In Defense of Grids: Academic Labor and Academic Freedom in the Moment of Complexity

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In Mark C. Taylor's recent work on emerging network culture, Taylor claims that extant critical theories have exhausted themselves due to their engagement with and reliance upon an outmoded structuralism that he labels a "grids." A grid, according to Taylor, represents an antiquated mode of thinking based upon the construction of binary oppositions that no longer have relevance in contemporary culture. Such binaries as East/West, for-profit/not-for-profit, and hegemonic/sub-altern reflect a mode of thinking whose rigidity is ill-adapted to contend with the rapidity of change brought about by the transformations made possible by network communication systems. "The grid is the figure of modernism" (25). Although critical theory—as represented in such key figures as Foucault, Derrida, and Baudrillard—attempts to resist the dominance of structuralism, its engagement with grid-logic renders it incapable of such resistance as it collapses all distinctions to one pole or the other of a set of traditional binary oppositions. "Though critics repeatedly claim to recover difference, their arguments always come down to the same: systems and structures inevitably totalize by excluding difference and repressing otherness [...] At this moment, theory, as it recently has been understood, reaches a dead end" (48). Critical theory remains mired in the grid-logic of modernism in spite of its pretensions toward overcoming the very binaries that it seeks to resist.

In stark contrast, the network culture that is currently struggling to take hold elides all such oppositions through the logic of complexity. "The transition from modern industrial to contemporary network culture does not involve a shift from one to the other pole of a stable polar structure. The technologies of production and reproduction in network
culture are creating strange loops that are transforming rather than destroying differences and oppositions that long seemed secure” (71–72). Networks, as opposed to grids, offer a logic of combination rather than separation, entanglement rather than isolation, decentralization rather than control:

In this situation, the structural oppositions, which had long informed thinking and guided policy, unravel and the political balance of power disappears. Whereas walls divide and seclude in an effort to impose order and control, webs link and relate, entangling everyone in multiple, mutating and mutually defining connections in which nobody is really in control. As connections proliferate, change accelerates, bringing everything to the edge of chaos. This is the moment of complexity. (23)

If the defining figure of modernism (and, unwittingly, its postmodern critics) is the grid, with its walls and their implication of division and partition, then the key figure of complexity is the network with its screens: “[A] screen is something like a mesh or net forming the site of passage through which elusive differences slip and slide by crossing and criss-crossing. But a screen is also a surface on which images, words and things, can be displayed. Every surface is actually a screen that hides while showing and shows while hiding” (199–200). In Taylor’s formulation, the act of knowing comes to be seen as an act of screening rather than separating. The construction of knowledge in network culture becomes an act of connecting by screening, letting differences shift and intersect while, under the auspices of complexity, difference itself is preserved unharmed.

**Universities and Complexity**

As Taylor makes clear, nowhere is the logic of complexity more likely to be felt than in that last bastion of antiquated high modernism: the university. The modern university, built upon outmoded grid logic, is poorly adapted to contend with the changes wrought by network culture. The construction of knowledge in the modern university has traditionally been, and continues to be, a process of separating fields, walling off areas and policing boundaries. This is grid work at its potentially highest level and as such comes in for some of the deepest scorn in Taylor’s text, especially as it concerns the protection of academic freedom. “Nelson and Watt speak for most of their colleagues when they insist that the essential function of ‘cultural critique and political resistance’ can be preserved
only if institutional autonomy remains inviolable. Such autonomy presupposes full-time lifelong employment and the protection of separate departments in the university" (255). The separation of academic departments is, of course, anathema in the moment of complexity as network logic requires not walls, but screens that entail not the policing of boundaries, but their dissolution. Network culture, due to its logic of connection, inclusion, and entanglement, resists, breaks down, and renders obsolete the grids upon which the modern university is built.

