

# The Student Commodity: Labour and Neoliberal Ideology in Public Education

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**ABSTRACT:** This paper attempts to analyze some mechanisms of neoliberal ideology in the public university system. Drawing upon political economy of communication resources we propose that one can assess the aforementioned mechanisms as a type of audience commodity work by which neoliberal ideology incorporates students into the process of ideological production, the goal of which is to shape student's understanding of education and self as a marketable commodity. In making this argument, the paper modifies Dallas Smythe's conception of the audience commodity and introduces the notion of the student-commodity. We argue that, ultimately, the role of the public university in a neoliberal regime is to produce the student-commodity and sell it to the corporate sector. These are examples of what Smythe calls the "consciousness industry," and we argue is the core productive activity of the public university system.

**KEYWORDS:** Dallas Smythe, audience commodity, labour, public universities, neoliberalism

## Introduction

In 2001 Chris Barrett and Luke McCabe, two about to be high school graduates from New Jersey, created a website offering themselves as "walking billboards to companies" by which they meant that they "would put corporate logos on their clothes, wear a company's sunglasses, use their golf clubs, eat their pizza, drink their soda, listen to their music, or drive their cars." Doing this would be in return for a sponsorship of their college education and living expenses. (Associated Press 2000)

In an online interview posted on their website the then teens stated that they had even developed a "business plan to show the benefits to any potential sponsors" and that this decision was inspired by celebrities' endorsement of corporate products. The interview ended with Barrett and McCabe's pledge of full commitment to the potential corporate sponsors: "We're going to be working constantly for our

sponsors" they emphasized. While at some point this project might have started as a playful exercise by teenagers possibly anxious about the cost of university education, as the story gained publicity, and with it the possibility to actually make the hair-brained scheme work, so these two decided to seriously pursue this strategy. Eventually, after negotiating with several corporations, First USA – one of the largest US credit card companies – agreed to sponsor the two boys in return for unspecified services.

Barrett and McCabe were featured in Joel Bakan's 2003 documentary *The Corporation*. In the film they claimed that they do not consider their decision to neither be sellouts or shills, but rather a strategy to secure their education (their livelihoods), without having to take excessive loans. For Barrett and McCabe, brought up in a society that has learned to satisfy all its wants and needs in terms of commod-

ity exchange, it is considered a perfectly reasonable thing to transform themselves into commodities in order to attain another commodity, education.

At first glance it appears that Barrett and McCabe have been subjected to a veil of reification which prevents them from seeing the real social relations that operate in their society and contributes to their alienation. Recall that Lukacs in his chapter on 'Reification and Class Consciousness' points to the perception of this type of action though being naturalized as actually perpetuating alienation. "The transformation of the commodity relation into a thing," he writes,

stamps its imprint upon the whole consciousness of man; his qualities and abilities are no longer an organic part of his personality, they are things which he can 'own' or 'dispose of' like the various objects of the external world. [Lukacs 1972:100]

Reification could explain why, instead of questioning the system for its turning of primary public social goods, such as education, into commodities, the two teens not only enact the rules of the system, but by employing their creativity become role models of ideological behaviour. This ensures the system's thriving and reproduction. Moreover, it has hallmarks of the recursive nature of reification. As Lukacs explains,

Just as the capitalist system continuously produces and reproduces itself economically on higher and higher levels, the structure of reification progressively sinks more deeply, more fatefully and more definitely into the consciousness of man. [Lukacs 1972:93]

Selling themselves as commodity is an emulation of other reified subjects, with the status of celebrities, within late capitalism. As Barrett and McCabe explain their choice:

We were...thinking about all the sports stars and actors and how they get corporate sponsored to do what they do best—which is act, play sports and look good in front of the camera. I thought, why can't normal people get sponsored to do what they do best? [BrandEra Times 2001]

Lukacs purports that commodities become "constitutive of society" when they "penetrate society in all its aspects and remold it in its own image."

