

*Extended Abstract*

## **The class situation(s) of knowledge work (M\_Title)**

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*Accepted:*

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### **Introduction (M\_Heading1)**

If we live in cognitive capitalism or within a knowledge society, the leading social forces do not exert class rule. The once “new class” of scientifically or humanistically trained intellectual workers (Gouldner 1979) has not, as its explorers of the 1960s and 1970s assumed, become the ruling class. But its probable members have spread throughout society, from the headquarters of global information technology corporations through well paid specialist positions in business, political and academic organizations to the precarious creative scene and a newly taylorized cybertariat or cognitariat. While this omnipresence has been captured by neomarxist concepts like mass intellectuality, its impact on class formation remains to be theorized. (M\_Text).

In my contribution, I plan to make new sense of an old question of Antonio Gramsci’s: is there an independent class of intellectuals? My focus will be on class interests and their proto-political articulation. I will develop an overview of central common characteristics of the situation of different knowledge workers, but also trace potential and actual lines of class division or fracturing.

1. *The means of intellectual production: common and incorporated?* The starting point will be a specific productive situation in which post-operaists see the potential unity of the new class: the means of intellectual production are both more individualized, incorporated in the producers, and more social, dispersed through common culture, than in industrial work. This feature sometimes stirs up broad solidarity against the owners of classical productive property, famously in the free software scene. However, it can also provoke narrow professional

interests. Scientists, lawyers, teaching professions etc. have a long tradition of controlling access to their ranks and thus maintaining high income levels, and in new expert cultures individual negotiations seem to prevail over any solidarity. Examples from ‘academic capitalism’ to software programming will serve to discuss these tensions.

2. *The process of intellectual production: increasingly incalculable?* From Marx’s machine fragment to Virno and Vercellone, the time of intellectual labour is portrayed as not measurable. Yet critics like Caffentzis (2011) have forcefully argued that this time *is* actually measured, in terms of deadlines or simply by calculating the time which is averagely needed to perform a task – to teach a student, to write a text, to translate a code. The interesting question for class theory is whether there is a dividing line between intellectual workers whose tasks are perfectly calculable and those who are expected to produce innovations or solutions which are not so easy to monitor. Under this aspect, the new world of intellectual work may simply be described with the conventional distinction between ordinary dependant work and service classes.
3. *The institutions of intellectual production: public or neo-feudal?* Where intellectual goods are nonrival and exclusion from using them is impossible, costly, not justifiable or counterproductive, public investment in their production seems to be a natural solution. This could be a strong reason for information socialism, at least for a social democratic state with high taxes and a strong class of state employees. Yet the reality of cost intensive public institutions and infrastructures of knowledge is more public-private – dominated by corporate agents, publically funded private institutions and wealthy families. The best examples are academic systems, which allow to ask whether the public needs of the knowledge economy mainly engender neo-feudal oligarchies.
4. *A split in the nature of intellectual work:* Gouldner’s helpful distinction between humanistically trained “intellectuals” and technically trained “intelligentsia” not only points to a strong possible coalition, but also to divisions and conflicts. While a “culture of critical discourse” may unite both groups, an orientation on utility on the one side and on interpretation and reflection on the other side may lead to a cultural split. In various institutional struggles, from the politics of education to the promotion of art and science, a technology-capital-expert coalition stands against a humanist-generalist-culture cluster. The question is whether this is only appearance or really a deep, possibly unsurmountable conflict.
5. *A gap in the power of intellectual workforce:* As noted, neither technological experts nor humanist intellectuals have become dominant. They haven grown in numbers, but power and income still concentrate circles closely around capital (Castells 1997). An ironic point is that these circles have become professionalized and intellectualized, too: as financial experts, lawyers, managers etc. Even their institutional places of training intersect with other intellectual workers; their selection involves academic degrees. This is a strong reason to see a very simple stratification in the class(es) of intellectual workers – while a small group of them participates in capital control and state power, a larger fraction may reinvent themselves as “dominated fraction of the ruling class” (Bourdieu), and a still larger fraction remains simply excluded from access to power positions.

The aim of my presentation is to see whether this last tendency is without alternative, or whether forceful middle-precarious coalitions of intellectual workers against the private appropriation of common knowledge goods are possible. (M\_Text).

## References and Notes

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