67 Rest in Graduate School: Boundaries, Care-Taking Labor, Racial Capitalism, and Ill Health

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Introduction

Too often does the urgency to complete academic-related activities take priority over our health and well-being. The ability to choose rest, especially when it is needed the most, became even more challenging since the arrival of the novel coronavirus into our shareable world—a historical moment that not only dramatically reshaped the nature of our work-life but further exacerbated health inequities produced by racial capitalism (Laster-Pirtle, 2020). The graduate environment is a space that often relies on processes that reinforce commodification and reduce personhood to productivity, where our work is something to be merely bought and sold. Keeanga Yahmatta-Taylor (2021) discusses how the academy is so quick to disregard "what we think, what we fear, or how we get through the day."

And so, the question facing a graduate student in political science is: how exactly can one center their humanity, build solidarity, and prioritize their physical, mental, existential, and social health amid the constraining expectations of the discipline? We offer a collective rethinking of work culture by critically examining the institutional dynamics that have continued to push the centrality of rest, health, and community further afield. Although we do not offer a singular answer, we hope to provide a critical theoretical approach for thinking through overwork in graduate school.

Feeling Overworked: The Pervasiveness of Racial Capitalism

In *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study*, Moten and Harney (2013) describe how the university has a limited capacity to foster true learning, love, and empathy. For Moten and Harney, a university ranking is not an indicator of intellectual quality; rather, it is a signal that a particular institution has a distinct ability to create a labor force that can effectively serve both the state and the market. Many universities also have dark histories of exploitation in which Black and Brown communities have disproportionately undertaken excessive labor in the form of administrative responsibilities, research, and teaching without compensation (see chapter 54 on concerns for underrepresented racial/ethnic students). Meanwhile, it is all too common for those in graduate school to experience a precarious funding situation in which they live paycheck to paycheck. Time and time again, universities have prioritized self-interest and competition, not cooperation, to fuel their racial capitalistic impulse and force us into a condition of ill health.

Reflecting on their experience as a Black graduate student at Indiana University, Eric Anthony Grollman (2017) bluntly stated, "Racism is the norm in academe […] Your graduate program is not in

the business of looking after your personal well-being, so do not rely on it to meet your personal, social, spiritual and sexual/romantic need." Here, the question is not merely how to establish an optimal work-life balance but rather, we must ask ourselves, how does one escape institutional obliteration? Racial capitalism embodies a theoretical notion that self-interest and competition, not cooperation and community well-being, should pervade each aspect of daily life. And the current work culture of academia is one that has continued to push the centrality of our health asunder.

Overwork not only implies excess labor but a "right amount" of work. When life or the body feel as though they seem to be crashing, does asking for a break come across as laziness? Each institution, department, advisor, to name a few, have likely derived their own criteria of where a student should be year to year of the PhD. To be frank, those criteria regularly work against us. Comfortably saying no to an unreasonable advisor or expectation can become harder as one progresses through the program and so, identifying when the phrase "I cannot say no" is steadily becoming commonplace as early as possible can be essential.

When our schedule is too demanding, not only does the quality of our intellectual engagement decline but so does our health. Fatigue can make us more susceptible to illnesses that caffeine alone cannot solve. Suddenly, the quality of your research is not the same. You start to have trouble learning and remembering course material. You move slower. You take a sick day. Then another. And another. There is a danger in prioritizing the amount of work you do rather than the quality of work done and your health.

On another hand, some enjoy having a full schedule and the pressure of overwork is not considered to be a direct result of graduate school. We do not mean to discourage against hard work or suggest that one should not be proud of the effort they expend. But unfortunately, in graduate school, the notion of hard work can quickly transform into a kind of "busy bragging"—an urgency to constantly share your overwhelming schedule. It could sound like the following: an insane amount of reading; another endless day of teaching and research; a conference presentation to prepare for; another panel discussion to attend.

To be fair, graduate school can be riddled with chaos, and sometimes venting or speaking aloud is necessary. It is also perfectly acceptable to share accomplishments and be proud of your academic success. The busy brag can be done consciously or unconsciously, but in either case, it is often accepted as "common" by the academic community to hide the depressive-oppressive environment of graduate school; it is not the badge of honor we presume it to be. Being selective with your time and creating a schedule that is conducive with relaxation is crucial.

The feeling of overwork is derived from a constraint placed on health and well-being, emotion, economic security (time, space, employment, wage), and institutional positionality. Overwork itself can become hegemonic, where underrepresented communities also take on affective labor disproportionately and at a lower value, sometimes with no value afforded at all. Selma James and Nina Lopez (2020) discuss how the pandemic created a "crisis of care—from the rise in the mental and physical ill health of children to the neglect of disabled and elderly people." Waged or unwaged, it became impossible to dismiss the significance of daily care-taking labor on which, pandemic or not, society is dependent on for survival. We desperately needed care but almost instantaneously, there was no way to provide it, receive it, or generate it—a relentless cycle of unmet physical and emotional need.

