



**INTERDISCIPLINARITY AND  
THE NEW UNIVERSITY**



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## Editorial

# Interdisciplinarity and the ‘new’ university

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*Is knowledge a social good, a common, which must circulate in order to produce effects? Or is it a commodity, something that can be purchased, an investment that has value only as property? These conflicting understandings of the value of knowledge are conflicts that are embodied in the practices of the university, in its structure.*

- Jason Read, *Edu-Factory Collective*, 2009: 151

What does it mean to say that the University is in ‘crisis’? When did this ‘crisis’ begin? Those in the UK might point to October 2010, when the Independent Review of Higher Education Funding and Student Finance released a report on higher education restructuring, with introduction from Lord Browne (often referred to as the Browne report). Or they may go back farther still, to the mid-1990s and the introduction of higher education fees. Students in the University of California system might point to the most recent ‘global financial crisis,’ as might students in Greece. Others might reach farther back to the post-WWII era to mark the beginnings of the ‘corporate university’ (see Nelson, 1999).

For some, this crisis emphasizes a shift ‘away’ from knowledge as a social good –based on the commons – to knowledge as a commodity, a private possession, as the introductory quote suggests. For others, the idea of knowledge as a social good is a romantic notion ignoring raced,

classed and gendered inequalities inherent to the education system (see Mohanty, 2003; Evans, 2004; Hemmings, 2010), as well as differences in global variances in understandings of ‘the commons,’ and the specific ways in which the effects of Neoliberalism are felt in the education arena (see Dahlström, 2008; Ong, 2009; Rhoades and Torres, 2006; Slaughter and Rhoades, 2004). As Ong (2009: 40) explains: ‘universalizable technologies... do not produce universalism or uniform planetary conditions, but rather specific [global] assemblages of politics and ethics’ (see also Ong and Collier, 2004).

This issue is the first in a series of two that the GJSS will publish in an attempt to unpack the neoliberal agenda’s ‘specific assemblages of politics and ethics’ (*ibid.*) on various sites in and outside of the university. Arguably, ‘neoliberalism’ (and also ‘crisis’) has been overly and often ambiguously employed as a simplistic catch-all term that replaces and



occludes the crucial labour of specificity required by rigorous academic critique. Nevertheless, it is also true – as Ulrich Beck recently pointed out in analysing the current European ‘crisis’ – that ‘neoliberalism ultimately claims to be the better socialism, because overcoming national and global poverty and creating a more just world is possible only by means of free markets...’ (2011). Thus, as an ideological, political and economic practice that promotes the free-market machinery above all else (and in all spheres of life), neoliberalism remains crucial as a way of conceptualizing broad and inter-linked forces of local, regional and international inequity. And while its scope is broad, its foci are necessarily specific. Bronwyn Davies for instance, has discussed the impact of discursive neoliberal regimes on intellectual work within universities and on the subjectification of our consciousness, arguing that it,

‘coopts research to its own agendas, [it] silences those who ask questions, [it] whips up a small-minded moralism that rewards the attack of each small powerless person on the other, and it shuts down creativity. It draws on and exacerbates a fear of difference and rewards a rampant, consumerist, competitive individualism. It makes emotion, humour, poetry, song and passion for a life of the intellect unthinkable’ (2005: 7).

The essays compiled in this volume attest to these various concep-

tions of neoliberalism by describing and analysing mechanisms through which the higher education ‘crisis’ is being produced, not least by exploring some of the particular *marriages of convenience* between capitalism and elitism that keep the system running *as normal*. The accounts included travel between the past and present, the abstract and the particular and the global and the local to assess the widespread impact of such conditions, as well as to describe and offer alternatives created by those very circumstances.

The decision to focus on the university in ‘crisis’ is spurred by our current location as junior scholars, all too aware of its personal and professional implications, as well as our geographical location – much of the editorial team at the GJSS were located within UK institutions when talk of higher education restructuring began but had not yet fully unfolded into the politicized environment of occupation, protest and repression. Since then, and in the wake of public sector cuts and rising tuition fees, important questions have been posed about how academic subjects, degrees and professions are valued and about the actual possibilities of access to higher education for all once the new order is in full swing. Voices of dissent range from those who refuse to give in to the rampant economic justifications being offered for the retention of the social sciences, preferring instead to appeal to the inherent worth of

an ample provision of subjects (see Evans 2010), to those who have resorted to a more pragmatic economic rationalization as a way of strengthening the case for the relevance of the social sciences and for retaining a less elitist (read, less US-centric) university system in the UK (see Hotson 2011).

Recognizing that we have been motivated by the current climate – and what we have called the ‘new’ university – this first issue is also about situating the contemporary ‘crisis’ within longer-standing debates about purposes and functions of higher education, as well as making connections between the ways in which marketization impacts higher education and how it influences other areas of society. Given our interest in expanding this discussion, we have provided a further resources section in which the reader can find an extensive list of publications, websites, blogs, and videos on the topic for reference<sup>1</sup>. The resources are widely varied both in terms of specific focus and geographic location; what they have in common is a dedication to the university as a space for new ways of thinking about knowledge production. It also offers a photo gallery with powerful images taken by those involved in various student protests from around the world. And, as all volumes, this one contains three reviews, one of an event mentioned more extensively below, and two of books that address different but nevertheless

pedagogically oriented themes. Coincidentally, both books reviewed were written by educators interested in passing on practical (almost utilitarian) knowledge gained in their respective academic careers.

Finally, as editors of a journal whose mission is to ‘provide examples of and discussions over pluralism in methodology across the social sciences,’ we are most interested in exploring what the current restructuring of higher education priorities might mean for those of us committed to interdisciplinary research and critical intellectual exploration in the social sciences. In this sense, the sobering and sometimes sombre tone employed by the authors of this volume was perhaps to be expected: they convey a deep and common concern and dissatisfaction with the multi-faceted transformation of our university cultures from a stated (even if not always consistently practiced) commitment to critical fields of intellectual inquiry towards something that feels limiting in scope and unreflectively homogeneous, but also silencing and - at times- aggressive.

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This issue begins to explore the various themes outlined above by placing some of the current debates over activities within universities - their purpose, structures and future- into historical perspective. Through the concept of *institutional overstretch* **Olivia Muñoz-Oscars-**

son's provocative essay reminds us that while it may seem unique to our times, many of the tensions experienced by universities today are in fact continuities. She introduces two of the main debates discussed in all of the other pieces: mainly, how universities and their workers are pulled in a number of different directions (sometimes in detrimental fashion but with underlying possibilities for thoughtful reconfigurations and resistances) and how fostering 'knowledge for the sake of knowledge' - or what **Vostal et al.** (this volume) call 'preserving and diffusing the so-called *useless knowledge*' - is disappearing. More specifically, she speaks to the multiple and contradictory roles modern university systems have adopted over time as *overstretch* and offers a historical glance not as a way of providing any facile answers to that complex question but rather as a critical anti-myopic tool that the academic community should use to reflect upon its own responsibilities and collusions with the very systems that so many of its 'custodians' purportedly condemn.

**Adam Kaasa** and **Daniela Tanner Hernández's** contemplative essay is an apt and grounded example of how this *overstretch* unfolds in one of the most ubiquitous academic performances of our times: the speaker event. The authors' philosophical review of 'An Encounter with Judith Butler' (in April 2011) suggests that we pause to think

more carefully about the taken-for-granted qualities and assumptions of knowledge and labour embedded in event performances. Their 'call' is at once simple and profoundly demanding: they argue that the potential of events as critical spaces of productive (mis)understanding<sup>2</sup> lies in their very variable nature which, in turn, offers us a continuous range of possibilities for different forms of thoughtful engagement by, and interactions between, speakers and the audience (whether physically present or not). By resisting the traditional conventions of a review to thoughtfully explore the unquestioned logic of one of the central aspects of our academic undertakings, they highlight our ever-present (if often elapsed) ability to reconfigure the content and context of our exchanges. This possibility was powerfully enacted in a second conference reviewed in this issue (first within book review section) by **Irina Costache**. In that particular event, which also included Judith Butler as one of its keynote speakers, participants broke out of their expected roles in untamed protest to highlight the themes of precariousness, racism and homonationalism that they felt were inscribed, expressed and even reproduced by the very design of the event, rather than just discussed by its presenters as academic knowledge. There, while *undisciplined* elements took hold, frustrating the original conference goals (as an expected form of exchange),

that failure to deliver also arguably produced a different and perhaps more nuanced form of understanding of the issues under question.

