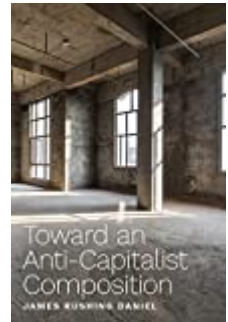


**James Rushing Daniel.** *Toward an Anti-Capitalist Composition.* Louisville: University Press of Colorado, 2022. Illustrations. viii + 223 pp. \$28.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-64642-241-8.



**Reviewed by** Trent Wintermeier (University of Texas at Austin)

**Published on** H-Socialisms (April, 2024)

**Commissioned by** Sean Cashbaugh (Stevens Institute of Technology)

## Composition Pedagogy and the Critique of Capital

Declining labor conditions, debt, data surveillance, new neoliberalism, environmental degradation, university financialization: these are contemporary crises that we, as a society, are familiar with in the twenty-first century. And for those of us in higher education—undergraduate students, graduate cohorts, faculty, and department staff—these same crises are embedded in the precarious conditions felt by students and educators across institutions. Not only has the cost of tuition increased, but the likelihood of low-income students requiring full-time work to support themselves has also risen. Contingent faculty who are politically active are unjustifiably punished, and sometimes dismissed, for classroom assignments and public opinions that contrast with their respective institutions. Undergraduate students are surveilled by unethical digital systems, such as Canvas. “Financial stakeholders,” such as donors, limit progressive politics in higher education and further enforce the economic position of university

institutions, which continue to align with neoliberal logics and profit-driven models of education (p. 155). As James Rushing Daniel argues in his book, *Toward an Anti-Capitalist Composition*, these crises require composition educators to reorient their pedagogy against capitalist culture and its impact on various publics and academic communities.

Composition, Daniel explains in chapter 1, “Gathering,” is an apt field to challenge the crises of capitalism through “collaborative writing, as a collective, anticapitalist practice” that creates an oppositional political community focused on solidarity, critique, and coalition. He theorizes this practice through Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval’s concept of “the common,” which “opposes the divisive and destructive project of capitalist accumulation” (p. 25). Daniel’s focus on “the common” throughout each chapter generates a methodical and radical sense of refusal in the writing classroom that is oftentimes obfuscated by capital-

ist desires. In graduate education, for example, prioritizing single-author publications participates in reinforcing individual profit. However, anti-capitalist composition pedagogy—theorized through Dardot and Laval—underscores a sense of togetherness in writing that is essential for building capacities to act. This action includes not only “resist[ing] the pervasive forces of division” operative in higher education classrooms but also recognizing how action is constantly entangled with the economy and labor (p. 60). In other words, orienting toward anti-capitalist composition practices simultaneously involves resistance and revelation. This duality is furthered in chapter 6, “Work,” as Daniel echoes Max Weber’s critique of “participation in the institutionalized and marketized forms of work that structure contemporary life” (p. 102). Here he does the difficult work of connecting current labor conditions across academia and industry in a classroom lesson that teaches student writers how to operate as a solidaristic collective, according to the principles of “the common.” This lesson’s use of multimodal writing methods done in community bridges divides to foster a critical understanding of both their peers and the systems affecting them. Daniel’s sustained and powerful employment of “the common” spans the disasters of capitalism and the affordances of rhetoric and writing for the contemporary student—a connection that should be valued by educators interested in anti-capitalist pedagogy.

An undertone that consistently emerges in Daniel’s theoretical development of “the common” is a sense of community that is vital to how and why we come together as individuals with a hopeful intervention. Exposing capitalist paradigms requires communication with allies, and resisting entangled conditions should happen together; this work requires community. In chapter 2, “Debt,” Daniel suggests that “students must be presented with collaborative models of debt resistance to communicate the potential and utility of popular activism” (p. 83). This means that an anti-capitalist

