

Nicholas Weekes, an undergraduate student majoring in International Studies, received the Outstanding Portfolio Award for “Knowledge Engulfed in Capitalism,” written in CPN 101 for Professor Ross Borden.

## Knowledge Engulfed in Capitalism

Nicholas Weekes

In “The Age of Social Transformation” Peter F. Drucker, contends that the work force is on the cusp of shifting from manual labor to a knowledge society. Drucker optimistically maintains that this new knowledge--oriented society will become extremely specialized for those who have access to an education. However, this specialization also poses a challenge. Drucker warns that society may fragment in small enclaves of specialized individuals. As Drucker describes the opportunities of a knowledge society, he believes that fragmentation is a risk worth taking. He argues that properly understood, the transition to the knowledge society can be peaceful because the preceding transition from manual work to industrial labor was peaceful. With more than thirteen references to Karl Marx, he attempts to refute Marx’s prediction of a social revolution led by the proletarian class. But his own account of a knowledge society makes clear that there will be an unprecedented competition for acquiring what he calls “knowledges” and that it will undermine the idea of knowledge itself as a common understanding and a birthright for all. Contrary to Drucker’s hopeful predictions, a society where only an elite is provided with an education is bound to be unjust, and the injustice is bound to produce social unrest and even rebellion.

Drucker believes social transformation will take place structurally and thus peacefully. Even as small-farms jobs have disappeared, Drucker contends that the largest social changes are widely accepted (224). It is central to his argument that the shift from an agricultural society to an industrial one came without any political or civil unrest (224). Is this view of history plausible, however? Drucker remains oblivious to politically oriented movements in the nineteenth century. For example, he does not acknowledge workers movements in Chicago and New York. Farming and industrial workers in these cities demanded minimum wages, decent working hours, and a chance to keep in touch with their humanity. While it is true that these movements were not so violent as Marx predicted, they were not nearly so peaceful as Drucker maintains. Blood was shed. Therefore, the prospect for a new knowledge society with a vast uneducated population is foreboding.

Drucker observes that blue-collar workers were the first lower class to be organized, but not because he is interested to show organizing gave them victories of fair working hours and minimum wages. His purpose is rather to show that, as an organized workforce, they helped to stabilize society (224). Drucker makes this point clear because it contradicts what Marx believed, that the workers would rise up against capitalism:

Contrary to Marxist and syndicalist predictions, the rise of the industrial worker did not destabilize society. Instead it has emerged as the century’s most stabilizing social development. It explains why the disappearance of

the farmer and the domestic servant produced no social crises. Both the flight of the land and the flight from domestic were voluntary. (227)

Drucker does not say so, but he may be relieved to think that knowledge workers will be too specialized to organize an effective social protest and that they will have no reasons for one.

At any rate, and just as peacefully as farmers gave way to blue-collar workers, Drucker hopes that blue-collar workers will give way to knowledge workers. The transition is not so easy, however, because this time the worker will need new qualifications. According to Drucker, knowledge workers “require a good deal of formal education and the ability to acquire and to apply theoretical and analytical knowledge. [. . .] They require a habit of continuous learning” (228). In Drucker’s knowledge society, individuals are obligated to pursue careers of ever-greater specialization. It may be that knowledge is the passport to success in a knowledge society but Drucker remains blind to the inequities in the distribution of “Knowledges”. “Knowledges” will become an expendable good because money determines its quality. For instance, the “Knowledge” that individuals buy will determine the mileage they receive from it. As a result, today from city to suburb, state to state and ultimately nation to nation there are blatant disparities in the essential knowledge that would mobilize a knowledge worker.

Drucker discusses the high theoretical and specialized skills of a neurosurgeon, who epitomizes in his regard a knowledge-based society (231). Even as knowledge workers possess optimistic outlooks for themselves, what does such specialize knowledge do for society? Indeed, everyone in a knowledge society does not have access to the knowledge of a neurosurgeon; the lack of access is fundamental in the fragmenting of communities and society. As Drucker admits,

[. . .] The acquisition and distribution of formal knowledge may come to occupy the place in the politics of the knowledge society which the acquisition and displacements of property and income have occupied and distribution of property and income have occupied in our politics over the two or three centuries that we have to come to call the Age of Capitalism (231).

Drucker’s is not appalled with the way knowledge is being carefully allocated. He leaves the acquiring of knowledge to the individual and leaves government free of that responsibility.

Even so, and apparent in consistency in his argument Drucker maintains that knowledge is not an individual venture but rather a cooperative are: “Knowledge workers work in teams [and] must be affiliated with an organization “(230). Drucker’s emphasis on collaboration is problematic because it does not allow workers to move freely outside of their specialization, despite his bold claim about mobility. Workers are confined to their areas of specialized work just as much as factory workers. Most importantly according to Drucker, “the knowledge society employees—that is, knowledge workers—own the tools of production. He is challenging Marx’s great insight that the factory worker does not and cannot own the tools of production, and therefore is ‘alienated’ ”(235). But even though knowledge workers may possess their tools for production, the tools may be insignificant because of increased specialization. The immense pressure on specializing makes mobility between jobs or residence nonexistence because knowledge workers are married to their specialization. Moreover, it hardly

matters for political purposes that each of them owns his or her “tools of production.” The tools themselves are so specialized on Drucker’s account that knowledge workers cannot organize to press their common cause.

Drucker demonstrates that the key to tapping into this knowledge is effective management. Again, Drucker makes the distinction between his knowledge society, which will transition peacefully and is carefully guided by management, and in Marx’ society of workers, where there would be revolutions. Although management has the potential of being a guiding force in a knowledge society, the reality is, workers are weary of the probing stare of management. Knowledge workers, enjoy their independence from the scrutiny of a manager in their daily activities, but only because management is too distinct to challenge diversity.

What is left for those that may fall on the outskirts of Drucker’s highly specialized educationally astute society? Drucker proposes the “social sector” as the entity that will remain pure to political and individual gains, but primarily for those that may not have achieved the required knowledge in a knowledge society (237). Drucker claims in the absence of the community the social sector will handle the maladies of a knowledge society. He argues that the social sector will focus on the whole human being, physically, spiritually and psychologically. The social sector maybe a novel and respectable ideal, but the evidence today points to the other direction; the jails are filled with those who do not achieve knowledge as their passport to success. The knowledge system, which is Drucker’s premise, is in shambles creating problems of vindictiveness with knowledge-deprived folks.

Drucker presents a new paradigm to describe the new age of knowledge that is slowly unfolding. The downfall in this new society is that even though it will be peaceful and not violent like Marx’s predictions of violence, the knowledge in the knowledge society will remain for those who could afford it, creating problems of knowledge capitalism because the fortunate and wealthy will undoubtedly have the access to the best knowledge. His solution to the problem is the social sector. Today, the social sector in many respects is under-funded and unmanned. Furthermore, the community will be neglected because those who are specialized will remain in their pseudo worlds, such as the universities, companies or organizations. Then, in spite of the profusion of knowledge, the poor and disenfranchised will still remain knowledge deprived.

#### Work Cited

Drucker, Peter F. “The Age of Social Transformation.” The New Humanities Reader. Eds. Richard E. Miller and Kurt Spellmeyer. Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2003. 222-247.