However, while this "veil of reification" explanation may account for the general prevailing conditions in which such consciousness comes into existence, by itself it is an incomplete explanation, at least for this case. This is because it misses the coercive change in behaviour from one of jest, and perhaps even one ridiculing the exorbitant cost of higher education, to one of market championship and entrepreneurship. As a better explanation, one that can accommodate the change in behaviour and beliefs, we propose instead a tripartite explanation involving the convergence of consciousness, state, and market. The primary benefit of this tripartite convergence explanation is, as we will show, that it is better able to attend to the nuances of involving persons co-opted into, or consenting to, ideological formation. Indirectly, our tripartite convergence explanation can reconcile accounts which attribute ideological production to mutually exclusive single sites. For example some accounts argue that the state disrupts the market from being able to function as an independent site of ideological production, while other accounts claim that the market undercuts the coercive capacity of the state. The infighting between these types of accounts is not sufficiently sensitive to how ruling elites use both as venues to extend their interests.

To advance our explanation, the paper will examine how good natured students like Barrett or McCabe become involved in ideological formation. Importantly, however, we wish to emphasize that in our explanation, Barrett and McCabe are the subjects of their own labour; that is to say that they do the ideological labour required to convince themselves that they can be treated as commodities. In other words, while the preconditions exist such that their reorientation is possible, they themselves do the work of reorienting their worldviews.

In our account, students are themselves doing the work required to prepare themselves for labour positions. In *Labour and Monopoly Capital*, a work that examines labour relations in industrial capitalism, Harry Braverman explains that in the era of

monopoly capitalism the term working class can encompass almost anyone. In this sense, the majority of students can be viewed as either the future working class that will be employed primarily in various positions of the capitalist enterprise, or in service to that enterprise.

As a case study, Barrett and McCabe offer a useful means to tint the various mechanics at play within the public university system and hence provide good examples of the aforementioned convergence within neoliberal public institutions and the logic thereof. The case study demonstrates how public institutions facilitate the transformation of the citizen into commodities and consumers. This process is a key site of capitalist ideological production.

### The Convergence of Consciousness, State, and Market

In *The German Ideology*, Marx and Engels state that “the ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas. ... The class which has the means of material production at its disposal, has control at the same time over the means of mental production.” (1969:39) Yet, if in previous epochs (slave-owning societies, feudalism) the relationships of power and the rulers of society are clear, capitalism masks its exploitative nature by the existence of the market where mass produced products can be exchanged. Jorge Larrain explains Marx’s notion of ideology:

The exchange of equivalents by free individuals in the market is seen on the surface of society and conceals the hidden extraction of surplus value in the process of production, it naturally tends to be reproduced in the minds of both capitalists and laborers as equality and freedom, the linchpins of capitalist ideology.

Larrain continues,

The emphasis is put in Marx not on ideology being a worldview, or a discourse consisting of articulated concepts and images by means of which we try to make sense of social existence; the emphasis is put on ideology being a specific form of distortion, not just false consciousness – its function of sustaining domination and reproducing the capitalist system by masking contradictions. [Larrain 1983:56-57]

Marx’s concept of commodity fetishism directly relates to the characteristics of capitalism as a concealment of social relations, hiding the real nature of the system. Marx defines commodity fetishism as the substitution of social human relations with interactions between “things.” “A definite social relation between men,” Marx writes, “assumes, in their eyes, the fantastic form of a relation between things” (Marx 1977:165). Under capitalism the products of human labour are assigned exchange value in the form of money and become commodities. Because of their exchange value on the market those commodities are not perceived as what they are, simply products of human labour. Rather they appear naturally to have a force of their own. (Marx 1977:167) Moreover, to quote Marx, “these commodities conceal the real social relations that take place during their process of production.” Instead “their own social action takes the form of the action of objects, which rule the producers instead of being ruled by them.” (Marx 1977:169) Relevant to the forthcoming analysis, it is important to remember that the process of commodity fetishism mystifies the domination of the capitalist mode of production, making it difficult to perceive, both to the people involved, and those analyzing it.