**Clare Hemming's** piece, written in *the Aftermath of the Vote to Lift the Cap on HE fees in the UK* (and, it must be added- soon after her own dynamic interventions at LSE's student occupation- see <http://vimeo.com/24869178>) presents a more explicitly gendered lens through which to view the issue of *overstretch* presented earlier. She argues that there will be – and indeed already are- highly biased factors and implications entrenched in the purportedly 'neutral' logic of the market-ideal that will further ingrain systemic gendered inequalities by requiring women to bear a disproportionate brunt of the caring labour that the State is absolving itself of. This has two particularly alarming consequences: not only will there be greater unemployment and low pay, two conditions that women *already* experience in higher numbers, but the political and ideological support for equality, seen as secondary to 'the economic crisis' (rather than one of its pillars), begins to slip between the cracks.

While Hemmings grapples with the neoliberal market system in relation to women's lives and academic futures in the UK, **Rima Brusi** directs her focus to the way in which it has recently been advanced in the Caribbean island of Puerto Rico through established and increas-

ingly violently-supported networks of questionable political privilege. In this case, the issue of the public university *as concept* moves centre stage, defended fervently by masses of students through strike actions of long duration and creative scope. Brusi's essay provides a kind of time-lapse narrative of how governmentality and power have combined in the penetrating operations of university governors and other armed police allies to the detriment of students, the educational system, and with ultimate consequences for the island's poor. Like other public and privatising institutions in this U.S. territory, the unsettling administrative manoeuvres witnessed within and around the purviews of its largest and most prestigious university illustrate the extent to which neoliberal regimes are prepared to travel in the name of 'austerity and order'.

Brusi's essay begins to address this volume's concern not only with exploring the effects of the contemporary crisis of the university on knowledge production within academia, but also the ways in which these challenges are being met and contested by students, faculty, and members of civil society. As the Edu-factory Collective (2009) recognizes – this time of crisis also offers possibilities. The two final essays speak critically to the duality of this phenomenon. Like Brusi in Puerto Rico, **Filip Vostal**, **Lorenzo Silvaggi** and **Rosa Vasilaki** are pre-occupied with how the UK is being

used as a laboratory of capitalisms' hegemonic tendencies; that is, how people are being subjectified and instrumentalized to the powers of capital in the economic and symbolic re-orderings of higher education. But instead of focusing on the role of violence, they identify some ways in which academic institutions are being driven by a new ideological discourse of 'grand challenges', supported in turn by a 'one-dimensional economic perspective' that makes alterations to the system appear inevitable. The authors include an important critique of how the concepts of 'knowledge' and 'community engagement' are being deployed amidst a market-driven, solution-seeking ethos to offer us instead a more humanistic and anti-positivist appraisal of how politics and knowledge should interject the current order.

This latter point echoes **Sarah Amsler's** own argument that the challenge posed by the 'deep neo-liberalist' forces of UK academia is to be able to visibilize their mechanisms without reifying them. As the student movements, protests and occupations around the country have been demonstrating, this requires that spaces of alterity and critical dissensus be carved out while current state of affairs gets highlighted. One of the most interesting suggestions to emerge from her insightful discussion (that ranges from the dismantling of the fundamental studies such as social sci-

ences within public education and the underlying threats and attacks on democracy to the range of visual techniques, resources and metaphors being used by activists) is that the new form of student resistance in the UK acts to highlight structures of power and institutional collision without necessarily believing those will do anything more than that; that rather than being goal-driven acts in the traditional political sense of the word, it is the consciously ephemeral performance itself that seeks to alter the dominant paradigms by visibilizing a new form of rationality to the system.

Here, it is important to point out that these efforts are not about 'a wistful nostalgia' (Vernon, 2010a) for a particular time or place, but about 'reimagining.' Indeed, the very concept of a 'pure' public university in the UK has been a rather fallacious one since the nineteenth century when academic institutions began forging alliances to secure funds through private industrial enterprises, post-war military 'research', and (as recently highlighted in the very publicized case of LSE's alliance with Gadaffi's son), undemocratic regimes.<sup>3</sup> The proposed reimaginings, therefore, move us away from gendered, raced and classed inequalities inherent to any romantic notion of the university, and towards the politics of possibilities: 'the awkward, messy, joyful, and risky work of thinking and acting differently in seemingly frozen states of domina-

tion' (Amsler, this issue). Here, we must not forget that within academe and beyond, these analytic and performative possibilities that 'enable citizens to understand what is being done to them, why, and by whom (Finlayson and Curzon Price, 2011: 147) are upheld intellectually by the 'orders of ... imagination, beauty, laughter and wonder' (Vernon *ibid*) encompassed by the humanities, most vulnerable under the current restructurings. Thus, the *politics* of reimagining possibilities is founded both in locating and contesting spaces under threat. Our point here is not to despair under current circumstances as if they signal a paralysis of options and action but rather, as other authors' in this volume eloquently argue, to underscore the transformative capacity made available through the threat of a crisis. In other words, that if we expand our field of vision to capture crucial opening points of inflection across what is in fact a continuum, change that is already underway becomes both evident and possible.

None of the authors collected in this volume give any easy answers or resolutions to what is taking place in relation to higher education. Instead, they present us with a range of difficult circumstances and identify pockets of opportunities for thoughtful consideration, change or action. There is an underlying call for us to move beyond the adversary model that sets up the circumstances as an 'us versus

them' boundary scenario, in order to retain a truly critical stance on new and emerging forms of deep neoliberalism. As a collective expression of affective disappointment and concern, the essays made us wonder: Is there something unique about the 'new university' and what it is turning into that presents us with missed but also open opportunities to – as Kaasa and Tanner precise – 'think anew'?

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> This list is certainly not exhaustive and contributions to it are welcomed at [gjss.editors@lse.ac.uk](mailto:gjss.editors@lse.ac.uk)

<sup>2</sup> We have used parenthesis here to allude to one of the author's ideas that there is productive potential not just in the designed space of exchange that events present us with, but also in the unintended but often common misunderstandings that take place.

<sup>3</sup> For some relevant news coverage about this story, see: <http://thebeaveronline.co.uk/2010/01/12/gaddafigives-1-5mil-to-lse/> ; <http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2011/mar/03/lse-director-resigns-gaddafi-scandal>; <http://www.opendemocracy.net/david-held/dealing-with-saif-gaddafi-naivety-complicity-or-cautious-engagement>

<sup>4</sup> This need has been rendered even clearer in the days leading up to publication, with the emerging story of a UK 'New College for the Humanities' : a university that offers access (and publicizes itself upon such an oppor-

tunity) to fields currently under threat (thereby acknowledging the problem being faced by the current environment of cuts) while, at the same time, operating as a private institution founded on a profit-making model that privileges an elitist outlook towards who that access is available to. See: <http://www.opendemocracy.net/ourkingdom/maeve-mckeown/new-college-for-humanities-emperors-new-clothes>; <http://infinetthought.cinestatic.com/index.php/5686/>.

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*tory Collective. Towards a Global Autonomous University: Cognitive Labor, the Production of Knowledge, and Exodus from the Education Factory.* New York: Autonomedia.