It is true, I would argue, that when such critics as Nelson and Watt speak of academic freedom, they imply the preservation of lifelong employment or, more precisely, the protection of the rights of academic labor. The relationship between preserving academic freedom and protecting academic labor can be traced, at least, to the founding of the American Association of University Professors. The purpose of the organization was to secure for faculty members the right of academic freedom that had been under attack, most notably in the Ross case at Stanford University, since the turn of the century (Haskell 48–53). Indeed, the AAUP’s charter document, “The 1915 Report on Academic Freedom,” attempted to codify the rights of academic freedom and thus secure the ability of faculty in higher education to express themselves without fear of retribution—the most common form of retribution being, of course, the loss of one’s position. The notion that a professor could speak his or her mind, even concerning controversial matters, without fear of retaliation by the university administration, was, to say the least, a violation of the orthodoxy current at the time which held that a professor was “an employee of the institution, no more, no less. If his conduct was displeasing to management, officials were entitled to give him his walking papers as readily as business executives might fire any factory hireling. In short, claims to special status or autonomy for professors were rejected out of hand” (Lucas 197).

Indeed, for much of its history, the notion that the professoriate should have any protection for “cultural critique and political resistance” was roundly rejected even by the AAUP, which focused instead on the goal of establishing the concept of academic freedom in the narrow field of the profession’s right to oversee the activities of its own members. As Schrecker makes clear in her study _No Ivory Tower_, this right was secured by tightly policing the boundaries of acceptable discourse within the professoriate. For instance, at the outset of the World War I, the AAUP issued a statement regarding academic freedom in times of war:
Essentially, it refused to protect professors who engaged in any type of anti-war activity, whether that activity was legal or not. [...] In addition, Lovejoy’s report went along with prevailing phobias, by imposing special restrictions on professors of German or Austrian descent who, in order to avoid all suspicion, must “refrain from public discussion of the war; and in their private intercourse with neighbors, colleagues and students [...] avoid all hostile or offensive expressions concerning the United States or its government” [Lovejoy]. (21)

Thus, while the AAUP was ostensibly created to secure the right of self-expression of the professoriate, it is important not to lose sight of precisely what that right meant. Since the turn of the century, a spate of cases existed in which professors were fired from their positions due to their voicing of unpopular opinions on any number of subjects. However, cloaked in arguments in support of the right to free speech or even “professional autonomy and collegial self-governance,” the threat to these freedoms was the loss of one’s position (Haskell 54). Thus, while the founders of the AAUP were explicitly modeling their organization after other kinds of professional organizations, such as the American Medical Association or American Bar Association, the correlation between a professor’s right to free expression and their employment rights could not have been more clear. In fact, the point was not lost on observers at the time: “To some, the idea of a general academic association of college and university teachers too closely resembled unionism” (Lucas 197). There can be little doubt that the AAUP was established to secure the labor rights of its members—in particular, their right to be free from reprisals during the normal execution of their responsibilities as university faculty.

**Ghosts in the Signal**

In fact, it is clear from the brief history of the AAUP that the relationship between academic freedom and academic labor closely parallels that of Taylor’s parasite-host. In his discussion of Michel Serres’ retelling of the parable of the city rat and the country rat, he notes: “As the fable become more convoluted, the host turns into a parasite and the parasites turn out to be hosts” (102). Academic freedom and academic labor enact just this relationship. Academic freedom is a parasite upon the host of academic labor, for without the bodies of workers to propel the enterprise forward, academic freedom grinds to a halt while at the same time academic labor is parasitic upon the host of the academic freedom. Academic freedom without protections for academic labor
is meaningless, and academic labor without academic freedom is hollow.