Lukacs’ reification takes its cue from the mystification and domination of the commodity form. However, rather than confining the concept to the economy, Lukacs expresses the viewpoint that commodity fetishism is the central structural problem of modern capitalist society. This is because it conceals the true nature of people’s relations with one another. Lukacs calls the outcome of this expanded process of commodity fetishism reification. The most important aspect, for Lukacs, is that “reification requires that society should learn to satisfy all its needs in terms of commodity exchange” (1972:91). Certainly Barrett and McCabe were trying to fulfill their desire and need for education by commodity exchange; except where most others were to exchange money for education, they were prepared to exchange themselves for it.

Central to the Marxist critique of ideology is that it conceals the social history of production, thus hindering the social good from being able to fully develop. As it applies to Barrett and McCabe,

they are unable to perceive the value and social good of education from a position that does not defer in part to conventional capitalistic conceptions of production.

At the time that Lukacs was writing, he claimed that “the internal organization of a factory [contains] in concentrated form the whole structure of capitalist society” (1972:90). Given, however, the changing nature of the economy, one area that could be considered akin to the factory is the public university, insofar as it is a concentrated site of basic knowledge production that the economy draws upon, prepares persons for diverse types of production, and comprises, as per Braverman’s definition introduced above, the working class and soon to be working classes. Furthermore it has the characteristic capitalist division of labour, and practices that come as a result of the mode of production needed for the mass production of commodities. The public university thus is in a unique position to define relations between individuals and transform their consciousness.

As reification applies to the public university, specialization in one sphere leads to the destruction of the image of the whole. Thus, knowledge can easily become deprived of context. Reification and specialization are characteristic of the same process that has profoundly negative consequences for human consciousness, because it prevents the person from seeing the real processes operating in capitalism. “As the process advanced and forms became more complex and less direct,” Lukacs writes “it became increasingly difficult and rare to find anyone penetrating the veil of reification” (1972:86). For example, when a person hears the expression ‘diamonds are forever’ one does not think of the commodity chain, possibly involving horrible exploitation and genocide, that turns rough diamonds into precious commodities. Rather the commercial symbolism conceals the real history of the product and its exchange on the market. This inability to imagine the whole assures that the system continues to reproduce more easily than if this labour process was known. The same principles operate in public universities. Here the labour process makes it difficult for students to question the purpose of the institution as a whole, or to properly set themselves in relation to that whole. It is unlikely that Barrett

and McCabe know neither the labour process nor the labour history of the institution they aspire to enter. They mostly see it as a route to satisfy personal aspirations.

Lukacs’ conception of capitalism was as an economic system dominating social life, shaping social relations and consciousness in accordance with the needs of the established economic order. In his analysis of the position of the worker in a system of monopoly capitalism, written fifty years later after Lukacs’ primary work, Braverman made similar observations:

[Monopoly] capitalist production takes over the totality of individual, family and social needs and, in subordinating them to the market, also reshapes them to serve the needs of capital. [1974:271]

And

[It] is a process that involves economic and social changes on the one side, profound changes in psychological and affective patterns on the other. [1974:277]

In classical Marxian analysis economic production forms the base of a capitalist society and thus is a fundamental aspect of its existence. In *Capital* Marx writes:

My view is that each particular mode of production, and the relations of production corresponding to it at each given moment, in short the economic structure of society, is the real foundation, on which arises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness and that the mode of production of material life conditions the general process of social, political and intellectual life. [1977:175 n35]

In other words, the economic base determines the superstructure that forms social and political life. Yet, Althusser points out that the reproduction of the conditions of production is fundamental for the existence of the capitalist system (Althusser 1971:124). But for reproduction to take place, a belief system that society accepts as normal and that promotes the value of this reproduction is required. The ideas and beliefs of society are parts of the superstructure. In

Althusserian theory the superstructure takes a primary role and becomes the necessary condition for the existence of the economic base. For Althusser, ideology always manifests in meanings of material practices, rituals and institutions. Thus, an examination of the meanings of the institutional purpose of the public university can be one means to explore the workings of the economic base.