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## FURTHER RESOURCES

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### Books

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<http://futureofhighered.org/>

Campaign for the Public University (UK)

<http://publicuniversity.org.uk/>

Caught in the act of protest: Contextualizing contestation (Belgium, Italy, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, The Netherlands, UK, USA)

<http://www.protestsurvey.eu/index.php?page=project>

Coalition of Resistance Against Cuts and Privatisation (UK)

<http://www.coalitionofresistance.org.uk/>

Edinburgh University Anti-Cuts Coalition (Scotland)

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Reimagine the University

<http://reimaginetheuniversity.wordpress.com/>

# The university and institutional overstretch

**Olivia Muñoz-Rojas**

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*Keywords: academia, university roles, institutional overstretch, higher-education cuts, humanities' situation*

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Whenever I hear the words 'new' or 'crisis' attached to any social or cultural phenomenon – in this case, the university – my immediate and intuitive reaction is to remind myself that there are few things that are indeed as novel as they appear, and that it is easy usually to find analogous situations and similar preoccupations in the past. In this essay I want to problematize the crisis of the university and the emergence of the 'new university' structure by succinctly exploring the historical trajectory and challenges of the modern university over the past two-hundred years. A caveat: in looking back into the past, I certainly do not want to make a case for historical relativism and understate the significance of current events just because the university has been through crises before. (That history itself, as a discipline, is under threat is at any rate a bold antidote against any form of historical relativism. Cf. Grafton 2011.) But, generally, I do believe history is a good point of

departure for better understanding the present. I will then go on to suggest that part of the university system's present difficulties stem from the multiple and contradictory roles it has acquired over time, combined with a lack of genuine self-criticism. I will end the essay with a set of fundamental questions about the structure and purpose of the university that need to be addressed anew.

In 1792, Isaac Haffner, professor of theology at the University of Strasbourg, published an essay on how to organize an establishment for the *hautes sciences* where he wrote:

Every well organized university ought to be a literary establishment that embraces all the branches of human knowledge. In spite of how little we may have reflected on the links that exist among them, it is easy to perceive that they assist each other, that there is a more or less visible chain that unites them. It would be dangerous, therefore, if we

were to separate them from each other; if we were to condemn any of them to oblivion, degrading one in some way in order to increase the merit of another, because in the end all of them would suffer from such a violent and arbitrary intervention (Haffner 1792, 7-8) (author's translation).

Towards the end of the eighteenth century, when Haffner wrote his essay, the university in a number of European countries seemed on the verge of extinction. In France specifically, many faculties did not have more than a few enrolled students (Sanz and Bergan 2006, 123). The old universities – and academia as such – appeared unable to recover from a state of ruin and neglect, unable to catch up with the utilitarian needs of growingly industrialized European society. To the emerging ruling class knowledge had to be productive, efficient, measurable, etc. A compromise between, on the one hand, the need for applicable science and specialization and, on the other, a concept of knowledge based on the idea of the ultimate unity of science (cf. Haffner's quote), inspired by German idealism, famously materialized in Humboldt's University of Berlin, founded in 1810. Humboldt's model for institutionalized higher learning established the coexistence of teaching and research in clearly differentiated disciplines, yet under the same physical and intellectual

roof (university as 'unity in diversity'). The model was soon picked up elsewhere.

If this was indeed a revolutionary moment in the longstanding history of academia, it should not escape us that substantial changes have taken place since. Above all, over the course of the past two-hundred years there has been an increasing democratization of access to higher education. It is not just that women and other population groups previously marginalized from higher education have been incorporated to the latter, but the idea – especially in post-war social-democratic Europe – that every youth ought to attend university as a safe recipe for, almost a guarantee of, a life with better professional, and thus material, prospects. This idea carries with it one of the kernels of the crisis that the university faces today: the tension or contradiction between the elitist, idealist origins of the university and its present function as the professional trainer of the labour force. We need only evoke the origins and trajectory of the university – from the Athenian schools to the medieval cathedral schools and the American colleges – to understand that we are dealing with an institution that is based on the tacit understanding that knowledge is an exclusive (at one point sacred) possession, which also explains why its transmission has tended to take place in secluded settings, and why universities hold the mo-



nopoly on the distribution of higher learning credentials (cf. Pedersen 2009 and Lindberg 2007). The elitist views predicated by Plato and other founders of ancient schools together with the monastic imprint that the early medieval cathedral schools left on the academic institution have survived over time as has the guild mentality that characterized the pre-industrial universities (cf. Lucas 1994, 38). Elitism, seclusion and corporatism (not in the commercial or financial sense, but as a system that views the academic community as a self-sufficient, organically structured body) are concepts that still apply to the university today. Yet, at the same time, over the past fifty years in particular, we have witnessed the appearance of more and more universities and students; urban campuses, specifically, are growing; and universities receive funding not just from the state but increasingly from private entities in exchange for providing skilled labour and scientific discoveries – all this seems to question the premise that universities are elitist, secluded and organized as autonomous organic bodies. But we also know that it does not mean that universities are open and accessible to everyone (cf. Smart 2009, 34, Becker and Hecken 2009, 235), perfectly integrated in their surrounding communities, and not defensive of their autonomy and the monopoly on defining what counts as higher knowledge and who possesses it.

Each attempt to transform the university over the past two-hundred years has emerged in response to the effects of this essential tension or contradiction – of being *part* and *apart* of the modern, capitalist system, and its ever-evolving structure. As a result of the attempts to solve this contradiction the university today suffers from what one may call institutional overstretch or multiple roles strain. Because, is it possible for universities to reconcile such different roles as that of the custodian of intellectual rigour, the curator of historic scholarship, the promoter of scientific innovation for the common good, the professional skills trainer, the universalist educator in civic values, the provider of applicable and money-spinning research, the buffer against youth unemployment, and, last but not least, the critical observer of society, including university itself? It is tempting to answer negatively to what seems like a rhetorical question anyway, and instead propose that the problem is precisely that the university has acquired multiple functions over time, and that we need to be more precise about what roles we do want it to play. But then we stumble onto another difficult conceptual question: who is ‘we’? Scholars, students, tax-payers, public administrators, employers...?

There have been different attempts to respond to these two questions over time and across continents. In many European and

Latin American countries, for example, there has been an emphasis on the roles of the university as the curator of historic scholarship, the civic educator and the critical observer of society (not necessarily of university itself). To illustrate these different roles, one may think of the special importance placed on the transmission of particular schools of thought and scholarly traditions in continental Europe, the close ties between the university and the development of a national citizenship project in countries like Mexico, or the effective use of the university as a platform of social and intellectual activism in countries like France. The resources for performing these roles have largely come from the state and, hence, from tax-payers. In the United States, on the other hand, the emphasis has been on the promotion of scientific innovation (not always for the common good), the custody of intellectual rigour (cf. the peer-review system), and the provision of lucrative research. The funding for these more entrepreneurially-oriented activities initially came from philanthropy (the Fords, the Carnegies, the Rockefellers), and later, especially from the 1950s, from governmental institutions and private companies who benefit from universities' research (Smith and Bender 2008, 3-5).

These are, of course, gross simplifications which override important nuances and differences between countries, but are helpful in hint-

ing at the ways in which two major modern university systems (the European and the North American) have sought maintaining a balance among roles more or less successfully. It is worth considering the both negative and positive effects that have emerged from the two systems' attempts to reconcile sometimes conflicting functions. For example, among the negative outcomes there is the clash between job and status expectations of graduates and the inflation of degrees that we encounter in many European countries. In places like Spain, the proliferation of master courses (which previously did not exist there) is partly symptomatic of the devaluation of undergraduate degrees. A collateral effect of universal access to higher education has been that it is no longer enough to have an undergraduate degree to aspire to a basic, let alone ascending, professional career. Such devaluation of undergraduate degrees affects a whole generation who is frustrated at not seeing its investment in, and commitment to, higher education rewarded in terms of income and status. As an example of the sometimes positive effects of reconciling contradictory roles, on the other hand, one may think of how the post-war collaboration of US universities with the Defense Department – and the institutionalization of the so-called military-industrial-university complex in the 1950s and '60s – made a number of US universities exceptionally afflu-

ent (cf. Leslie 1993). Partly thanks to this money, the university system could afford the development of new, cutting-edge, critical disciplines such as post-colonial theory and gender studies. What's more, even in campuses whose schools were directly collaborating in the development of military technology some of the strongest anti-war protests took place in the 1960s and 70s (cf. Heineman 1994) – perhaps a particularly bold example of the essential contradiction of being part and apart of the capitalist system.

