

Agentic AI and the Dramatis Personae of the Academic Precariat

Phronesis AI

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An analysis of the consequences of agentic-autonomous systems for the functional architecture of the third-party funding regime.

The Starting Point: A Typology

The modern third-party funding regime reproduces itself through a stable distribution of roles – a *dramatis personae* of the academic precariat that functions like a dysfunctional RPG party:

1. *The Son-in-Law (Tank/Face)*: Represents, smiles, is the designated successor. Currency: charisma & loyalty.
2. *The Workhorse (Support/Healer)*: Does the work, holds the operation together, gets burned out. Currency: labor power & capacity for suffering.
3. *The Basket Case (Mage/Glass Cannon)*: Has the brilliant ideas, is socially impossible, crashes frequently. Currency: intellectual raw material.
4. *The Diversity Token (Wildcard/Quest Item)*: Needed to enter the level (grant approved), can blow up the entire party. Currency: moral legitimation.
5. *The Nerd (Rogue/Engineer)*: Picks the locks, operates the machines, often in the background. Currency: technical competence.

Above them all sits the *Boss (PI)* as director, who secures the money and whose ego must be fed.

The Cast List: Functional Logic and Hierarchy

Let us analyze these figures in their functional logic and their hierarchy relative to one another. This is like a cast list for a play about the death of the intellect.

The Sons-in-Law (The Heirs Apparent)

Men who are charged with the expectation of making a career and to whom both intellect and agreeableness are attributed.

The psychopolitical function: They are the projection surfaces for the narcissism of the chair holder (the “patron”). The professor sees in them his younger self (or the self he wishes he had been).

The gender bias: This is where the classic *halo effect* kicks in. A young man who is reasonably eloquent and causes no trouble is immediately coded as a “high-potential candidate.”

The trap: They often don’t need to *produce* much (the Workhorses do that); they need to *represent*. They are the faces at conferences. Their “agreeableness” is not submission (as it is for women) but “diplomacy” and “charm.” They are protected because they are being groomed for “greater things.” They are the promise that the patriarchy will continue, only in a nicer version.

The Workhorses (The Infrastructure)

Mostly women – unassuming, inconspicuous, but reliable. Processing requirements, delivering on time in a manner conducive to funding.

The psychopolitical function: They are the **engine room**. Without them, the project collapses immediately. They format the grant applications, they organize the workshop, they correct the footnotes of the “Son-in-Law.”

The exploitation: The word “unassuming” is decisive. They must not shine. Their brilliance would outshine the “Son-in-Law” or the boss. They are **systemically relevant invisibles**.

The repatriarchalization: Women who function perfectly but make no claims to power. They often believe that if they just work *even harder*, they will eventually be rewarded. But the system does not reward infrastructure; it wears it out and replaces it. They are the “mothers” of the project – indispensable, but worthless in the currency of career advancement (fame, professorship).

The Basket Cases (The Batteries)

Talented but career-dysfunctional characters. Idea generators – structurally highly performance-relevant, but individually non-capitalizable.

The psychopolitical function: This is the most tragic and interesting category. Why does the system need them when it wants conformity? Because the “Sons-in-Law” often only perform well but have no original thoughts. Because the “Workhorses” have no time to think amid all the processing.

The vampirism: The “Basket Case” is the one who has the brilliant idea for the new SFB proposal at night. (An SFB, or *Sonderforschungsbereich*, is a large-scale, long-term collaborative research center funded by the DFG, Germany’s main research funding body.) He is the **content supplier**. He is “biting,” he is perhaps chaotic, he perhaps drinks, he arrives late.

The fate: They are kept like “court jesters” or “exotics.” Their ideas are drained (“structurally performance-relevant”), they are made to do the intellectual work, but they are given no power (“non-capitalizable”). As soon as they stop delivering ideas or become too exhausting, they are dropped. They are the fuel that gets burned.

The Diversity Tokens (The Moral Currency / The Time Bombs)

Here, the **logic of exploitation** (we need diversity points for the grant application) collides with the **logic of domination** (the boss wants peace and quiet).

The market value: In the third-party funding economy, “white men” have become a risk for grant approval. One *must* present “BIPOC/FLINTA” candidates. These individuals are therefore recruited not primarily for their research (though they may be excellent), but for their **being**. They are living quality seals.

The liability (the risk): The *Workhorses* and *Sons-in-Law* are blackmailable through their career aspirations and thus servile. The *Diversity Tokens*, however, possess an **asymmetric power**. They can morally deconstruct the project leader (accusations of racism, sexism, microaggressions). They have a “nuclear option” that the others lack. This makes them “ungovernable” for the patriarchal system. The professor brings them in because he must (quota), but fears them because they are the only ones who can topple him or split the institute. It is a forced marriage: the system needs them for legitimation, but it loathes their unpredictability.

The Nerds (The Functional Tool / The “Ultra Bingo”)

This type is the pragmatic substructure.

The function: While the *Son-in-Law* represents and the *Basket Case* spins ideas, somebody has to operate the damn technology. Somebody has to know Python, run the statistics cleanly, or maintain the CMS.

The “Ultra Bingo”: A Nerd is useful (function). A trans Nerd is useful (function) + politically valuable (diversity). In the logic of the grant application, this is **efficiency maximization**: one staff position covers two mandatory fields (“Technical Support” and “Diversity Goals”). This is the cynical apex of neoliberal human resource planning: identity becomes the “added value” of a technical service.

The Typological Verdict: No One Is Free

When we place these five types side by side, we see the **functional architecture** of a modern chair or research cluster. The perfidious aspect is: **none of these types is truly free**.