Althusser differentiates between the coercive structures of the State, the Repressive State Apparatus (RSA) and those that operate by forming of belief systems, the Ideological State Apparatuses (ISA). Even though both RSA and ISA combine the use of repression and ideology, the former functions primarily by repression and the later functions primarily by ideology. The ISAs are “multiple, distinct, relatively autonomous” and consist of the educational system, the religious systems, the political system, the family, cultural institutions, and communications. But what unifies the ISAs is the presence of ruling class’ ideology (Althusser 1971:142). All ISAs contribute to the same result: the reproduction of the relations of production, i.e. capitalist relations of exploitation (Althusser 1971:146).

According to Althusser, the educational system in modern capitalism is the most important ISA, where children learn the skills to sustain the capitalist system.

I believe that the ideological State apparatus which has been installed in the dominant position in mature capitalist social formations as a result of a violent political and ideological class struggle against the old dominant ideological State Apparatus, is the educational ideological apparatus. [1971:145]

From Althusser’s perspective the primary function of ideology is to constitute individuals as subjects to a higher authority. Ideology interpellates subjects. He terms this higher authority the Absolute Subject, around which all other subjects orbit and determine their various courses of action (1971:168). In the case of neoliberal ideology this higher authority is the ruling class’s version of market.

In Althusser’s view ideology always manifests itself in practice. The behaviour of Chris Barrett and

Luke McCabe demonstrates this notion: their decision to act in such a manner could not have been prompted if the existing social relations did not permit this act, if the existing social relations deemed it inappropriate. It is precisely because neoliberal ideology’s social relations exist, that Barrett and McCabe think it is perfectly normal to become corporate billboards. Their website shows that they acted out of the realization that this was a savvy business tactic to achieve success. Thus, they see themselves as individuals who are able to market themselves and reap the rewards of their adeptness, rather than as products of the capitalist system, who can be sold on the market, that has grown to determine all aspects of human existence. They simply acted in the ways that neoliberalism expected them to act – like good subjects. Additionally, since ideology permits no viable alternatives, Barrett and McCabe were rendered incapable of comprehending a different system whose economic structure permits different social relations. The process of reproduction becomes complete through the role that another major ISA, the media plays. In various major networks, such as CNN, NBC, FOX, ABC, and numerous newspapers and magazines, the two teenagers are presented as another success story that can only happen in America (Giroux 2002:426). The Barrett-McCabe case is an example of how education is perceived as a commodity and how students perceive themselves as such.

### **The Neoliberal Restructuring of Education and its Impact**

Keeping Althusser’s aforementioned comments in mind, it would be a misnomer to treat neoliberalism exclusively as an economic form. Rather we consider it to be a convergence where the ruling classes have captured the state and use political and economic means to establish a mechanism design which skews privileges and resources to themselves at the expense of the working class. In this sense, neoliberalism is by no means a laissez-faire capitalism, or antagonistic to state economic planning or policy, but rather requires direct intervention into the public life to create their preferential mechanism design, followed by a commensurate mobilization of state and public sector productive capacities to support this practice.

Whereas the classical liberal economy revolves around the fairness of exchange, neoliberalism emphasises the creation and immediate extraction of value as per the purpose of the aforementioned mechanism design. One method of doing so is to disinvest people of their capacity to circulate value amongst their local circumstances, and extract that value elsewhere. It is trickle up economics.

