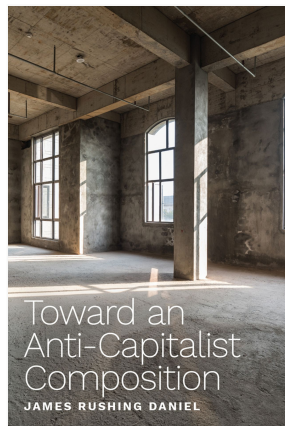


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Is It Possible to Teach Anti-Capitalism? On James Rushing Daniel's "Toward an Anti-Capitalist Composition"

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Toward an Anti-
Capitalist
Composition

JAMES RUSHING DANIEL

OVER THE PAST half decade, a renewed struggle between labor and capital has roiled the United States. That struggle, which has been exacerbated by the pandemic and involved companies from Starbucks and Amazon to UPS, GM, and Trader Joe's, has now expanded to include academic

workers. Contra the myth of ivory-tower quietism, university campuses are a lively battlefield. Graduate-student unions have won landslide victories at Chicago, Yale, and USC. They've successfully gone on strike at Temple—where management revoked insurance coverage in retaliation—and the University of California, where 48,000 workers represented by the United Auto Workers (UAW) downed tools and froze the system in late 2022. Adjuncts at the New School (90 percent of whose faculty consists of precarious contract professors despite its progressive sheen) won impressive new benefits and raises after striking last year. And contingent faculty at NYU and Harvard continue to battle for union recognition, following the lead of the UC-AFT lecturers' union, which won a new contract in 2021 with a strike threat.

College teachers are now activists and organizers—by necessity.

The situation both appalls and brings hope. On one hand, there is action of an intensity not seen since the 1970s. On the other, working conditions—which, as teachers like to say, are students' learning conditions—have become so dire as to demand a battle. Around 75 percent of professors in the United States now work off the tenure track, most for pay that ranges from narrowly sufficient to blatantly unsustainable.

Often, they have little autonomy in terms of what, how, or when they teach. Most have no institutional support for research; all are watched obsessively by a ballooning corps of managers (for the “all-administrative university,” see Benjamin Ginsberg’s 2011 book *The Fall of the Faculty*). In the meantime, universities devote themselves to landlordism, healthcare capitalism, private equity, policing, jacked-up tuition, and other forms of wealth extraction—trying all the while to whitewash the situation and maintain their progressive public images.

Put another way: Universities’ wealth isn’t distributed to their workers. Like other American employees, academics’ inflation-adjusted wages have flatlined since the mid-1970s. Within the institution, pay is only good for upper management and football coaches. Meanwhile, a reactionary Supreme Court kills student debt relief for tens of millions, and the planet continues to boil. What’s a professor to do?

Plenty has been written about the neoliberalization of American higher ed, wherein many US schools resemble grotesque hybrids of corporations, hedge funds, and sports franchises rather than centers of learning. Similarly, ample energy has been devoted to the poor treatment of faculty and staff by powerful administrators. (Marc Bousquet’s chilling 2008 study *How the University Works: Higher Education and the Low-Wage Nation* was published during the Bush

administration, after all.) What happens inside the classroom has also been the subject of immense scholarship. Current best practices call for centering student agency over instructor expertise, attending to questions of social justice, downplaying coldly competitive or evaluative criteria like grades, and underscoring how writing is situated in sociopolitical contexts.

Receiving less attention are the ways in which pedagogy and classroom practice are minutely interwoven with the political economy of specific institutions, higher education acts as an entire financialized sector, and the United States represents what many scholars have called a “business civilization.” Since Reagan’s 1980s, students have been incentivized to see their education as a private, eminently lucrative investment in their self—a method of either joining or staying in the middle or upper classes. Led by budget-slashing administrators, students are encouraged to view many fields—including, unsurprisingly, most of those in the arts and humanities—as useless trifles at best and traps at worst (unless you happen to have family money). They are urged to join the nominally pragmatic STEM universe, through which universities develop their marketable technological “breakthroughs”—which can, of course, be monetized via intellectual property rights.