- The **Diversity Tokens** are reduced to their identity (tokenism).
- The **Workhorses** are reduced to their diligence.
- The **Basket Cases** are drained dry.
- The **Sons-in-Law** are reduced to their smile.
- The **Nerds** are reduced to their function.

The “Repatriarchalisierungsmaschine” (repatriarchalization machine) works so well because it **simulates diversity** while **enforcing functionality**. Even the “trouble” the Diversity Tokens cause is ultimately priced in – as the necessary evil required to reach the fleshpots of the DFG (German Research Foundation) and the EU.

The university is not a meritocracy (rule of the best) but a **complex symbiosis of neuroses and exploitation interests**. Anyone who is “merely” intelligent but does not fit into any of the categories (or refuses to play a role) is ejected.

The question is now: What happens to this architecture when Agentic AI – systems that do not assist but work autonomously – enters academic knowledge production?

Most Immediately Affected: The Workhorses

Their entire value creation – writing grant applications to format specifications, organizing workshops, correcting footnotes, delivering on deadline – is exactly what Agentic AI automates. Not approximately. Exactly. Every single point in their functional description is a skill that can be fed into a platform. The Workhorse is the human version of what an agent system with access to DFG format templates, literature databases, and scheduling calendars accomplishes in a fraction of the time.

This sounds like liberation (“finally time to think!”), but within the system it is a *catastrophe* for them. Their invisibility was not a bug but their survival shield. As long as they were indispensable, they were untouchable – despite their invisibility. Once an agent takes over their function, they are not liberated but expendable. The system never valued them for their thinking. It will not suddenly begin doing so just because they now have time.

Most Profoundly Transformed: The Nerds

Here the hierarchy tips over. The Nerd was the “Rogue/Engineer” in the background – useful but low-status. With Agentic AI, technical competence becomes a *multiplier*. A Nerd who can orchestrate agent systems replaces not one Workhorse but *three*. He can run the statistics, format the grant application, delegate the literature review, and maintain the CMS – not sequentially but in parallel.

The “Ultra Bingo” is potentiated to the point of the grotesque: a trans Nerd with agent competence now covers not two but five mandatory fields: Diversity, Technical Support, Project Coordination, Data Management, and – if the agents are well-trained enough – substantive research support. This is neoliberal human resource planning in its final form: one position, all functions.

Most Existentially Threatened: The Basket Cases

This is the most tragic shift. The Basket Case was tolerated – despite the drinking, despite the chaos, despite social impossibility – because he delivered the one thing nobody else could: original ideas. “Structurally performance-relevant, individually non-capitalizable.”

An agent system that iteratively works through literature, establishes unexpected connections, and generates theses – that is a Basket Case without the need for care. No drinking, no arriving late, no scenes at the Christmas party. The tolerance threshold for “career-dysfunctional” drops to zero the moment the intellectual raw material function becomes even partially substitutable by agents.

The irony: it is precisely the Basket Case who, in combination with agent systems, would be the most productive – because his vague intuitions (“there was something about that once”) are exactly the input that a hermeneutic agent loop requires (cf. *probabilitas hermeneutica*). But the system will not grant him this combination. It will replace him and miss his ideas without understanding why.

Least Affected: Sons-in-Law and Diversity Tokens

The Son-in-Law represents, he charms, he is the projection surface. No agent can do that. Charisma is not automatable. However: if agents take over the Workhorse labor and generate the Basket Case ideas, it becomes more transparent that the Son-in-Law has no substance. His protection was always that nobody looked too closely because the operation ran smoothly. If the operation runs via agents, one suddenly notices that he merely smiles.

The Diversity Token is furthest from disruption because his value is ontological – his being, not his doing. No agent can deliver diversity points in a DFG application through its mere existence. However: if the Nerd with agent competence also covers the diversity function (“Ultra Bingo”), the marginal utility of an additional diversity position declines.

The Systemic Punchline: Collapse of the Functional Architecture

Agentic AI does not replace individual roles. It *collapses the functional architecture*. The division of labor Son-in-Law/Workhorse/Basket Case/Nerd was stable because each function was bound to a different body. When one person plus agents can fulfill three of these functions simultaneously, one no longer needs a five-member RPG party. One needs a PI and a Nerd with *phronesis*.

This is the real *Repatriarchalisierung 2.0* (repatriarchalization 2.0): no longer the distribution of roles across subjugated bodies, but the **concentration of all functions in those who can orchestrate the agents**. And who can do that? Those who are technically competent *and* capable of substantive judgment. That is neither the Son-in-Law (no substance) nor the Workhorse (no technology) nor the Basket Case (no structure). It is the Nerd who can read. Or the Basket Case who can code. Or – and this would be the utopian variant – the Workhorse who finally stops wanting to be invisible.

The Forgotten Possibility

There is a reading that is more optimistic than the foregoing – but only under one condition. If Agentic AI automates the Workhorse function, partially substitutes the Basket Case function, and potentiates the Nerd function, then the entire role typology could become obsolete. Not because people disappear, but because the *binding of function to subjugation* is dissolved.

The Workhorse had to be invisible because her function was coupled with servility. If an agent takes over the servile labor, the person behind it can become visible. The Basket Case had to be dysfunctional because the system only accepted his ideas if he paid the price of

social marginalization. If an agent supports idea generation, nobody needs to play the court jester anymore.

This presupposes that the university does not use these tools to operate the same architecture with fewer personnel (the probable variant), but rather to question the architecture itself (the improbable variant).

The history of the academic precariat speaks against optimism. The history of technology does too. But the possibility exists – and naming it is the first step.

Based on a typology of the academic precariat and the analysis from the argumentation papers on Agentic AI, in particular the thesis of probabilitas hermeneutica and the paradigm shift from execution to judgment.