To assist in this, a successful neoliberal governance regime requires a process of organizing subject's consciousness to respond in particular ways, and a state apparatuses whose objective is to treat individuals as subservient to the power elite's interests. Through concrete policies the state both rewards behaviour and attitudes driven by economic self-interest and punishes those groups that are not economically savvy enough to adapt to the new rules of the game. An example of the first movement is the states' regulation of laws and economic sectors, while an example of the second is the states' reduction of social welfare policies that ameliorate the conditions of the most vulnerable.

As Read (2009) argues neoliberalism masks class differences and exploitation by presenting a picture of society where all are competitive economic actors driven by incentive structures. The key to success in this environment is "human capital" – or acquiring and nurturing skills that increase benefits and decrease costs. This is what produces the neoliberal subjects. If, as Harvey has shown, Fordism aimed to discipline workers into consumer subjects through the practices of scientific management and affordable pay that stimulated the consumption of the produced commodities, neoliberalism forms subjects through re-regulation and alienation. Ultimately, "individuality is reduced to the endless pursuit of mass-mediated interests, pleasures, and commercially produced lifestyles" (Giroux 2002:426). Well-being is understood as the ability to reproduce labour, a cost borne by individuals themselves.

At the level of ideology, the rhetoric of neoliberalism, at least with regard to the public sector, is that it should be structured according to market principles, the management of public goods being informed by the logic of market utility. This means that the aforementioned things are no longer supported by wide

spread taxation, but a pay-as-you-go model. There is however a say-do problem here. Neoliberals appeal to free trade, free markets, or economic entrepreneurship for the purposes of open competition, while their actions suggest anything but. Therefore we should be cautious not to be fooled by the rhetoric of neoliberalism. Recall that Marx understood the process of exchange to conceal the exploitative production process as giving the ideological base of capitalism, so too must one not be caught up in the concealing process itself.

Wendy Brown captures the essence of neoliberal rationality that has assigned a very specific role to the state. She writes that it is to disseminate market values to all institutions and social action, even when the market relations do not exist. (see Brown 2005:40) She argues that neoliberalism erases the discrepancies between economic and moral behaviour. Consequently any form of action, as long as it is prompted by economic incentives, becomes permissible. Further, she points to a qualitative difference between the constituted subject under liberal capitalism and the constituted subject under neoliberalism. Whereas in liberal capitalism, the citizen is the legal subject of the state, under neoliberalism, subjects are conditioned to respond to economic signals, and to think of themselves primarily in these terms. This is why the neoliberal state promotes self-interest, investment and competition. As Brown points out, "the state ... must construct and construe itself in market terms, develop policies and promulgate a political culture that treats citizens exclusively as rational economic actors in every sphere of life." (Brown 2006:694) In other words, a successful neoliberal governance regime requires a process of social conditioning. Hence, the success of neoliberal policies depends on a process of measures designed by state apparatuses whose objective is to shape individuals as particular types of subjects.

Hyslop-Margison and Sears give a clear account of how the neoliberal ideology restructures societies on a global scale and impacts perceptions of education:

Neoliberal ideology removes the economic sphere from moral or social discussion by portraying these latter realms of discourse as entirely dependent on

the former. In other words, appropriate social and moral action is determined by what works for the market, and what works for the market, according to the prevailing logic, is neoliberalism. All other spheres of life are correspondingly designed to address the needs of the marketplace and any interference with market logic becomes unthinkable let alone possible. Sadly, for younger students who have lived “inside” this worldview their entire lives, their ability to even imagine a different social structure is barely perceptible. [2006:11]

Furthermore, as Giroux points out, neoliberalism translates into the colonizing of the public sphere; everything that is not operating in accordance with the laws of profit is either turned to operate that way or squeezed out (2002:430). In that sense education is not an exception.