It is telling here that Taylor essentially abandons his previous discussion of parasites and hosts where the relationship between the two is ambiguous and indeterminate for a more traditional usage as he describes the relationship between higher education and the social structures of which it is a part. "Protests to the contrary notwithstanding, the university is not autonomous but is a thoroughly parasitic institution, which continuously depends on the generosity of the host so many academics claim to reject" (256). If so, then what of the parasite-host relationship of which he was so enamored earlier? In the place of ambiguity and indeterminacy we find the parasite rendered as polemic against an obstinate faculty viciously defending narrow self-interest while employing a rhetoric of radical critique. However, if we understand the logic of the parasite as Taylor describes it in his discussion of Serres, then we may come to see the host as not so generous after all. In fact, it may be that the relationship is inverted altogether and that the social formation that Taylor so righteously defends may be the parasite after all. "Higher education is not a 'bit of excrement floating on the tide of culture' (or the economy). The academy itself enacts and expresses social relations of capitalism and heightened managerial control grounded in a neoconservative discourse" (Rhoades and Slaughter 63).

In other words, while Taylor claims that the complexity of network communication systems renders all grids of binary opposites obsolete, he reverts to traditional usage of the parasite-host relationship to excoriate modern defenders of the university. They are parasites, in the traditional sense, continually biting the hand that feeds while expecting the hand to return again and again. If we understand the parasite-host relationship in the way that Taylor describes in his discussion of Serres, then our rendering of the relationship becomes substantially noisier, making it difficult to decide whether the university is parasite to the capitalist host or host to the capitalist parasite. In any case, "For those who can bear neither ambiguity nor uncertainty, such noise must be eliminated; for those with more open minds, however, noise is a welcome guest whose interruptions and disruptions are as creative as they are destructive" (103).

In the Coda to The Moment of Complexity, Taylor repeats the oft-rehearsed argument that the protection of academic labor through the institution of tenure is no longer tenable in a society that no longer
provides secure employment for any of its members. "In addition to this, most faculty members demand job security denied to the people upon whose labors they depend. Leaving questions of fairness and practicality aside, this system of well-paid lifelong employment is unlikely to continue much longer" (256). Leaving aside the practicality and fairness of a society that no longer seeks to provide well-paid lifelong employment to any of its members, the meeting of the "demand" of the faculty for such job security is already—and was well before the advent of "complexity"—disappearing: "The nation's higher education faculty have not been immune to the trend toward low-paying, part-time, and temporary work. Colleges across the country, especially community colleges and municipal colleges attempting to balance their budgets, have made use of a buyer's market for teachers during the last two decades" (Tirelli 181). According to recent estimates, as much as fifty percent of faculty in America's institutions of higher learning work as "adjunct" or temporary faculty ("Summary of Data"). As Jill Andresky Fraser puts it in White Collar Sweatshop:

At universities and colleges across the country, cost-control pressures have resulted in the transfer of more and more of the classroom-teaching load to low-paid adjunct professors and graduate students: the academic world's equivalent of temp workers (typically lacking as they do any type of job security, employee benefits, or professional status). (45)

Further, this alteration in the higher education employment landscape follows none of the patterns suggested by Taylor in his synoptic history of the university. Indeed, from Taylor's reading it would seem that the modern university had sprung like Athena from the head of Kant. Rather, I argue that even a cursory survey of the modern university would indicate structural relations based on models that any capitalist would immediately recognize:

Even as some units and faculty have increased responsibility for undergraduate teaching, accompanied by layoffs of colleagues replaced by part-time employees, others (as in the physical sciences and engineering, which are experiencing declining enrollments) are directed to engage in more and commercially relevant research, accompanied by the hiring of additional peers and nonfaculty professional support staff. (Rhoades and Slaughter 37)
In short, after a whirlwind tour of post-postmodernity under the sign of complexity, we find ourselves on familiar ground after all. This is not the terra incognita of complexity. Instead, we find ourselves in the conservative nightmare of university life. A university inhabited by pampered profs "whose work interests fewer and fewer people beyond the walls of the academy" (Taylor 250), resisting and resenting their own students' greater technological savvy, lecturing "from the tattered notes they have used for years" (258, 262). The solution to this latest version of profscam is for the university to capitulate to the market once and for all. The autonomy of the university is ended (as if it ever existed), and it is time that this antiquated monolith makes its peace with the market forces currently refashioning the society upon which it parasitically feeds. Taylor's proposal for reshaping general education into a clicks-and-mortar operation employs the same weary division of labor we find in the actually existing university where "[w]ith the cooperation of and guidance of faculty members, GEN supports a pool of qualified teaching assistants from schools throughout the world who answer questions, respond to written work, and preside over bulletin boards and chat rooms" (263). It is a presumptively high-tech version of the university where some create knowledge (those faculty fortunate enough to be in demand) and others disseminate it (those TA's presiding over all those chat rooms). Moreover, this plan presides over a de-skilling of the professoriate of which Frederick Taylor could be proud.