Capitalism is an existential threat to critical culture. The ideology infects our education system, inhibiting the free development of human potential. Once students pick a major, testing and grades are used to rank and sort. Similar systems are used to pit them against each other for access to law, business, and medical school. They determine who receives scholarships that lessen one's debt burden, or plum entry jobs with Google. And now, generative AI beckons in the form of programs like ChatGPT. After all, why do the intellectual lifting yourself when all that matters is the boring terminus, a "useful" degree?

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Amid this capitalistic system of education, the question becomes: Can teachers demonstrate forms of opposition? Can anti-capitalism actually be taught?

Assistant professor of English and director of writing at Seton Hall University [James Rushing Daniel](#) certainly thinks so. His thrilling *Toward an Anti-Capitalist Composition* (2022) threads the pedagogical and the political together. In equal parts polemic, scholarship, and memoir, Daniel's book contends that a writing-intensive course can—at the level not just of content but of form—effectively introduce students to anti-capitalism. Teaching can stage

encounters between the capitalist logic that has overrun the world and the remaining extant non- or anti-capitalist possibilities for living—including the university as a public good, controlled by the people who actually keep it running. Writes Daniel, we need a “*(re)commoned* university,” a “radically egalitarian site most fundamentally organized and governed by those who maintain it rather than those who preside over its financial situation.”

For Daniel, it is not a question of students swearing their allegiance to Karl Marx. Teaching anti-capitalism is not about blunt indoctrination or straightforward information transfer. (This wouldn't work anyway, as students are critical beings just like their teachers.) No: What Daniel advocates for instead is an alternative pedagogy—a teaching structure opposing the capitalistic logic that society should be organized around profit-seeking, consumption-addled individuality. This form of teaching offers a socialized approach to interrogating things like debt, employment, and the digital platforms in which all writing is now entangled. It designates the writing classroom as a place for people to think together, in which their “collective labor [is] organized as the critique of capitalism, rather than its fulfillment.”

Writes Daniel: “[A]nticapitalist action [is] a site of vital togetherness.” Of this, he contends, the

classroom can be a primary instance—a site of resistance against the isolating, competitive logic of capitalism. There, students might work together to build knowledge and communicative capacity independent of profit, cutthroat anxiety, or selfish pleasure. Hidden inside the mass of the contemporary techno-imperial university is something precious and profoundly worth preserving.

Students know that the world is in crisis. They stare at misery-producing screens and recognize that the planet is cooked for the benefit of an obscene minority; they lived through a pandemic. Many already sense that, as Daniel (following a mass of scholarship) puts it, “capitalism plays a crucial role in deepening and sustaining virtually all other crises and inequities”—even if they haven’t yet read Ruth Wilson Gilmore, Angela Davis, Walter Rodney, Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, Robin D. G. Kelley, or Cedric Robinson, scholars who have demonstrated how capitalism supercharges racism, misogyny, queerphobia, state violence, and ecological disaster.

The feeling is there. Students just need a critical language for it—an anti-capitalist one that composition classrooms can nourish at the level of both pedagogical form and thematic content. This need is, in turn, linked to campus labor struggles and the battle for a democratic university, which is happening right now in places like Florida (where

Governor Ron DeSantis's henchmen continue to dismantle the state's public schools) and West Virginia, [the site of E. Gordon Gee's wrecking campaign.](#)

For Daniel, a lively classroom models a larger "democratization of the university." This is risky pedagogy: many higher education institutions run firmly on what Henry Heller, in *The Capitalist University: The Transformations of Higher Education in the United States Since 1945* (2016), calls "academic capitalism": a corporate model where powerful managers control all planning, where labor is crushed, and where students are loaded down with debt by design. Many Americans would be surprised to learn that leftist professors don't wield much power in academia. The real heavyweights are what Daniel calls "the vast body of typically conservative financial stakeholders including donors, trustees, partner universities, foreign nations, and corporations." Rather than top-down bureaucracies devoted to capital extraction and prestige accumulation, Daniel contends for "a more collective space where those who are coactive in the operation of the university and the production and dissemination of knowledge are substantively involved in the governance of the institution." Within classrooms themselves, he advocates for composition seminars—a common ground for subjectivities that don't flatten students' and instructors' individual differences, spaces where

intellectual work is intrinsically worthwhile and collaborative.