Neoliberalism commodifies public universities through the corporate restructuring of programs, redirecting research through changing the incentive structures, involving universities in public-private-partnership, threatening academic freedom, attacking teaching unions, transforming university spaces into places of advertising of corporate values indebting and employing students as corporate salesmen. Henry Giroux illustrates how the ideological language of neoliberalism stamps its mark on the educational system. He writes that “the corporate commercial paradigm describes...students as customers, admitting college students as ‘closing a deal’ and university presidents as CEOs” (Giroux 2002:430) Furthermore, “academic disciplines are valued according to their exchange value in the market,” while students “take courses that provide them with the cachet they need to sell themselves to the highest bidder” (Giroux 2002:432).

Althusser argues that the school’s task as an ISA is to drum into the student the know-how needed to reproduce the capitalist system. In the case of the neoliberal shift the emphasis is on classes that can lead to financially beneficial jobs in the corporate world. As public universities become dependent on corporate capital, “those areas of study” Giroux writes “that don’t translate into substantial profits get either marginalized, underfunded, or eliminated” (2002:434). Usually, as Nussbaum (2010)

notes, these are humanities-type programs and disciplines, which are, with good reason, reluctant to demonstrate econometric based returns on investments or ideological servitude. While there are many shared resources across the university, the distribution and allocation of other types of rewards and resources is uneven, with departments with closer ideological coherence to ruling classes, or responding to their incentive structures, given preferential treatment.

Public universities starved of finances increasingly rely on corporate money for support, which gives corporations some influence over the educational process and the type of research conducted. Giroux points to the fact that in highly ranked public universities such as UC Berkeley, business representatives sit on faculty committees that determine funding for research. These trends change the role and function of academia: “As the boundaries between public values and commercial interests become blurred, many academics appear less as disinterested truth seekers than as operatives for business interests” (Giroux 2002:433).

This process has a direct impact on the students’ perceptions of education. Jeffrey Williams, commenting on the ideological ramifications of student debt under neoliberal capitalism, demonstrates how debt encapsulates the notion of education as a commodity. It is worth quoting him at length:

First, debt teaches that higher education is a consumer service. It is a pay-as-you-go transaction, like any other consumer enterprise, subject to the business franchises attached to education. All the entities making up the present university multiplex reinforce this lesson, from the Starbucks kiosk in the library and the Burger King counter in the dining hall, to the Barnes & Noble bookstore...Second, debt teaches career choices. It teaches that it would be a poor choice to wait on tables while writing a novel or become an elementary school teacher for \$24,000. Third, debt teaches a worldview. Debt teaches that the primary ordering principle of the world is the capitalist market, and that the market is natural, inevitable, and implacable. Fourth, debt teaches civic lessons. It teaches that the state’s role is to augment commerce, abetting consuming, which spurs producing; its role is not to interfere with the

market, except to catalyze it. Fifth, debt teaches the worth of a person. Worth is measured not according to a humanistic conception of character, cultivation of intellect and taste, or knowledge of the liberal arts, but according to one's financial potential. Last, debt teaches a specific sensibility. It inducts students into the realm of stress, worry, and pressure, reinforced with each monthly payment for the next fifteen years. [Williams 2006]

Parallel with the growing debt is the transformation of public universities into spaces that resemble markets. In this environment it is not surprising that students think and act in terms of commodities.

### The Student Commodity

At this point the question is: can one view public education under neoliberalism as the producer of the student-commodity that works to reproduce global capitalism with conformity and obedience? We have already indicated how higher public education has been increasingly infiltrated by the interests of big business and remodeled to serve its purpose. The important point here to detail is how students are not only packaged to sell to corporations, but also how they do the labour of this process themselves. That is, that the exploitation of students occurs in such a fashion that they work on their own ideological production. In this section we will be drawing upon the logic of Dallas Smythe's audience commodity, and applying it to neoliberal educational concerns.