Lost in this muddle of conservatism, masqueraded as cutting-edge radical thought, is the fact that the university is thoroughly and "intricately implicated in a marketplace that is not limited to ideas" (Taylor 269). Indeed, the relationship of the university to the society in which it exists is far more akin to the parasite-host relationship that Taylor borrows from Serres than the one he rhetorically wields against such critics as Nelson and Watt. Actually existing universities, as opposed to the nightmare of stultifying rigidity Taylor describes, "have generally had ambivalent relations with their surrounding societies, both involved and withdrawn, both servicing and criticizing, both needing and being needed" (Berdahl, Altbach, and Gumport 4). This is complexity indeed, and it is responsible for creating an institution that has been "the most successful in the world, admired internationally for providing access to higher education to a mass clientele as well as some of the best universities in the world" (Altbach 272).
Further, this is not an institution staffed by the brooding, bickering malcontents of Taylor's imagination. As much of the notion of complexity does, Taylor's description of faculty elides key differences in the experiences of university faculty.

The academic profession is a multitude of academic tribes and territories. [...] Building upon a widening array of subcultures that speak in the strange Tongues of econometrics, biochemistry, ethnomethodology and deconstructionism. [...] No less important in the differentiation of the academic profession in America is the dispersion of faculty among institutions in a System that, when viewed internationally, must be seen as inordinately large, radically decentralized, extremely diversified, uniquely competitive and uncommonly entrepreneurial. (Clark 21–22)

With respect to the level of complexity that the modern university demonstrates, it is difficult to imagine how the rationalization of Taylor's GEN project could compete.

None of this is to say that the university as it is currently constituted is without its problems, only that the solutions offered by Taylor are, in fact, more likely to detract from the complexity of these remarkable institutions. This university is marked by a high level of complexity that has been generated by the interplay of a grid labeled "autonomy and accountability" (Berdahl, Altbach, and Gumport 5–8). This binary opposition creates a dialectical tension wherein purity is never achieved at either pole but out of which dynamism is achieved; dynamism that is creative rather than destructive. Taylor's notion of complexity eliminates the opposition of autonomy in favor of accountability to market forces. The elimination of this grid is destructive of the complexity that Taylor treasures and that the modern university has achieved. Thus, its preservation is a necessity.

Finally, the very complexity of the relationship between the university and the culture in which it exists is ample justification for such a defense of grids. The university, far from the ivory tower that Taylor excoriates, is as much a workplace as any other and as such the successes that it has achieved should be defended so that it can provide a model (imperfect though it may be) for a kind of work life that others may emulate. As Stanley Aronowitz puts it,

In fact, the salaries and working conditions that some enjoy in universities should be held up as a standard for everybody. Work without end is the scourge of every radical idea because it colonizes our most precious
possession: time. Participatory governance at the workplace, in the
community, and in the home; free time for personal development and
pleasure; and social and cultural equality are next to impossible when
work time is so long that the worker (intellectual as well as manual) can
barely keep her eyes open at the end of the day. Backbreaking manual
labor and work that separates body and mind should be eliminated by
technology and democratic work organization. (211)

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