Nevertheless, we have now reached a point, obviously accelerated by the current economic crisis, where even the potentially positive externalities resulting from reconciling opposite roles are disappearing or no longer valued: neither foundations, nor the state (that is, tax-payers) nor private companies seem ready to pay for anything other than what is strictly useful and necessary to maintain the present economic and political system alive in spite of its blatant flaws. In this stage of capitalism there seems to be neither the need nor the room for universalistic, civic educational projects or the production and assimilation of knowledge for the sake of knowledge. As a result, the tendency is that the roles of the university are increasingly reduced to two: the professional skills trainer and the provider of applicable and profitable research. It goes without saying that both the skills and the kind

of research that universities in this model need to provide are those presently demanded by the market and by the state – to the extent that the latter tries (or is forced) to replicate the market. Fundamental skills students need to be trained in are: ability to, and ways of, increasing cost efficiency; capacity to identify and exploit new market opportunities; ability to persuade clients and customers of the benefits of x or y, etc. It is also obvious to everyone that there are certain disciplines and fields that are simply less fit for these purposes. For the moment, some university managers are trying (at least half-heartedly) to salvage these disciplines by changing their logic and aims. For example, if you teach history or critical theory, you should not worry as much about transmitting the ideas and facts that constitute the content of the course – let alone a particular *Weltanschauung* – as ensuring that students acquire professional arguing and presenting skills that will serve them when they are hired for writing government reports or introducing prospective benefit increases at company board meetings (because even though some of your students might not be aiming for these kind of jobs, these are the kind of jobs most of them will have to take). Furthermore, there is the implicit assumption that if you place too much emphasis on the content of the course, if you ask your students to take critical theory seriously in this case, you

will jeopardize their ability to survive and find satisfaction in the kind of life that awaits them.

For many of us it is difficult not to write about these transformations without incurring a certain ironic or even sarcastic tone, but there are many more people for whom all these adjustments are perfectly sensible, and maybe even a way of finally overcoming the institutional overstretch. And this, I believe, is very important to keep in mind. If a number of us believe that the main role(s) of the university ought to be different, we need, first of all, to be self-critical. What I have defined earlier as the historical essence of university and academia – elitism, seclusion and corporatism – is often lurking behind academics' passionate defence of the university as the custodian of intellectual rigour and historic scholarship, the democratizing educator, the critic of society, etc. The tacit, self-abrogated moral and intellectual superiority that the academic community launches onto the face of the market and the state – the perceived adversaries – is not helpful if it is not supported, in parallel, by a thorough examination and acknowledgment of the contradictions that plague this age-old institution. The collaboration towards the development of lethal military technology and the education of undemocratic political elites from developing countries are but two contemporary and particularly prominent examples of the kind of

realities that jeopardize the credibility of universities, North American and European in particular, complicating the efforts to develop a coherent defence of the institution as such and its critical role in society.

Yet, going back to the beginning of this essay, university, academia or higher learning (however we prefer to call it) has survived crises before, and, as Haffner's quote suggests, the challenge to the perceived integrity of science and knowledge, the threat of certain disciplines disappearing because of their allegedly unproductive nature, as well as the accusation of elitism and seclusion, have been there for as long as the modern university, as we know it, exists. Crises, as the popularized Chinese proverb goes, are moments of danger and opportunity. I think the current situation is an opportunity for asking ourselves, both as members of the academic community and as ordinary citizens, very bold questions that could help define an alternative university model that is neither a resigned acceptance of the demands of the market, nor a defensive response to what is perceived as an illegitimate intervention of the market and the state: Who should attend university and with what purpose? What are the aims of scientific research and, in particular, social scientific and humanistic research? Who should be paying for university teaching and research? What is the role of the university as a social actor? Straightforward but

difficult questions that may have been asked (and possibly even answered) at different moments in the past, but that need honest and responsible answers today.

NB This essay has greatly benefited from the author's participation in Antoni Muntadas' project *About Academia*, exhibited in the Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts, Harvard University, 3 March–7 April 2011, and at the Arizona State Museum and the American Academy in Rome subsequently. See <http://www.ves.fas.harvard.edu/muntadas.html>

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# Thinking anew, every time: An encounter with Judith Butler

**Daniela Tanner Hernández and Adam Kaasa**

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*Keywords: Judith Butler, public events, thinking-with, co-presence, performances of academia*

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Nominally, public events in the university system are an opportunity to engage academics in a curated space, around certain themes and to give witness to that engagement by other academics, students, thinkers and a wider public. This curated or intentional space is usually provided to test or experiment thoughts, to open up and broaden the boundaries of intellectual discussion. One welcomes with enthusiasm, therefore, events, and the growing number of seminars, workshops, keynote lectures, panels and conferences. One imagines new symposia, extends and accepts new invitations, creates new panels and forums, eager for new spaces to engage.

And yet the experience of the event is often far from this initial sense of productive possibility. At a recent architectural public lecture, a student, books in hand, approached the speaker and related that she was disappointed. Disappointed with the

lecture, disappointed in him. Far from an isolated incident, this frank encounter between speaker and audience unveils, perhaps, a common misidentification. Somehow, despite the proliferation of events, and perhaps in part because of it, events themselves – their purpose or potential, their failure or success – are hardly reflected upon. Instead, the personification of the possibility of thoughtful engagement in the figure of the author or speaker, leads to an attribution of success or failure to the person and not to the event itself.

Recent consideration given to the effects of trends in research and teaching funding, and to the way professional academic landscapes of career planning, promotion, publishing and repute are continually being restructured along managerial lines, uncovers a push towards a context that turns every academic into a curator, a participator, a respondent, a chair, a conference,

symposium or panel organizer, a paper presenter, an invited panel member, a roundtable discussant, a keynote speaker of at least so many events every year. The endless performance and increasing generation of these often unpaid roles becomes the necessary accompaniment to teaching and writing. More and more the event itself – its production and sustainment – becomes the end, rather than a valuable means. Remarkably, these issues are almost never thought alongside the content of these occasions, let alone discussed and worked through in their preparation.

The point here is not to suggest that the growing number of initiatives is in any way wrong in and of itself<sup>1</sup>, much less to imply that events should always, of necessity, be successful (indeed, very often failure offers the opportunity for an opening: some mistakes are important mistakes to have made<sup>2</sup>), or that success should be measured against any particular standard, or that this success could be unanimous in any case. Rather, the thoughts here arise from a feeling of dissatisfaction, and by a sense that understanding this dissatisfaction, rather than merely criticising or offering an easy verdict of ‘moderate’ success, is important. Specifically, we intend to grapple with the proposition that there is, perhaps, a connection between a compulsion to produce events and to endlessly collaborate presentially (and publically) with others, and the

loss, sometimes, of a critical approach towards these very activities themselves. A proliferation of a discourse populated by surely positive words such as conversation, interdisciplinarity, opening up (to the floor, to the panel), discussion, improvised response, and so forth has made it seemingly irrelevant to engage the events themselves, to try to understand what takes place (or fails to take place) within them, the kinds of opportunities, beyond empty rhetoric, we think or hope they will bring about. Or, even, what indeed is it that we expect when we attend or participate in an event? And how or why is this expectation fulfilled or disappointed?

But this is meant to be a review. The event in question was seductively titled ‘An Encounter with Judith Butler,’<sup>3</sup> and was organized by the Centre for the Study of Democracy at the University of Westminster. It took place over a day from 10.00am to 7.00pm on Friday 4 February 2011 in Fyvie Hall at the University of Westminster. The event was structured as two roundtables addressing the work of Judith Butler and a keynote public lecture by Butler herself. The first roundtable entitled ‘Judith Butler’s Contribution to Contemporary Ethical and Political Issues’ brought together Vikki Bell, Elena Loizidou, Isabell Lorey and Stewart Motha, with chair Chantal Mouffe. After lunch, the second roundtable centred on ‘Judith Butler’s Contribution to Gen-

der Theory' and had Terrell Carver, Mandy Merck, Henrietta Moore and Leticia Sabsay as discussants, and Harriet Evans as chair. Each panel member spoke for roughly 10 minutes, followed by a response from Butler, and then questions and answers from the floor. At 5pm, the room cleared, and the audience re-entered a packed house for Butler's public lecture tentatively titled 'The Right to Appear – Towards an Arendtian Politics of the Street,' a continuation of the themes explored in some of her most recent lectures in London,<sup>4</sup> namely issues related to mournability, state violence and cohabitation, specifically in relation to Israel and Palestine, and which are to constitute the basis of a forthcoming book.