Dallas Smythe argues that "mass-produced, advertiser-supported communications under monopoly capitalism" produce "the audience-commodity," a product that is sought after by advertisers. The audience commodities possess "predictable specifications," or "demographics" that enable advertisers to scrutinize their buying habits and adjust their strategies accordingly. The audience commodity is a form of labour – it works to create the demand for advertised goods by learning to buy particular brands (Smythe 1994:272). Advertisers rely on the content of the media to get what they pay for. Thus, the media makes sure that the audiences are attracted and "cultivate a mood" for buying the advertised products. Smythe deems any media

content other than advertising as "free lunch" that works to "recruit members of the audience" (Smythe 1994:271). Leisure time is also work time – as a result of being trained to become consumers, individuals under capitalism engage in consuming corporate products and thus work for the reproducing of the economic order, while at the same time they preoccupy themselves with consumption.

What has happened to the time workers spend off-the-job while not sleeping is that enormous pressures on this time have been imposed by all consumer goods and service branches of monopoly capitalism. (Smythe 1994:279)

How is this related to higher public education? There is a mechanism that works to turn the student into commodity that sells their labour. As the neoliberal state tightens control on the allocation of funds to public universities, and the burden of cost of education is increasingly borne by the students themselves, many students are put in a position where they have to justify their studies in economic terms. This occurs irrespective of whether they take on debt or draw upon intergenerational wealth to fund their studies. Placed in this position, the student soon becomes familiar with the structure of the public university system. Moreover, due to the conditions of research funds and allocations, the student learns that the more conducive the research and area of study is to the ruling elites interests, they will be able to draw upon more resources. Furthermore, they seek entrance to an occupation that promises to get them out of debt. Thus, the process by which the student-commodity learns to choose "the hot majors" is twofold. First is the lack of finances and pressure to pay debt, and second is the university itself, restructured under neoliberal lines. In reality the promise of the well-paid job remains just an empty promise. The majority of the students end up getting monotonous and routine entry-level jobs (Williams 2006; Giroux 2002). Braverman's analysis of the corporate office is indicative of the types of labour students perform:

The functions of thought and planning became concentrated in an ever smaller group within the office, and for the mass of those employed there the office became just as much a side of manual labor as the factory floor. [Braverman 1974:316]

For the majority of the students the dream of the “hot jobs” that never materialize are the “free lunches” that allure them to choose majors like business, finances and so on, those that can demonstrate a return on investment.

The similarity with Smythe’s model is also visible in relation to students’ leisure time. All around campuses students are surrounded by the symbols and products of corporate culture that teach them that social relations are equal to consumerism. The number of billboards associating leisure with consumerism is disproportionate to the number of announcements of social activities. Students often spend their free time in the pub or at the disco, where they engage in the consumption of corporate brands. In that sense the audience-commodity and the student-commodity do not differ in their essence, simply working to reproduce the system of capitalism.

We have already shown how the current public university transforms students into future corporate employees by instilling corporate values and creating a blurred line between education and market. If we analyze the function of the public university based on this assumption, we can argue that student labour in the current stage of neoliberalism is the perfect commodity. Students are taught to become the future employees of the corporate world where they will exercise their labour power. Commenting on the role of labour in a system of monopoly capitalism Braverman writes:

Labor power has become a commodity. Its uses are no longer organized according to the needs and desires of those who sell it, but rather according to the needs of its purchasers, who are primarily, employers seeking to expand the value of their capital. And it is the special and permanent interest of these purchasers to cheapen this commodity. [82]

Under these conditions the work in public education is not humanistic in orientation, that is work directed at discovering more about ourselves and the world, but rather corporate, that is work directed at using tools to create and extract value.

As already pointed out, the current form of neoliberal ideology is a convergence of state-based and market-based ideological production. In educa-

tion, at least, this means that educational incentives and structures develop around corporate-state lines. The public university, it seems, has been co-opted to become a site of ideological production.

