 attacks; staggered by the absence of Weapons of Mass Destruction in Iraq, apart from those owned and operated by the Pentagon; and gobsmacked by the financial crisis, never said "sorry," "I was wrong," or "You were right." They just continued on their merry way, professing amazement that "no one" foresaw what happened. This is in part due to the standing of Marxism and the Left more generally.

In the case of this crisis, it results from a failure to recognize that the entire framework of "the economy," an entity with needs and emotions, is an invention—that economics *constructs* the economy, rather than merely *describing* it (Arminen, 2010). For example, English-language media references to "the economy" as an anthropomorphic subject, with needs and desires, derive from coverage of the Depression. Press attention shifted from relationships between producers and consumers of goods

(a labor-process discourse of the popular newspapers that dissented from conventional economics) and onto relationships between different material products of labor, with a similar change in emphasis from use value to exchange value. The discursive commodities “the economy” and “the market” were given life and value through being textualized, then fetishized as empirical truth (Emmison, 1983; Emmison & McHoul, 1987).

So with the crisis of the 1930s and the diffusion of Keynesianism, “the economy” entered popular knowledge. Hence the discourse of my parents. This is not to say that my father’s memory about shoes, or my mother’s experience of leaving school, were invented. Their recollections were real. But those histories were part of the Keynesian triumph, a metadiscourse called macroeconomics. It related to actual, material reality, but like all statistical forms, it textualized material interests and conflicts. And it led, along with the microeconomic ideology that displaced it, to derivative instruments—the inevitable outcome of economics’ mathematicization and its seduction of and by capital. Textualization is crucial to all endeavors. It has special piquancy in the field of communication. I’m specifically interested in what is happening to media work—the process of textualization. This is a sphere where Marxism could make a significant contribution.

The prosumer idea alluded to above derived from the right-wing U.S. futurist, Alvin Toffler, 30 years ago. His fellow futurists helped generate the neoliberal discourse of creative industries we know today: to 1960s antisocialists like Zbigniew Brzezinski (1969) and Daniel Bell (1977), communications technologies promised the departure of manufacturing from the First World to the Third, and the rise of “clean,” “safe” industries in the Global North. Toffler also invented the less well-known but more useful concept, “the cognitariat” (1983). It has since been taken up and redispersed by the Left.

Antonio Negri (2007) applies the term to people mired in contingent media work who have educational qualifications and facility with cultural technologies and genres. The cognitariat plays key roles in the production and circulation of goods and services, through both creation and coordination. This “culturalization of production” enables these intellectuals, by placing them at the center of world economies, but it simultaneously disables them, because it does so under conditions of flexible production and ideologies of “freedom.” What used to be the fate of artists and musicians—where “making cool stuff” and working with relative autonomy was meant to outweigh ongoing employment—has become a norm. The outcome is contingent labor as a way of life. This new proletariat is not defined in terms of location (factories), tasks (manufacturing), or politics (moderation of ruling-class power and ideology), and it is formed from those whose immediate forebears, with similar or less cultural capital, were confident of secure health care and retirement income. It lacks both the organization of the traditional working class and the political *entrée* of the old middle class.

The U.S. media lost 200,000 full-time jobs in the decade after the 2000 dot-com bubble, more than half of them in newspapers (“Media Jobs?,” 2008). The Bureau of Labor Statistics warns that “a large number of jobseekers” remains “attracted by the

glamour of this industry” (2008), even though projections for employment are dismal. Consider television. For decades, employment in TV expanded above U.S. national averages, with cable a particular source of job growth (Toto, 2000). But television companies are now producing, distributing, and exhibiting texts through a wide array of platforms, mechanisms, and funding systems. This proliferation, alongside technological, regulatory, and wider macroeconomic changes, has dramatically altered the landscape and experience of media work.

Before the recession was officially decreed, in 2007, screen writers’ employment was at its lowest ebb for 11 years (Writers Guild, 2008). There are fewer jobs in U.S. broadcast TV, although cable continues to grow. This disparity is partially due to the change in viewing numbers, and partly to the fact that cable is a largely un-unionized sector by comparison with broadcast, so wages, security, and health insurance decline while profit margins increase. In 2008, the weakness of the advertising economy was hidden by two gigantic stimuli—the Olympic Games and the Presidential election. The key difference emerging in 2009 was the collapse of nonmedia firms that paid huge sums of money for national television coverage, such as car companies and big-box or high-street retail stores (Consoli, 2008; “Most Media,” 2008).

At the same time as “good,” ongoing jobs in TV diminish, cable networks continue to emerge—13% more in 2004 by contrast with the year before—and gain profitability, with each year of the past decade bringing advertising growth due to the discounts available by comparison with the old networks. But this is no index of an open market. Rather, it signals additional ownership concentration: 90% of the major cable networks are owned by 5 conglomerates, which also run many of the companies that make the shows they buy. Before deregulation in 1995, networks had to abide by an antitrust logic. Instead of screening shows they had produced, they bought the right to put on programs made by others; as a consequence, independent houses proliferated—there were 40 major independents. But when these rules were rescinded, many small businesses fell apart. Big TV corporations moved production in-house so that they could sell texts through infinite other territories and media. The people who made the creative decisions about everything from story lines to wallpaper were overridden again and again by men in suits who lacked relevant expertise. Today, these desk-bound businesspeople want to prevent the web from being subject to the same wage conditions as television (Dobuzinskis, 2009; Herskovitz, 2007; “Most Media,” 2008; Richardson & Figueroa, 2005).