We continued to work, repressing each warning sign of ill health to impose a cure rather than commit to respecting and strengthening our bodies. In short, the experience of overwork in graduate school can differ from student to student, namely as we consider race, gender, sexuality, disability, class, to name a few. Not everyone is equally alienated, equally unwell, equally feeling the weight of social suffering, equally exploited, equally represented, and equally expected to follow the institutional procedure of academia.

Disciplined by the Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic also interrupted any sense of routine and normalcy. The sudden temporal uncertainty spawned a feeling of strangeness, where people across the globe quickly realized the extent to which our lives were previously scheduled and conditioned (Grondin et al 2020). To avoid a complete

rupture of everyday life, we needed to create new connective tissue. Some took to baking. Some took to at-home exercise. Some took to artistic expression. Although we could provide texture to everyday life with new activities, we inevitably lost time or more acutely, a notion of time. Monday felt like Thursday. Wednesday felt like Saturday. Friday felt like Tuesday.

But the impression of losing track of time also went beyond the inability to remember a particular day of the week; for some, we also lost the ability to recall the past—our previous self. The normal was, in fact, abnormal at one moment. And so, we hope to draw attention to how a potentially unhealthy behavior, habit, or expectation in our present moment can be made to feel normal, ordinary, or mundane. Not every lifestyle change made during the pandemic should be absorbed or rendered as normal.

At the height of the pandemic, Veena Das (2020) urged the academy to contend with how social and personal suffering would shape the classroom experience as they did during the last recession when income declined, suicide rose, and divorce soared. In the face of a distinct world order, Das realized that what might have appeared to be an impersonal neutral question in the past moment would now likely touch a naked wound hidden behind a clothed body and smiling face. The pandemic came with a harsh realization that what we often characterized as normal was, in actuality, violence inscribed into the everyday. Disease, death, and despair felt unavoidable but nevertheless, many were encouraged to endure, hide their anguish and rage, and instead, focus on using the moment to generate new political science research.

Meanwhile, the discipline has also often "produced a decidedly incomplete portrait of political life" (Soss & Weaver, 2017) and of the experience of marginalized communities, where the over-representation of quantification and widespread neglect of theories of racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, classism, disability, to name a few, can induce a perpetual state of frustration as an aspiring political scientist. It can be incredibly difficult to establish a research agenda in a program that has remained deeply committed to archaic methodologies and vocabularies that bear limited meaning on communities that were never of interest to political science.

There is a cost to becoming a political scientist and learning the "canon." Immersing oneself into the bodies of thought, methodologies, and theories of political science has the capacity to determine our schedule, research interest, intellectual development, pedagogy, and relationship to our political world. It can become second nature to continuously value not only academic-related activities but the priorities of the discipline above rest and well-being. Social science and humanities research alike have long histories of racism and colonialism embedded into their epistemological processes and methodologies, where the act of immersing oneself into a particular discipline, to use the language of Katherine McKittrick (2021), can be a "dismal, suffocating" process that can ultimately hinder successful completion of the PhD. How does one locate space to research and write against a prevailing discourse? What exactly does it mean to become absorbed into the language and methodologies of political science?

Although there is a movement to "decolonize" the literature, for Robbie Shilliam (2021), it is also not enough to merely retrieve histories of imperialism or colonialism, nor is it enough to condemn the hidden and ignored colonial logic of a conventional argument. We have to create new modalities of seeing the world and introduce a far more expansive series of archival material and interdisciplinary methodologies to move the study of political science from the center of power to the margin. But where is the time? Here, there is a very practical concern, that is, for a graduate student, how does one actively unlearn the dangerous and harmful legacies of slavery and colonization amid coursework that does not share that same epistemic commitment?

Some also feel as though "decolonize" is nothing more than a buzzword and frequently deployed to quiet the recent call to include marginalized thought on syllabi. At the same time, having a "race week" or "gender week" over the course of a single semester is rarely comforting for a student that is actively looking to find a method or body of literature conducive with their research orientation.

It is unlikely that we can provide a single piece of advice on how to develop your academic voice and become confident in writing against a prevailing paradigm in graduate school. But maybe, Nikki Giovanni (2021) can serve as one starting point. In a recent interview with Public Books, Giovanni stated the following:

"I have a right to write what I believe. And I also have a right to write what I feel. I am going to say

what I believe. I am not gonna make a joke out of you. I am not gonna lock the door to keep you in. You have a right to walk out that door. I have an obligation to say what I believe. This is how we get along […] A writer, by nature, is very arrogant. We do not often say that out loud, but we are. We believe in ourselves. So we write. I am not trying to change anybody, but we write what we believe in. That is the only thing that is really important. It is what you, what I, or what we believe. If you do not believe in your own writing, then I do not know where you will go. The main thing is that you have to trust your voice. Once you trust your own voice, then you are going to write well."