Public higher education therefore reveals itself to be integrated into the wider process of commodity exchange, and one which subsumes processes of political contention. Here students are sold on the idea of the university as vocational institution as well as sold to corporate entities. In this set of exchanges it is important to consider the nature of products being sold. A basic reading of the public university system is that it has to sell its value to the public coffers, and to its donors by making its value explicit. The value proposition is econometric or political abiding in nature, and hence the public university must show value for money and a return on investment. Public universities are required to make their pitch for continued support by demonstrating financial return. Here students are no longer viewed as students learning, but rather customers who are selecting vocational life chances. The student commodity shows that commodified students are not only buying education when they attend universities, but rather they are working to make themselves products as components of an ideological system in which they are subject to higher forms of authority. The ‘product’ here is the student who has learned to respond to the mechanism design of the neoliberal production process. Public higher education is in the business of selling these products to the market, and packaged for work in the capitalist system. This corresponds to the subject status that the working classes have in relation to the ruling classes.

We are now in a position to look more closely at the alienating aspects of this student work. From the proceeding paragraphs, we think we are well justified in claiming that labour is exploited in the student commodity. Moreover, we think that this is alienated labour insofar as it conforms to the alienation and repurposing of their reproductive capacities. As Smythe writes,

In Marx’s period and in his analysis, the principle aspect of capitalist production has been the alien-

ation of workers from the means of producing commodities-in-general. Today and for sometime past, the principle aspect of capitalist production has been the alienation of workers from the means of producing and reproducing themselves. [Smythe 1981:48]

The public university effectively produces alienated labour.

The student commodity is, admittedly, a nonconventional interpretation of the audience commodity. Nevertheless, despite the difference in the segment of population that does the labour, the logic remains the same. For example, the case of Chris Barrett and Luke McCabe cannot be thought of being wholly representative of all students, but is representative of the commodification of education and the effect this process has on students' consciousness and affiliations, in which their class power is excluded. Chris Barrett and Luke McCabe seem paradigmatic of this process. If we understand them to be involved in the convergence of the state-market-consciousness, the student commodity as a form of demand management is a crucial link.

## Conclusion

In this paper we pointed to the relevance of Lukacs, Althusser and Smythe's theoretical work in the current era of neoliberalism to attempt to demonstrate how students, a subsection of the working class, are involved in producing an ideology which posits them as its subject. The paper analysed contemporary public higher education as a central component of neoliberal ideological production, where the commodification of student work arranges student's consciousness in such a fashion to converge with market and state based incentive skews.

We would like to conclude by reiterating Althusser's highly pessimistic realization of the function of ideology in a capitalist society, hoping

that if this pessimism is realized we can face more optimistic times.

Result: caught in this quadruple system of interpellation as subjects, of subjection to the Subject, of universal recognition and of absolute guarantee, the subjects 'work,' they 'work by themselves' in the vast majority of cases, with the exception of the 'bad subjects' who on occasion provoke the intervention of one of the detachments of the (Repressive) State Apparatus. But the vast majority of (good) subjects work all right 'all by themselves,' i.e. by ideology (whose concrete forms are realized in the Ideological State Apparatuses). They are inserted into practices governed by the rituals of the ISAs. They 'recognize' the existing state of affairs (*das Bestehende*), that 'it really is true that it is so and not otherwise', and that they must be obedient to God, to their conscience, to the priest, to de Gaulle, to the boss, to the engineer, that thou shalt 'love thy neighbour as thyself,' etc. Their concrete, material behaviour is simply the inscription in life of the admirable words of the prayer: 'Amen – So be it.' [Althusser 1971:169]

The student commodity might be useful to help explain why the majority of students are not involved in ideological contention.

The main objective in the process for the formation of the student-commodity is reproducing mechanisms of production that define the current socioeconomic environment. The outcome hoped for is complacency and conformity with the political and economic practices of neoliberal regimes, assuring the next corporate workforce. It remains to be seen whether the production of student-commodities will be completely successful or whether student led activism will push back against their commodification. Initial efforts, for instance, in Britain and Quebec show promise, but it is too early to tell what the outcomes of these contentions will be.

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