

The Bourgeois Hivemind

Monopoly Capitalism, Class Power & the Mass University, 1890-2025

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Towards the end of the nineteenth century, the modern university became a knowledge factory, first in the US and then across the Imperial West. We were still far away from the postwar behemoths like Berkeley and Madison, but the trend was clear. College enrollment ticked upwards after the Civil War, growing by an order of magnitude in the half-century before World War II.² The emergent mass university would become, across the long twentieth century, the strategic pivot of monopoly capitalism's "means of mental production" (Marx & Engels). The "giant" firm, factory, and university were the emergent trinity of a new accumulation regime whose need for a scientific, technical and managerial intelligentsia was unprecedented.³ Monopoly capitalism's need for economic coordination, social and ecological management, and nationalist indoctrination via compulsory public education – not to mention a vastly expanded state apparatus – called forth a rapidly growing layer of professionals. The mass university would produce these intellect workers, who would variously produce the instrumental and ideological knowledge necessary to sustain the endless accumulation of capital.⁴

The history of the mass university is therefore the farthest thing from the popular cliché of the ivory tower. It was fundamental to the restructuring of American class society through the white collar revolution, to the development of the war machine, and to the training of corporate technical and administrative cadres to staff the greatest empire in human history.

There's nothing wrong with factories as such: the problem is who rules the factory, who decides on the labor process, and whose interests it serves. There's a serious argument that most education ought to be reorganized on a very different basis, though it's easy to slip into nostalgia for an imagined past of artisanal teaching and research. These are problems of political power that cannot be addressed by the syndicalist yearnings of a professoriate. These issues must be

raised and addressed democratically – rather than through the present structure of university rule by administrative decree, or through abstract and technocratic formulations of “expertise.” Today, such a democratic process does not exist in the Imperialist West, which no longer pretends to respect even the fig-leaf “democratic” character of bourgeois liberalism.

After World War II, the knowledge factory came into its own. Never had universities been so institutionally central to capitalist rule, economic life, and warmaking. Core elements of post-war American imperial policy were valorized scientifically – I say “scientifically” sarcastically – by new or newly expanded fields and disciplines such as area studies, demography, and environmental studies. All were generously funded by the Empire directly, or indirectly through the Foundations. The very disciplines we now associate with environmental studies in North America are children of the Cold War. Earth system science, as we know it, emerged directly from the priorities of American Cold War imperialism. Its major strands – demography, cybernetics, resource management – were yoked to what Senator J. William Fulbright famously called the military-industrial-academic complex (1967). As I’ve argued elsewhere, “environmental studies” was especially close to the American fantasy of planetary management and its war machine: the incubators of global environmentalism. It is no coincidence that the Forrester-Meadows synthesis in 1972’s *The Limits to Growth* (a foundational text of environmentalism) gestated at MIT, a key strategic partner in the era’s war machine, its military-industrial-academic complex. We can trace the Anthropocene concept and its earth-system sciences to these Cold War developments.⁵

This history should make us deeply skeptical of the dominant tendency in today’s seemingly progressive calls for interdisciplinary or multidisciplinary thought. Such approaches accept the legitimacy of the existing disciplines. They remain silent on the disciplines’ complicity in capitalist rule. Their approach is fundamentally arithmetic, not synthetic. But even when bourgeois scholars speak of synthesis, it’s an abstract synthesis. It’s abstracted from the real ground of the class struggle in the web of life, what Marx and Engels called the “real ground of history.”

Claims to synthesis are everywhere these days – assemblages, networks, systems. Every decade or so, we get new labels slapped onto old ideas. Some of these models are intended for “scientific” consumption, while others appeal to liberal scholars on the other side of the Two Cultures, especially liberal scholars who imagine themselves as radicals. Nearly always, what we get is a chaotic mish-mash of refurbished cybernetics and causal pluralism, both products of the early Cold War. No one these days seems to pay much attention to the history of ideas, to the history of the “means of mental production” and the class character of knowledge production.⁶ I say this after several decades of swimming