The brief reflections that follow will focus, not so much on the details of themes or specific content of the interventions, but rather will try to engage the event from a different register, outlined in the musings above. Thinking 'events' through 'An Encounter with Judith Butler' is an especially interesting point of departure, for its structure provided for a broad range of interventions and modes of conversation: two very different but similarly organized roundtables, and a public lecture. Interestingly, despite the fact that all the sessions took place on the same day, in the same room, to (roughly) the same audience, the event as a whole provided radically disparate experiences: a strong first panel

took up diverse modes of engagement with Butler's work, and challenged each other's interventions in creative ways that opened up to a dynamic, if not always coherent (but, then, one should question the necessity of coherence), discussion. A second panel offered somewhat disjointed presentations that, although possibly individually strong, failed entirely to reach out towards one another or towards the audience. Even Butler's thought-provoking lecture contrasted sharply with a somewhat disjointed and virtually chair-less Q&A that ended with a visibly exhausted speaker and a rapidly-dispersing room. What is the nature of this apparently arbitrary breakdown or disengagement – of panels, of sessions or sometimes of whole events? The tentative suggestion here is that often this failure is rooted in a basic misunderstanding of the kinds of interactions, or more precisely, the kind of thinking, that takes place (or can take place) in an event, with others, and how this interaction is to be curated and participated in.

In the Q&A of a lecture delivered at Birkbeck, University of London, in 2010 Judith Butler remarked, while scribbling on a paper before answering a question: 'Some of us need to write to think (...) I've never thought that thinking takes place in the mind (...) It's a radically exterior kind of event, which may also be true about memory.'<sup>5</sup> The remark was said in passing and in a somewhat joking



tone. And yet something important echoes here.

To be sure, the mind-body binary has long been refigured, with the labour of the mind now mostly considered to be inextricably related to the materiality of the body and to the multiplicity of textures, both material and immaterial, within and through which a thinking and acting subject emerges. However, the fact that we can still assume to understand the distinction between those very words – ‘mind’ and ‘body’–, still come to place expectations on those same assumed understandings, and, furthermore, still imagine them as reliable sites for different kinds of work, is precisely what needs continued refiguring. Perhaps, we could argue, it is the misplaced expectation of labour on an assumed reliability of a ‘subject’, that continues to ‘do us wrong’ as we plan, curate and participate in events. Or perhaps, taking on from Butler, we have it wrong. Perhaps it is not the misidentification of the mind and body in a subject, but the misconception that thinking happens in the mind, that it is a private affair, that thinking is what ‘a subject’ does, alone.

As it stands, we continue to imagine that subjects think, privately. And so, strangely, this relationship between thinking as action, thinking as an activity at the core of intellectual engagement, and the spatial and temporal materiality of the body that engages it is rarely considered. We continue to imagine that the products

of thinking subjects, such as books or articles, are also private, that they are privately constructed ‘things’ and that they are, somehow, a representation of said private thinking. Of course the historical context of, say, a book may be mentioned, influences and sources copiously noted, or places, relationships and people acknowledged. But even in and despite these gestures, thinking as a process becomes overshadowed by a suspect common-sense notion of thought as an authored, final (usually written) product.<sup>6</sup> Finally, we continue to imagine that the body bearing the name of a subject carries in it, and with it, that private thinking; and since that thinking is attributed to the material body of the thinker, we imagine that it can be called to account for itself at any given time – an event, for instance.

As a consequence of these unreflected-upon imaginaries, the relationship between bodies, spaces of thinking configured as events, and the possibilities brought about by them becomes strangely confused and ambiguous, as it subtly and often inadvertently shifts from thinking to product, and from a notion of relationality to one of simple bodily co-presence. On the one hand, as was mentioned earlier, theorisation of encounters, symposia or conferences mobilise ideas of collaboration and conversation, where the fact of sharing a particular space and time is invoked as the possibility for new thoughts to emerge. This

implies an understanding of thought as a mode of communication, a mode of sharing even, that is made possible through bodies, material spaces and particular temporalities – a notion of thought, therefore, that makes sense only as *thinking*, as a creative and fluid activity that takes place in relation to and with others.

On the other hand, in practice, these same events are, more often than not, curated around particular authorial figures in a way that seems to misinterpret the fact of physically proximate bodies (that is, the fact that bodies are in the same room, on the same roundtable) as, itself, thinking. Or, to put it otherwise, a strange economy of thought ensues, whereby thought is understood to have already taken place elsewhere, already completed, as it were (in a book, perhaps) so that the event becomes an occasion for those thoughts to be gathered and (endlessly) repeated, rather than renewed, rather than *thought anew*. And if bodies are taken to simply represent a moment of past creative and dynamic thinking, then the rubric becomes one of simply placing bodies that matter in the same room and at the same time, with little consideration as to how thinking-as-conversation may be facilitated or even whether that is the desired outcome. Of course authorial figures are (hopefully) more than just ‘indexical names’, and to some extent every body *is* the embodied presence of the trajectory of

the knowledge, engagement and passionate thought in and through which it has been shaped. It cannot, however, *stand for* that thought. Nor does this trajectory necessarily imply the ability or even the desire to extend that knowledge and engagement towards others, to share it presentially with others – the willingness, in other words to take copresence as an opportunity to think anew within a particular encounter.

The point here is not to moralize or offer judgment or prescriptions over particular types of events or modes of participation. It is not to suggest that a thinker should be willing to share and be challenged in the way described above, much less to imply that one is a better thinker if one is, or a less thorough one if one is not. It is also not an attempt to smooth over the difficulties and dimensions of power relations inherent to different modes of communication, to un-critically celebrate conversation, or to evoke some notion of coherence and consensus – or else difference and dissensus – as if these were uncontested terms. Finally, it is also not a question of whether an event is organized as a lecture or as a roundtable; whether it is mono-disciplinary (if such purity ever exists) or inter-disciplinary, general or highly specialised.

Indeed, it is not that the above considerations are irrelevant or unimportant. Rather, the point is precisely that there is no ready-made formula that guarantees engage-

ment or that conjures the creative relational thinking that makes an event come alive. A carefully crafted and minutely timed choreography of presentations may call forth intensely passionate discussion. A blindly spontaneous gathering may also summon electric and unforeseen results. Sometimes neither will. Perhaps it is the case that the inevitably contingent nature of events may be best engaged by trying to come to terms with the fact that this contingency – which is also its potential – lies in thought itself, in the possibility of thinking-with-others, under unique conditions. And maybe what is called for is a willingness to take on the responsibility and labour, the vulnerability and courage – as curators, speakers, chairs and audience – that this necessarily implies.

Surely these last words are written with Judith Butler in mind. Throughout the day, she worked, thought in conversation – in thorough and careful responses to each panel member, in challenged positions and questions raised during the Q&As, and in a well prepared and dynamically delivered public lecture. Near the end of her talk Butler stated that ‘thinking relies on bodily life that cannot be sequestered in any private sense.’ Far from private, Butler’s contribution is not only in theory, but in *thinking* itself – an engaged thinking, each time anew, and one generously shared with others. Perhaps the day figured as an *encounter* was precisely that.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Although perhaps Arundhati Roy’s answer to a question about her (much delayed) ‘next’ book would be relevant here too: ‘There’s so much noise in the world, so why add to it? In my case, I only write when I can’t not.’ See Ian Jack’s article ‘Arundhati Roy: India’s bold and brilliant daughter’ in *The Guardian*, 29 January 2011 (accessed 19 March 2011 from <http://www.guardian.co.uk/theguardian/2011/jan/29/arundhati-roy-interview-india-activism-novel>).