A large part of the battle thereby involves saving composition, which has long been a paradigm of labor exploitation within the university. Writing classes are overwhelmingly taught by adjuncts, graduate students, and other contingent faculty. Daniel thus calls for “an anticapitalist (re)awakening in [the] discipline.” Yet, while composition’s 21st-century “social turn” and justice orientations have been crucial, approaches that lack a class analysis are not enough. According to Daniel, we must not be merely progressive or liberal, but genuinely left–anti-capitalist.

In an effective writing class, subjectivities mix and collaborate. People get together. Daniel draws on the philosopher Jodi Dean’s notion of “comradeship” to imagine a pedagogical space that “allows students to work across various sites of division and difference [that] neoliberalism deepens, allowing for the gathering of various identities, orientations, and perspectives.” This might involve group writing projects wherein students team up instead of competing, thereby “cultivating political comrades” and the “collaboration of equals.” If capitalism offers nihilism, a “logics of division and insularity,” then collaborative thinking, reading, and writing provide potent alternatives.

Take one of Daniel's Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) courses. After reading *Feminism for the 99%: A Manifesto* (2019), students group up to create collaborative statements of values, trying to imagine worlds beyond a for-profit status quo dominated by white men. Even in courses based on individual writing assignments, composition remains a fundamentally collective exercise. In my classes at USC, students examine texts together in what Daniel would call "communal critique." They brainstorm early ideas for essays, discuss one another's subsequent pitches, take part in conferences, and conduct extensive peer reviews.

Crucially, this collaboration centers student agency, which aligns well with existing best practices as defined in the scholarship. De-emphasizing professorial authority—the function of pedagogical modes like lectures—empowers students. For Daniel, this has an anti-capitalist valence. Students learn to leave behind "the managerial authority represented by the instructor," whom many initially think their main job is to please, and instead focus on channeling the full force of their intellectual energy and affective energy into the task at hand. As anyone who has spent time in a classroom knows, very little is more thrilling.

Capital would prefer we not feel this unless we can

turn a profit.

However, a collectivist teaching structure is not the whole of Daniel's pedagogy. Course *content* is important too. He argues that critical attention to debt and work regimes helps students develop anti-capitalist sensibilities—which seems especially important given that the modern university is, among other things, a giant machine for producing debtors, some of whom go on to become teachers.

Debt is a tool for social control and humiliation. It abhors a commons, seeking to enclose it and replace social life with market obligations. Debt is an evil professor because of the cruelty with which it teaches: writes Daniel, it is a “unique persuasive apparatus [...] disguised as a banal financial mechanism”; it shapes student decisions about individual classes, their majors, and their paths after college. Debt annihilates collectivity and becomes a grim parody of the care that underlies good teaching—it is, in [David Graeber's words](#), “the perversion of a promise.”

The task of a writing class that deals with debt, then, is to “reassert human connection over financial relations.” One of Daniel's courses undertook group reading and writing responses to Hadas Weiss's *We Have Never Been Middle Class: How Social Mobility Misleads Us* (2019), which challenges the notion of a “middle class” between owners and workers. Taking a

critical look at capitalist logic also means examining how students' own schools function, which can be done by teaching about things like college debt or the role of academic labor in preparing young people for lives of work.

Because so many Americans work to pay down debt, and given the concurrent predominance of hustle culture, Daniel foregrounds labor as well. For most, college functions as a training ground for Getting a Good Job. This demands ideological buy-in from students, in which every bit of intellection, creativity, or research serves merely as prelude to remuneration. Such a status quo is, quite literally, making students sick. "Inured to a culture of exploitation and maximal productivity" and trained to accept "the dominance of precarity and productivity culture," students suffer from myriad, acute mental health crises. Endless, faux-meritocratic overwork in the form of 4.0 GPA scales and standardized tests begets an epidemic of anxiety and depression. Daniel invokes the words of the philosopher Byung-Chul Han, positing that students are so burdened that they become "too alive to die and too dead to live."