in intellectual currents that have had basically zero Marxist reflexivity about the history of ideas – a world-historical tradition that celebrates Braudel for instance, without ever identifying him and his version of Area Studies as bankrolled by the American Foundations, or an ecosocialist critique that’s offered virtually no historical critique of Green thought and its proximity to quasi-fascist characters like Haeckel, Lovelock, and Hardin. The problem, however, is not “merely” the political uses of such knowledge, or the bourgeois forces that support it. The problem is also the modeling and the methods that create forms of “expertise” specifically suited to monopoly capitalism’s evolving division of labor between “material” and “mental” labor.⁷ Thus, causal pluralism, which has a long history (like everything else), was codified after World War II as the only acceptable approach, usually reified along disciplinary lines and specific modes of data collection and analysis (e.g., statistical, ethnographic, archival, etc.). Causal pluralism offers some obvious political advantages for the bourgeoisie. Abstract causal pluralism treats class, race, gender, growth, politics, markets, nature, and much beyond as discrete spheres of reality. Everything is now a systems model. Some, to be sure, are more woke than others. There are a great many differences. But all agree that a dialectical and materialist synthesis is impermissible. The surest way to destroy an academic career is to take seriously the dialectical method.

The problem reasserts itself in the recent “-cene craze,” following media-academic popularizations of the Anthropocene.⁸ Here, “critical” scholars play with words and provide ideological cover for capital. The ungainly Plantationocene is a fine example. This liberal ideology, liberal pluralism, avoids a fundamental critique of capitalism as a unified historical system, instead fragmenting and particularizing contradictions. Such an approach is very useful for translating arguments into management problems. Advocates of the whatever-cene don’t want revolution; they want respectability, and a safe space for abstract theorizing apart from the “real ground of history.” This, of course, is the historic role of the bourgeois university: produce intellect workers who can redefine capitalism’s problems in “anything but class” terms.⁹ Race, climate, “the environment,” colonialism, poverty, you name it – these are rendered into fragments and thence into management problems. That’s good for the intellect workers – the so-called professional managerial class. The PMC isn’t a class but a labor market and a cultural formation, but that’s a discussion for another day. Because these professionals are the ones who staff the managerial institutions, within government and increasingly, in the non-profit industrial complex, they instinctively identify problems as discrete issues to be administered by the credential cadres. Such intellect workers speak in the forked tongues of the liberal elite. Poly-crisis, climate emergency, sustainability, diversity, and more. Never, never, *never* do they name class, capital, and imperialism as a “rich totality of many determinations” (Marx).

For the liberal critical theorists, there is a conceit that their distance from Marxism stems from their concern with true liberation, because Marxism is a form of Western Universalism, or because socialism was in reality “just as bad” as capitalism, or some other rubbish. Because there’s no attention to the class history of ideas, these liberals fail to see how they are carrying water for the imperialist bourgeoisie, which is quite happy with “critical” approaches so long as those approaches fragment and particularize – fragments which can always be reassembled into new-look systems models and then deployed for planetary management and internally, control of the dangerous classes, “the deplorables.” This is the irony, for instance, of intersectionality and its family of reductionisms, which have so blossomed under the neoliberal model precisely to block the old communist syntheses, while providing the rationale for diversifying the PMC while the ruling class has laid waste to the American working-class majority.

In a nutshell, for Marxists the history of ideas is a history of class struggle. Of course that history is mediated. After World War II, the Rockefeller and Ford Foundations were the visible hands behind the post-war invention of the new imperial disciplines. Funding was only a part of their work. They built new institutions, and supported the institutions that codified the monopoly capitalist system of knowledge. One of its most successful inventions was Area Studies. Area studies was a form of interdisciplinarity designed for imperial management and counterinsurgency. It was designed to produce total knowledge—*supposedly* total—of strategic regions: the Slavic and communist world, East Asia, and Latin America. This was the old discipline of Orientalism reinvented. Area studies was building knowledge to support the effective management of the decolonizing world. This, after Truman’s famous Point Four speech, was called Development.

Alongside demography and area studies, we see the rapid expansion of environmental studies programs in the United States after 1968. These were not born out of a desire for environmental sustainability in some warm-and-fuzzy way. They were not born out of a response to an environmental crisis, but rather to Third World revolt and its most effective vanguard: socialist revolutions. There were many environmental problems, before and after 1968, but there was no planetary crisis. Rather, the reinvention of environmental studies after 1968 came out of a long history of eco-managerialism that goes back to the late nineteenth century. As I’ve discussed elsewhere, we can trace this lineage back to Gifford Pinchot, a scion of a New England bourgeois family and the Yale forestry school, which his family funded.¹⁰ And this conservation meant the efficient scientific management of nature as resource for the state and for capital. After 1970, this was updated systematically by an American empire under siege. Virtually all education now conducted under the rubric of environmental studies, at least in Western Europe and North America, is managerial. It is occasionally slathered

with virtue hoarding, often of the sort that celebrates blood and soil politics under the sign of a fetishized indigeneity.