<sup>2</sup> This point was made by Edgar Pieterse at a recent talk in reference to an interdisciplinary project that brought urban practitioners and artists together in an event in Cairo – an attempt that ‘hasn’t worked, but hasn’t worked in a really important way’. The suggestion is that mistakes do not make attempts any less valuable or relevant, so long as the opportunity to interrogate the ‘failure’ is taken up and engaged with rather than refused or covered up. The public lecture, entitled ‘African Urbanism’, was hosted by LSE Cities, London School of Economics and Political Science on 26 January 2011. Podcast of the event is available at <http://www.urban-age.net/events/publicLectures/2011/01/26/african-urbanism/>, accessed on 19 March 2011).

<sup>3</sup> The very title of the event is interesting, with a foregrounding of the proper name, ‘Judith Butler’, that perhaps hints at the ever increasing weight of an academic ‘star system’ in the organization and draw of certain events.

<sup>4</sup> See ‘Forgiveness and Retribution:

Judith Butler in Conversation with Udi Aloni', hosted by The Jewish Book Week 2007 on 04 March 2007; 'Frames of War', hosted by the Humanities and Arts Research Centre of Royal Holloway, the School of Psychosocial Studies, Birkbeck College, on 04 February 2009; 'Co-habitation, Universality and Remembrance', hosted by the Department of Psychosocial Studies, Birkbeck College, on 24 May 2010.

<sup>5</sup> Lecture by Judith Butler entitled 'Co-habitation, Universality and Remembrance', hosted by the Department of Psychosocial Studies, Birkbeck College, London 24 May 2010 (podcast available at <http://backdoorbroadcasting.net/2010/05/judith-butler-co-habitation-universality-and-remembrance/>, accessed 19 March 2011)

<sup>6</sup> Perhaps to some extent this being drawn to the idea of 'authorship' is understandably perceived as natural, or even practically necessary – books do, after all, have authors – and this, to be sure, need not in itself signal the return to an autonomous self-referential subject.

# In the aftermath of the vote to lift the cap on HE fees

**Clare Hemmings**

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*Keywords: gender, higher education, UK, neoliberalism, equality*

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The vote to treble HE fees in England last Thursday (9th Dec 2010) came after weeks of student organizing to resist the catastrophic changes we are facing in universities and the public sector as a whole. The fact that the vote was closer than it could have been and that there were a couple of resignations from the Lib Dem side will at least confirm for this emerging student movement that resistance is not futile, though it will also confirm that reason has little impact on right-wing ideology in full swing. Arguments about the importance of graduates for society as a whole (we expect our lawyers, doctors, social workers and teachers to be competent do we not?) have had little impact. The reasonable queries about why this government is reducing its funding of HE while other crisis-hit Western countries are not, or about the importance of holding on to one of the few areas of English public or professional life with an international reputation, have cut no ice at all.

For those of us working in Higher

Education as well as hoping to get some, the full range of proposed cuts make up a devastating package. Increased access to HE in England under the last government was made without concomitant infrastructural, teaching or research support and along with increased bureaucratization and pressure to perform in market terms. To now face the removal of teaching budgets for Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences and charge students the balance is not only unethical, it cannot work. Students will either stay away in droves or, where they do pay the inflated price, will no doubt expect some kind of additional value for money from a system already straining under the weight of casualisation, increased targets and aggressive managerialism. They will be expecting more than a reasonable education in a hierarchised national context cracking under its own inequalities of pay, security and opportunity and are, frankly, very unlikely to get it.

Gender, class and race inequali-

ties already dog the HE sector in England. Despite legislation prohibiting gender and race discrimination and requiring public institutions show further what measures they have taken to ensure increased equality, women continue to earn anywhere between 6% and 30% less than men in academia. The figure gets higher the higher up the promotion ladder you go, indicating that there are real glass ceilings as well as inequality within each level. There is no will to transform these inequalities because of course the top end depends on them. The franchising out of cleaning and security to the private sector means a lack of living wage right at the heart of our institutions. And academic pensions are about to be changed to an average salary exit scheme rather than a final salary one, multiplying the wage gap by as many years as women and minorities have worked.

The current difficulties HE institutions are facing in England mean that for the resistance we have seen not to calcify into divisions between students as consumers and faculty as service providers (in universities that survive of course), the links to broader inequalities must continue to be made. As one of the faculty involved in the occupation teach-ins in the last fortnight, I have been enormously heartened by the students' abilities to make the broader connections between cuts in HE and other cuts and existing equalities. The ongoing arguments about HE

funding and who should pay must avoid discourses of 'entitlement' at all costs. Because the problems we are facing are much deeper than a question of *reduced access to privileges* the majority of English young people have never had. They herald the disenfranchisement of a generation (or more) who will either be saddled with debts that reduce their subsequent choices or who will not take that risk. They signal the beginning of cuts to the public sector that will result in widespread unemployment or low pay that mean additional debt will not be an option for low- or average-earning families (who might otherwise help with HE costs).

We are told graduates will enter the labour market at the highest levels, earning on average above average salaries. Setting aside the question of whether later high pay is in fact an acceptable reason for graduates (rather than anyone else earning high salaries) to pay back twice, we also need to ask critical questions about what these statistical averages mask as well as what they reveal. What is the range that this average represents? What kinds of inequalities does it mask? Let's cite some different statistics:

- Women's lifelong earnings in the UK are on average 16.4% less than men's.
- Two-thirds of public sector workers are women, with women accounting for 73%

of the local government workforce and 77% of the NHS workforce.

- 40% of ethnic minority women live in poverty in the UK and this figure is likely to rise as unemployment increases.
- Women's pensions are on average 60% less than men's because they live longer than men and because of likely gaps in pension contributions.
- The annual deficit is £70bn and £120bn of tax goes uncollected, avoided or evaded each year.<sup>1</sup>

Since women are over-represented in part-time and hourly paid jobs they will face a higher likelihood of being sacked as a result of public sector cuts. In this context we might ask then who can afford to pay back 27,000 after their education (and that's just in fees) and who will either face 30 years of debt (and possibly their children's debt too) and who will be able to pay this amount back within the first couple of years of working? Who will even think to take this risk with their future, and for whom is this amount of money no risk at all?<sup>2</sup>

It is important that we keep on pointing out – as the students have been doing really effectively – that these kinds of inequalities are not superficial, and they are not an unfortunate remnant of a more unequal age that will be addressed by the market over time. They are

the condition for the cuts in welfare provision and the public sector, because without these inequalities there would be no one to pick up the pieces as state services are rolled back. Some more questions the answers to which are entirely rhetorical: Who bears the brunt of the rolling back of the welfare state and the decrease in provision? Who does the caring work when the state will not pay for it? Who will be at home already (working or otherwise) to do it? Who will continue to make ends meet and expect their girls to help them? Women are already the ones who absorb the shocks of poverty, and the cuts mean that women will continue to be disproportionately affected.

These gendered aspects of the attack on the public sector are certainly not lost on the coalition government. They have already made it clear that their cutting agenda includes normative gendered assumption based on 'family values' that assume a middle-class heterosexual family unit where the woman can stay at home. Who is this true for? Increasingly in terms of the cuts we see that equality agendas are positioned on the side of 'not doing one's bit', of an old-style agenda incompatible with the need for people to tighten their belts. If this seems a bit of an extreme argument, consider the fact that when last year a landmark case was won against Birmingham Council for paying women less than men, the council response

was that they couldn't afford equal pay. Small business discourse similarly claims equality is a route to bankruptcy. The fact that equal pay is not bad for business turns out to be beside the point as equality is established as the opposite of good citizenship. Perhaps it will not be long before we hear politicians wondering whether it is sensible to educate girls at all, given that family survival depends on their willingness to do unpaid labour. More and more, equality agendas are seen as an unaffordable, utopian luxury that the market cannot support, and yet we are still being asked to believe in 'the market' as neutral.