This trend toward job loss by TV artists has been in evidence for some time. When I migrated to New York City in 1993, interviewers for broadcast stations’ news shows would come to my apartment as a team: a full complement of sound recordist, camera operator, lighting technician, and journalist. Now they are rolled into one person. More content must be produced from fewer resources, and more and more multi-skilling and multi-tasking are required. In my example, the journalist has taken over other roles. The job of the editor is also being scooped up into the new concept of the “preditor,” who must perform the functions of producer and editor. And if journalists work for companies like NBC, they often write copy for several websites *and* provide different

edited versions of the original video for MSNBC, CNBC, CNBC Africa, CNBC Europe, and CNBC Asia, in addition to the parent network and individual channels in various countries.

How did this occur? It gets back to our 1960s futurist friends, Bell, Brzezinski, and Toffler, and the New International Division of Labor (NIDL; Fröbel, Heinrichs, & Kreye, 1980). The NIDL has seen developing markets for labor and sales and the shift from the spatial *sensitivities* of electrics to the spatial *insensitivities* of electronics. This has pushed businesses beyond treating Third World countries as suppliers of raw materials to look on them as shadow setters of the price of work, competing among themselves and with the First World for employment. As production split across continents, the prior division of the globe into a small number of empires and satellites and a majority of underdeveloped countries has been compromised. The old IDL kept labor costs down through the formal and informal slavery of colonialism (the trade in people and indentureship) and importation of cheap raw materials with value added in the metropole. Then, successful action by the working class at the centre redistributed income. The response from capital was to export production to the Third World.

Now this has become a norm in culture as well. Work may be subject to local, national, regional, and international fetishization of each component, matching the way that the labor undertaken is largely fetishized away from the final text. Business leeches want flexibility in the numbers they employ, the technology they use, the place where they produce, and the amount they pay—and inflexibility of ownership and control. The orthodoxies that created this economy, the neoclassical *doxa* preached by neoliberal chorines favor an economy where competition and opportunity cost are in the litany and dissent is unforgiveable, as crazed as collective industrial organization. Hence, the success of Mindworks Global Media, a company outside New Delhi that provides Indian-based journalists and copyeditors who work long-distance for newspapers whose reporters are supposedly in the United States and Europe. There are 35%-40% cost savings (Lakshman, 2009).

How to respond? Progressives need to account for the postindustrial standing of these cultural workers, and reject a neoliberal embrace of casualized labor:

for those who can keep a job in the post-Fordist labour market, decent and meaningful work opportunities are reducing at a phenomenal pace in the sense that, for a high proportion of low- and middle-skilled workers, full-time, life-long employment is unlikely. (Cosma Orsi 2009, p. 35)

The discourse of neoliberal knowledge work needs serious reconceptualization, because grotesque inequality is the stalking horse of romantic deregulation. So we need a truly alternative vision to the new right of cultural studies that preaches about “creativity” and prosumption. For while there is a sweetly engaging quality to the amateur discourse of peer-to-peer exchanges that claims to elude corporate and state dominance, it relies on a series of anecdotes in place of an analysis of the structural

obstacles to an egalitarian social system that would give all people time and space for leisure regardless of class and other axes of subjectivity (Orsi, 2009).

The rather unworthy hopes of immiseration that some of us quietly harbored in 2009 have not seen a policy reaction against capitalism, despite its discrediting in the public mind. The global financial system is not being revised or scrapped—merely reformed via changes at its margins—while reforms encouraging labor organization have languished (Baccaro, 2010). Essentially, we lack a voice that speaks from both traditional workers and the new cognitariat. Instead, we open each issue of cultural-studies journals and wall-street journals and learn a lot about prosumers. And how old-fashioned “we” are. Cultural Marxism has fucked up in its fetish for relative autonomy and its overanxiety about economic reductionism, just as surely as neoclassical economics has fucked up in denying that its categories are inventions that create the world rather than accounting for it.

Across the human sciences, disciplines are rethinking their foundations in the wake of the crisis (Walby, 2010). We must do so, too. Here are some key agenda items:

- a. address the situation of the cognitariat, and retextualize its casualized stature within economic discourse
- b. examine the need for new taxes on the use of the NIDL in the cultural field
- c. rethink outmoded entities like “film schools” and “journalism schools”; and
- d. engage the new right of cultural studies and their recycling of futurist myths.

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Bio

Toby Miller works at the University of California, Riverside. His latest books are *Makeover Nation: The United States of Reinvention* (2008), *The Contemporary Hollywood Reader* (2009), and *Television Studies: The Basics* (2010). His work has been translated into Spanish, Chinese, Portuguese, Swedish, and Japanese.