To a certain extent, one cannot become all too preoccupied with the expectation of the discipline. Sometimes, the answer is relatively straightforward. Say no. Write. Trust your voice. Each of which is certainly easier said than done. But there is a world of inquiry beyond the discipline of political science. Do not be afraid to question the boundaries of the discipline because it is likely that you have noticed something important—a serious theoretical contention, a methodological error, or poor organization. Establishing a broad intellectual horizon/community is necessary for success in graduate school. Again, to use the language of Nikki Giovanni:

"Where do you go to rest? Well, you should have a friend that you can go to. A friend that you can laugh with. A friend who is not going to laugh at you, who is going to be a part of you, who is not going to use you."

Rest: Embracing a New Vision

The political theorist Antonio Gramsci, who prioritized the development of critical pedagogies to overcome institutional oppression, understood culture as a learned way of shared being. Paolo Friere elaborated on this critical-pedagogical dimension of Gramsci's thought in Pedagogy of the Oppressed, wherein he delineated how oppressive, dehumanizing conditions can be transformed when new systems of education are created with and for empowering oppressed people.

In graduate school, the seminar room, the reading group, and the zoom-room workshop, which now transcends geographical boundaries, all underlie graduate student life and hold the potential to become a cooperative space for learning. Each space, structured by competitive individualism, the commodification of knowledge, and de-prioritization of well-being, could benefit from learning and teaching that is focused on critically examining power and institutionalized inequalities.

The complex entanglement between racial capitalism and academic overwork can produce a particularly deleterious assimilationist politics within the classroom, serving only to secure greater success for those already well-positioned within the institution. Academic overwork is inflected by race, gender, class, and sexuality and to prioritize our health, we must begin to center intersectionality within the academy, in order to secure real change. As we continue to participate in shared space and develop a clearer understanding of the restlessness of the current terrain, splintered by unhealthy disciplinary expectations, we can critically rethink a new form of work-life for the graduate student experience – one centered around cooperation and mutual-aid.

Academic overwork, in one way, is the prioritization of academic production over personal and social well-being. Creating a new and healthier culture, then, would require the acknowledgment that, while academic overwork may not be experienced by everyone in the same capacity, it is widely accepted as self-evident and good for academic success. But paradoxically, accepting overwork as self-evident and good is undermining associational life within the university and inducing disproportionate burnout, neither of which can be sustained over an extended period of time. But why do we continue to subscribe to an ethos of academic production? One response lies with the notion that culture is a shared way of learned being. Unlearning, then, would require the language of racial capitalism so that a space for rest may be opened.

Anything short of a prioritization of rest is a hindrance to success in graduate school. Rest, by nature, is a necessary moment for personal and social well-being and it has the potential to transform our shared academic space. Kevin Quashie (2012) described the quiet as a sovereign space of inner life, holding the potential for an expression of vulnerability, desire, fear, ambition, hunger; an internal oneness that is generated by a capacity to inspire collectivity (74). Rest, like the quiet, is neither still, nor silent.

Rest is pedagogical; it is an epistemic commitment to care and a learned way of sharing being focused on asserting our humanity.

What does it mean when someone who has historically been treated as nothing more than a resource lays claim to equal treatment or demands time for self-care? We can start to overcome the long-standing, entrenched expectation for marginalized graduate student communities to carry the extra-weighted burden of research, administrative responsibilities, and care-taking labor once rest is embedded into the meaning of graduate student success. As the academy and the other modalities of governance produce and exacerbate harm, a rethinking of our being, feeling, and knowledge is necessary for rest, precisely for a re-setting of our expectation of success in graduate school. We all have several personal and professional responsibilities to handle, but against the grain, centering a rest-based culture in critical opposition to overwork can begin to secure real change for our health.

Moving Forward: Building Practical Capacities

Both abolitionist studies and the field of critical pedagogy share a commitment to being guided by a wide, endless imagination and can be used to practically work toward providing institutional transformation at the level of teaching, learning, and research. They also offer fruitful ground for political science to engage in academic bridgework so that our specific disciplinary constraints can be examined, addressed, and overcome. We have offered a critical lens through which we can engage in a collective rethinking of academic work, especially how overwork perpetuates inequality according to the various power structures within the academy. From this vantage point, we can build a new vision of work-life in political science. Indeed, there can be no otherwise, however, without a collective re-imagining of graduate student life.

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