So how do we move from these comments and the disappointments of Thursday's vote to raise the cap on fees, to feeling able to prepare ourselves for sustained resistance to the oncoming onslaught on the public sector and future cuts in HE. It's perhaps too early and too hard. But I do keep going back to the student occupations and the emergence of a contemporary student movement prepared to make the links, take on the establishment and learn impressively quickly on its feet. This and the issue of gender return me to ontological as well as political questions. We must ask ourselves perhaps not only what kind of generation of young people we want to see coming through universities, but also be prepared to challenge the gendered premises of the spending cuts whenever and wherever we

can. In pedagogical terms we might want to ask our students (if we have any) what kind of gendered subjects they want to become as well as what futures they want to look forward to. There are hard questions to be asked about why women continue to do more caring and domestic labour in England while claiming they are equal that cannot be answered in economic terms alone. Yet the questions of gendered subjectivity have to be asked in part because of their central political and economic salience.

NB This article was first published in *Feminist Review* (December 2010). Available online at: [http://www.palgrave-journals.com/fr/collective\\_interventions.html](http://www.palgrave-journals.com/fr/collective_interventions.html)

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Statistics and some of the above points are taken from the Women Against Cuts (<http://womenagainstthecuts.wordpress.com/>), Fawcett Society (<http://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/>) and the Women's Budget Group (<http://www.wbg.org.uk/>) information.

<sup>2</sup> The Fawcett Society have tried to take the government to court for not consulting properly on the gendered impact of their proposed cuts. On Monday 6th December a 'permission hearing' was held to determine whether to grant a review will take place, supported by Equalities and Human Rights Commission. Unfortunately the Royal Court ruled that the government has no case to answer.



# A new, violent order at the University of Puerto Rico

**Rima Brusi**

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*This essay describes the development of and the state's reaction to the recent student protests at the University of Puerto Rico (UPR). The Puerto Rican state seems to be probing how much violence it can get away with when dealing with protests that undermine neoliberal economic reforms and the moralistic, law-and-order discourse that accompanies them. The economic reforms and the violence unleashed against the students combine to exacerbate existing inequalities and reduce access to higher education for socio-economically disadvantaged students.*

*Keywords: University of Puerto Rico, student strike, police brutality, neoliberalism, democracy, tuition*

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## **Introduction**

Whatever its shortcomings, the public university remains a symbol of educational opportunity, in some measure still committed to investing in the public good. As such, it is an institution particularly susceptible to the kinds of erosion brought about by neoliberal reform, and also one of the spaces where a critique of such erosion is more likely to emerge. Historically, it has often been a locus of resistance where movements and alliances have been forged, refined and challenged.

This essay will briefly describe the trajectory of and the state's reaction to one such movement: the recent student protests at the University of Puerto Rico (UPR). The latest events in the island's public university system mirror those at many

other public universities around the world in that they have made the oftentimes abstract critique of neoliberal doctrine, policy and practice frighteningly concrete. In the case of the UPR, students are contesting 'austerity measures' imposed by the university administration under the guise of a looming national 'financial crisis' that has systematically funneled public funds away from public institutions and into private hands and profit. This classic enactment of neoliberal doctrine has combined intensive economic reform, fast-tracked in the name of a fiscal 'emergency', with a moralistic discourse that appeals to 'law and order' as practice but also as basic value (Treanor, 2005). Broad-ranging in its effects, and often coupled with neoconservative values and

policies, neoliberalism is reshaping higher education institutions throughout the world (see Shumar and Canaan, 2006), bringing with it the use of authoritarian forces and strategies to protect the market and its assumptions (Collins, 2006) and exacerbating existing inequalities via the reduction of access to higher education for disadvantaged populations (Giroux and Giroux, 2004; Naidoo, 2006). In a way that has become familiar around the world (Klein, 2007; Giroux and Giroux, 2006; Treanor, 2005), state violence becomes a necessary complement of broad and fast-paced political and economic reforms. The state seems to be probing how much violence it can get away with when dealing with protests that undermine their economic agenda. By following the key events surrounding the student movement that began in Spring 2010 this essay will highlight some of the ways in which the violence unleashed against the UPR has turned it into a testing ground for the neoliberal state.

### **First signs: 2008-2009**

Neither the globalized neoliberal rationality nor its influence on university affairs are new in Puerto Rico. The last two decades of the twentieth century were characterized by attempts to place the UPR (and the island's economy) firmly inside the so-called knowledge economy, increase the role of the sciences, and attract outside funding

(Colón-Zayas, 2005). Tuition had been increased several times since 1980, although it never attained the high levels that are considered normal today in public universities in the United States (Ladd and Rivera-Batiz, 2006). But, the university remained relatively protected (Colón-Zayas, 2005) from the more intense reforms applied to other parts of the public sector, where partial or total privatization was implemented in areas such as health, public housing, K-12 education and public utilities (Colón-Reyes, 2006).

Soon after the island's 2008 elections, governor-elect Luis Fortuño (who presides the pro-statehood New Progressive Party of Puerto Rico, or NPP, and is a member in excellent standing of the Republican National Committee in the United States) started to appoint the members of his cabinet. One of the first was José Figueroa Sancha, a former assistant FBI director and now the new superintendent of the island's police force. Figueroa Sancha quickly announced his commitment to a return to 'zero tolerance' policing (known in Puerto Rico as *la mano dura*, or 'iron fist'), that had been implemented before with much noise and little success under Pedro Roselló's governorship from 1993 to 2000 (Picó, 1999), and had been criticized for exacerbating inequalities via the targeting of dark-skinned and poor Puerto Ricans (Santiago-Valles, 1995). The appointment of Figueroa Sancha was soon followed

by a more controversial decision pushed forward by Fortuño, when the NPP-dominated Legislative Assembly passed Public Law 7. This new law declared a state of fiscal emergency and authorized the government to fast-track the dismissal of 17,000 public employees. It also allowed for the expansion of private contracting, including companies hired to manage the layoffs themselves, and to cut funds to the public university system. State funds allocated to the UPR, by law, amount to 9.6% of the total annual budget; Law #7 did not alter the percentage but did exclude a number of sources from its base, thus adding substantial new cuts to the UPR's budget, already depressed due to the contraction of the economy. In April 2010, the resulting deficit was calculated at 169 million dollars. (Rivera, 2010).

Seven months later, and following island-wide protests and a general, non-violent strike in October 2009 against the layoffs (Bonilla, 2010), the government of the capital city of San Juan suddenly decided to strictly enforce existing regulations against public drinking. It was an ominous precursor to what was yet to come for the university. Large numbers of national and municipal police, including riot police, targeted Avenida Universidad, a street that lies directly in front of the UPR campus in the district of Río Piedras, widely known as the social meeting grounds of bars, clubs and restau-

rants for undergraduate students. Instead of simply fining violators up to \$500, as the law stipulates, the officers chased students down the street and tear gassed them, even inside the campus dorms. In one case a young woman ended up in the hospital with a badly wounded thigh; she was not outside during the arrests, but was reached by a tear gas canister shot inside her dorm's lobby (Hernández-Pérez, 2010). Ordinances against the consumption of alcohol in the street have been developed in many Puerto Rican towns, however they had never been enforced as violently as on this occasion, nor do they traditionally involve the use of riot police or tear gas<sup>2</sup>.

Since then, the violence perpetrated against protesters has become so severe that on March 10 2011, American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) executive director Anthony Romero (Romero, 2011) issued an open letter to the Civil Rights Division of the U.S. Department of Justice on the question of police brutality in Puerto Rico. In the letter Romero called on the Civil Rights Division, which has been investigating the Puerto Rican police since 2008, to complete its long-standing investigation and take into account the most recent reports of widespread abuses committed against University of Puerto Rico student protesters: 'Students have been mercilessly beaten, maced with pepper spray, and shot at with

rubber bullets,' Romero wrote. 'Police have also applied torture techniques on immobilized student protesters, including the illegal use of nightsticks to provoke serious and permanent injuries, and the application of pressure in the neck, eye and jaw of the protesters to provoke pain and cause unconsciousness. At most events young women are the first to be targeted for police violence and have also been sexually harassed, groped and touched by police.'

### **The Student Strike: Spring 2010**

Because it is determined by a formula that reflects the overall economic climate in Puerto Rico, the university's budget was already depressed before the passing of Law 7. The additional cuts, however, spelled disaster well beyond the initial estimates: The university now faces an estimated annual deficit of between \$240 million and \$300 million (Colón, 2010).