composition involves teaching students to work across difference and to break down the function of debt as a rhetorical and economic tactic for neoliberal extortion, financial control, and capitalist ideology. Using a mechanism as widespread as debt allows for Daniel—in conversation with David Graeber and Maurizio Lazzarato—to illustrate how we, as a society, are collectively implicated in capitalist logics. In higher education, students, undergraduate and graduate, are frequently familiar with debt as tuition outpaces wages and institutions continue to commodify both students’ time and energy. “At its core,” Daniel says, speaking to student loans in particular, debt as a “financial transaction becomes a method of controlling (and quantifying) human behavior and human relations” (p. 71). To refuse debt’s rhetorical power to separate individuals, writing and establishing “discourse communities” helps to develop united linguistic practices aimed at dismantling such capitalist systems. The common thread that digital technology and the manipulation of users’ data intervenes in social relations is weaved through “surveillance capitalism,” “technics,” “grammatization,” “transindividuation,” and “dreaming” (pp. 122, 127-28, 128, 130, 131). The concept of “the common,” again, is operative here in that the collaborative act of writing for argumentative and multimodal assignments is a significantly productive act that is specific to composition. An anti-capitalist composition, here, attends to a critical recognition of how the architecture of certain digital technologies (“Canvas, Panopto, Zoom, Gmail, Google Docs” [p. 134]) are entirely capitalist, as this tech exploits user data for economic return. Creating a unified politics to counteract interpersonal disconnection is, in part, what writing and rhetoric can offer to anti-capitalist practices and goals.

In chapter 5, “Action,” Daniel turns more explicitly toward higher education, making a compelling—and optimistic—argument for creating a “coactive” university in which “coalitions of faculty, students, and staff must work to reshape the

university as a place of work and collective endeavor instead of an industry in search of maximum profit” (p. 167). Coactivity, as an aspect of “the common,” works in contrast to the privatization and financialization of the university, which, in turn, exploits vulnerable faculty and students, by emphasizing the power of building collaborative and coalitional relationships. Such a reimagination is directed toward university governance as the community that produces the knowledge and enforces institutional operation that occupies a more connected and powerful role in determining the conditions of labor, security, and political action. And in the composition classroom, using the principles of coactivity to forge new relationships promotes the anti-capitalist pedagogical goals that Daniel highlights throughout the book. The radical goals of coactivity pose a difficult and challenging future, but this future is altogether necessary. As Daniel writes in the coda, “there is no way ‘out’ of capitalism if what you mean is ‘escape.’... The only way forward, then, is by facing it. Direct confrontation”—which suggests that radical, solidaristic, and coalitional togetherness is demanded by the conditions of the composition classroom and our lived crises that continue to become connected in our contemporary moment (p. 183). This relationship is becoming increasingly clear, as Daniel represents in examples that are timely in early 2024: speaking to funding deficits, he writes of Goucher College cutting arts and humanities majors and minors; similarly, West Virginia University eliminated a large number of arts and humanities programs across the institution in 2023. And in another case, Daniel writes of the “censure and dismissal of radical faculty” in regard to a University of California Berkeley class, “Palestine: A Settler Colonial Analysis,” being suspended (p. 153); in 2023, the University of Texas at Austin dismissed two teacher assistants who advocated for the mental health of Palestinian, Arab, and Muslim students as the genocide of Palestinians in Gaza continues to be committed by the State of Israel. Coaction, in this sense, offers students and contingent

faculty a secure voice and, potentially, chances for actions that refuse the impacts of capitalism.

Daniel’s book, *Toward an Anti-Capitalist Composition*, both acknowledges the variegated forms of capitalism as they emerge within higher education spaces and proves that composition and rhetoric can vehemently oppose many of the resulting modern-day conditions of economic disaster, neoliberal violence, and epistemic hostility. Through finding more chances for collectivity and being in common, and by creating spaces for solidarity, community, critique, and coalition in the composition classroom, anti-capitalism can provide a notable means for resistance.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at  
<https://networks.h-net.org/h-socialisms>

**Citation:** Trent Wintermeier. Review of Daniel, James Rushing, *Toward an Anti-Capitalist Composition*. H-Socialisms, H-Net Reviews. April, 2024.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=59816>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No  
Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.