Still, Daniel argues that psycho-capitalist terror can be resisted. In class, his students compose their own "work memoirs": auto-ethnographic accounts of their labor histories, which, he notes, "often diverged along the lines of class and race," with students from

marginalized, racialized demographics being more likely to respond thoughtfully to the assignment. They also read Amazon PR statements and labor fiction like Heike Geissler's 2018 novel *Seasonal Associate* (an account of working in a German Amazon facility), practicing a "collective [...] public critique" of contemporary workplace logics. Again, this is dangerous, as "pedagogies more concerned with promoting criticism and resistance than with promoting skills may be profoundly misaligned with the orientation of the university."

Of course, students often hesitate. Besides those who are politically conservative, many are wary of anti-capitalism. Like most of their peers, they have been socialized to see capitalism as the natural state of things. At least, this has been my experience. In a writing course called *Work and Working Life*, which I developed with my colleague Kate Levin at USC, some students wrote papers that—despite my urging—took the position of businesses and their managers writing about the economy or work. They elided the experience of workers who live on wages alone. Others who were inclined to criticize capitalism saw it as immovable. Most contemporary students are conservatives or liberals, not radical leftists—not yet.

Put simply, a teacher can't run a Marxist frontal assault. Understandably, students resent having intellectual frameworks rammed into their heads.

Hence the utility of subtler anti-capitalist pedagogies, framed through the consideration of common experiences like work or debt or simply spending time in a room full of other people. I deliberately didn't assign Marx in my Work and Working Life seminars. But we read a lot of Marxish things about how Starbucks fights unions, how wealth accumulates in the hands of a select few, how prisons depress wages, and how technologized academia prepares individuals for lives of alienated production and passive consumption. These topics resonated with many students, particularly those who had already worked low-wage jobs or whose family members had. So too did students of greater privilege often respond strongly to stories about the pressure on the contemporary workforces they will join after graduation. (I suspect that if I had assigned *The Communist Manifesto*, there would have been more pushback.)

"[M]ost US universities are in the mature phase of a nearly century-long capitulation to capitalist interests," Daniel writes, and "if teaching critical of capitalism is to thrive at the university, the financial and political structure of higher education cannot remain as it is." That's a tall order. American campuses have been anticommunist spaces since at least the 1950s—it is easy for managers to remove troublesome faculty. Few professors enjoy job security, and "the enormity of capitalism's influence and the

risk to the teachers who oppose it are not unrelated.”

It's not just that universities have worked with the FBI to get leftist professors canned, as happened during the Red Scare. It's not even that the provost is going to descend and intone, “You're fired.” It's that—thanks to adjunct precarity and at-will employment—universities retain a simple, unassailable ability to refrain from renewing your contract. What Daniel calls “the unwilling silence of contingent and junior faculty” does not persist because teachers are cowards. Rather, it is enforced.

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The historian Henry Heller argues that, as fundamental forces in American life, anticommunism and anti-Marxism produce a “refusal of history.” Universities fund disciplines and projects that seem marketable or monetizable. They crow smugly about “STEM” as they systematically defund and de-skill fields centered on humanistic, artistic, and sociocultural inquiry—all because these tend to raise problematic questions about the status quo.

Would writing classes become shrines to Marx and Du Bois and Rosa Luxemburg? Probably not. But the art of teaching composition, and the broader project of helping students learn to think critically, would benefit from anti-capitalism. There is no time like the present to be brave, to stop hoping management will

somehow leave us alone if we behave.

Of course, the path runs through politics, not theory and scholarship alone. We need a “common, coalitional opposition” to capitalism. For teachers, that means unionizing en masse as soon as possible. Daniel is clear that unions alone will not save the university, but they are a vital part of the longer struggle.

He offers no platitudes, and his thinking aligns with the late Mike Davis’s statement about hope in a grim world. The struggle goes on even if victory is unlikely or far away:

“Hope” is not a scientific category. Nor is it a necessary obligation in polemical writing. On the other hand, intellectual honesty is [...] I manifestly do believe that we have arrived at a “final conflict” that will decide the survival of a large part of poor humanity over the next half century. [...] Fight with hope, fight without hope, but fight absolutely.

We have two options. Either we wait until the university is a glorified office park, or we fight as hard as possible wherever and however we can. Daniel knows where he stands, and his remarkable book underscores the centrality of struggle on all fronts.