The pro-capitalist character of environmental studies, a.k.a the holism of the rich, is revealed in the absurd Venn diagram of the three pillars of sustainability. If you've ever seen this or taught this, you have a sense of how deeply ideological the three pillars of sustainability are. And the essence of it is that, no matter what, business sustainability must be prioritized over all others. They have a lot of pleasing language about balance and harmony and all of that, but we all know what they are really, truly aiming for. Over the short run, such programs – environmental studies programs – produce low- to mid-level cadres for environmental management. They effectively constitute an ecological version of Jim Ferguson's anti-politics machine, elaborated in his famous study of development in Lesotho. Anti-politics machines convert political struggles—democratic struggles, popular struggles over land, life, and work—into technical problems for experts to solve, of course always under the invisible jackboot of the bourgeoisie and its Overton window of “realistic” policy.

As Harry Braverman observed, the logic of scientific management concentrates thinking and doing, respectively, in the minds of the bosses and in the hands of the workers. Under scientific management, a philosophy that emerged in the seventeenth century but only matured under monopoly capitalism, the labor process is progressively fragmented. Its roots lay in the Cartesian Revolution, itself closely tied to a managerial revolution, centuries ago.¹¹ Under scientific management, the bosses de-skill the workers, seeking to maintain as much of the intellect work as possible, and in so doing, to reorganize production and advance the rate of surplus value. In the knowledge factory, intellectuals, too, are de-skilled; they just don't realize it. They believe that expertise and “specialization” is skill-enhancement, when the reality is quite the opposite. This is why so many scholars can sound so smart when speaking on a specific topic yet be so dumb when it comes to everything else.

Here is the crucial point. This logic of alienation, formal separation, and managerial unification characterizes not only the history of the means of material production, but the history of the means of mental production. These form a dialectical unity, the means of material and mental production. Revolutionaries always understood this, as with Mao's insistence on pursuing a synthesis of Red and Expert. And while these means of mental production have never been limited to the university system, under monopoly capitalism the universities became a strategic theater of the bourgeois knowledge-production and thought-control apparatus.

Let us return to the “normal state” of monopoly capitalism in Baran and Sweezy's memorable expression: the normal state is economic stagnation.¹² This

has profound relevance for intellectual life today, and the degradation of university life across the Imperial West. The accumulation process and the production of knowledge are dialectically joined. At the very moment when creative and heterodox thinking is most needed to address capitalism's unfolding crisis and the climate change in which it is embedded, the universities, the disciplines, the states, and the foundations have constrained intellectual freedom in every sense of that term. As a blockbuster article in the January 2023 issue of the journal *Nature* reported, there has never been more academic production—never been more articles published—and never been less insight produced, less “disruptive” research.¹³ The Kuhnian cycle, which was always a liberal fantasy, is decisively broken. So too is monopoly capitalism and its knowledge factories.

NOTES

1. Jason W. Moore teaches world history at Binghamton University. This text is adapted from a public lecture, “Welcome to the Knowledge Factory: Structures of Knowledge, the Disciplines & the Ideological Struggle,” delivered at the Centro de Investigaciones Interdisciplinarias en Ciencias y Humanidades, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, January 22, 2026. Readers can find the corresponding video here, “The Bourgeois Hivemind,” <https://youtu.be/NM9IbIbq06A>; and the complete lecture here, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wRFB4FV9UxA>. Direct correspondence to: jwmoore@binghamton.edu. Please cite as Jason W. Moore, “The Bourgeois Hivemind: Monopoly Capitalism, Class Power & the Mass University,” *World-Ecological Imaginations* (March, 2026).
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4. Paul A. Baran, “The Commitment of the Intellectual,” *Monthly Review* 13, no. 1 (May 1961).
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6. See especially Gabriel Rockhill, *Who Paid the Pipers? The CIA and the Cultural Cold War*. New York: Monthly Review Press, 2025; and Frances Stonor Saunders, *The Cultural Cold War: The CIA and the World of Arts and Letters*. New York: The New Press, 2000.

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