In April 2010 the UPR administration announced that tuition waivers, traditionally given to athletes, band and choir members, and honor students, would be eliminated for students eligible for Pell Grants, which are granted on the basis of financial need. Essentially, the measure (touted as part of the solution to the university's financial crisis) disqualified financially needy students from receiving institutional merit-based aid, and as such mirrors attacks on need-based aid in the United States<sup>3</sup>

where active budget proposals both in the House and the Senate include substantial cuts to the Pell Grant program. Students repeatedly, and unsuccessfully, sent letters and requested to meet with the administration to discuss this decision. Faced with the administration's silence, they decided to launch a strike.

Originally planned as a two-day stoppage, the strike ended up lasting almost 10 weeks. Although one would hardly know it from the U.S. media, the students' massive protests repeatedly paralyzed Puerto Rico's 11-campus, 65,000-student public university system, during the Spring of 2010. During the strike, students in several campuses and especially Rio Piedras and Mayagüez, organized large demonstrations and artistic activities. They also developed participatory forms of organization and decision making that involved the creation of area committees camping out inside campus near the different colleges and/or points of entry ('portones') to the university. Each camp group in Rio Piedras and Mayagüez had its own distinctive styles and rituals. Some had solid alliances with other causes (environmental, labor, pro-independence and LGBTT, for example), some, especially in Rio Piedras, had particular disciplinary affiliations and identities (Humanities, Natural Sciences, and the like). But all groups were active participants of inclusive and frequent plenary sessions where all major deci-

sions were discussed collectively.<sup>4</sup> A central committee, the ‘Comité Negociador Nacional’ (CNN), including 2 student representatives per campus, was created to negotiate with the administration. Students also, and famously, created their own media and media corps, including some sites that are still going strong, for example the online newspaper Rojo Gallito, websites like Estudiantes de la UPR Informan, and online radio stations like Radio Huelga and Resistencia Colegial.<sup>5</sup>

In one of the main sections of his first budget address, on April 26 2010,<sup>6</sup> governor Luis Fortuño framed his administration’s position toward the UPR strike and towards resistance in a more general sense. In his speech he called the student strikers ‘members of a tiny minority’ driven by selfish, ‘ideological’ motives as opposed to a ‘silent majority’ that ‘really wants to study.’ He referred to public, affordable higher education as a ‘privilege’ that Puerto Rico provides to its students at no small cost to its citizens. ‘Tuition paid by students covers hardly 3% of the university’s budget; the rest is paid by us taxpayers,’ he said, contrasting responsible citizens with the protesting students. ‘That is why our people—a just and noble people, but also respectful of law and order, and believing in democracy—get upset when they see what we have all witnessed at the university.’ In this way he framed the strikers as ‘chaotic’ and ‘selfish’, in need of

a ‘law and order’ his government would be glad to provide.

Officials and public figures—including ex-governor Romero Barceló, Police Superintendent Figueroa Sancha, chief of staff Marcos Rodríguez, and UPR Board of Trustees president Ygrí Rivera—echoed the governor’s sentiments, portraying the students as selfish, privileged, disorderly, and ideologically driven. Disparaging the students and their cause, politicians and administrators speaking to the media, especially radio, appealed to the ‘silent majority’ and described the strikers as socialists, leftists, drug users, anarcococos (anarchist crazies), and even terrorists.<sup>7</sup> The administration also announced plans to increase tuition by \$800.00 per year through the establishment of a ‘special fee’, and published a number of full page or prime-time anti-strike advertisements in major newspapers, radio and television stations.

Meanwhile, the ‘silent majority’ failed to materialize, and the strike was repeatedly ratified by student majorities in different campuses. The faculty soon followed suit. In May, faculties from all 11 campuses got together in a historic national faculty assembly and formally expressed support for the student movement and requested the resignation of University President José de La Torre and president of the Board of trustees Ygrí Rivera.

By June, the mainstream press and popular opinion seemed to

side with the students. The bully-like, inarticulate clumsy Goliath that was the administration was pitted against the smaller, more agile, articulate, and largely peaceful and media savvy students' David. Editorials in major newspapers urged the university administration to negotiate with the students, as did San Juan Superior Court judge José Negrón Fernández, who named an ex-judge, Pedro López, as the mediator. Sixty-nine days after the strike began, the students ended it and an agreement was signed by a majority of the trustees that included some important victories: Tuition waivers would remain in place; the imposition of the \$800 annual fee was postponed, pending reexamination and discussion; and university employees and students who participated in the strike would not be subject to administrative sanctions (Díaz-Alcaide, 2010). The agreement, however, was not signed by either Ygrí Rivera or José Ramón de la Torre.

### **The Backlash: Summer and Fall 2010**

The government did not miss a beat. Aggressively pursuing their agenda, Fortuño and the NPP-dominated legislature set about undermining democratic governance at UPR, both in the administration and among students. On June 21, Fortuño signed a law that had been fast-tracked through the legislature the same day, expanding UPR's Board

of Trustees from 13 to 17 members. He announced the names of the new members the very next day (Bauzá, 2010). To put this in context, UPR, with fewer than 65,000 students, now has almost as many trustees as the New York State University system (SUNY), with more than 400,000.

Attuned to the legislature's activities, members of student media, unions, and environmental groups attempted on June 30 to observe a legislative session in which several key new laws would be discussed—including the criminalization of protests in public spaces, the commercial development of environmentally protected areas, and the abolishment of student assemblies and their replacement with an anonymous electronic voting system (Fontáñez, 2010). But the Capitol that morning was closed to the public and surrounded by riot police, despite the fact that the legislature's sessions are open to the public under the Constitution. Numerous incidents of police brutality against demonstrators as well as members of the press were documented that day by both mainstream and alternative media.<sup>8</sup>

During the ensuing months, the new majority on the Board of Trustees installed chancellors on several campuses who were openly rejected by faculty assemblies and search committees. Attacks by administrators and politicians resumed, with a clear moralistic undertone that

characterized opposition as 'leftist' and therefore 'disorderly', directed at striking students and supporting faculty members. Fortuño's chief of staff, Marcos Rodríguez-Ema, told the press that strikers had 'leftist, ideological motivations' and should be taken out of campus 'a patadas' (kicked out), together with their 'profesores bandidos' (an expression that literally means 'bandits' but also means 'shameless'). The chancellor of the extremely peaceful Cayey campus asked for police intervention on the grounds that 'there are just too many leftists here'. At the Mayagüez campus, the new chancellor declared that any demonstrations or protests were to take place in a newly designated 'public expression zone' located in an old athletic track far away from campus buildings—and potential audiences. The Puerto Rican satirical online newspaper *El Ñame* wondered whether such a move was not, after all, equivalent to sending protesting students to the moon to 'freely' express what nobody would hear.<sup>9</sup>

In December, Fortuño signed the law that made student voting remote and electronic, effectively eliminating open, public debate in student assemblies and saying that the new system would protect the 'true majority' from politicized groups (Primera Hora, 2010). Soon after, the trustees ratified the postponed \$800 fee, to be implemented in January, without so much as a glance at student and faculty proposals—some of which

even agreed to allow students and employees to shoulder more of the university's financial burden as long as the trustees agreed to demand that the legislature undo the cuts to the university budget mandated by Law 7, as well as to claim monies owed to the university by other government agencies estimated at \$300 million (Caro, 2010; 80grados, 2010). All these proposals were ignored, however, and the student fee simply implemented.

### **The Second Strike: Winter 2010-2011**

These developments prompted the students at the Río Piedras campus to mobilize for a second strike, beginning with a 48-hour stoppage on December 7–8, with the option to begin an indefinite strike on December 14. Then, in the early-morning hours of December 7, when the two-day strike was to commence, private security guards hired by the university demolished the gates to the Río Piedras campus to prevent the students from barricading themselves in as they had done earlier in the year. Most of the private guards were young men from impoverished communities with little training and education. They had been hired—in a surreal turn of events—via Facebook by the ex-wrestler Chicky Starr, well-known years ago for his cheating ways in the ring and now a recruiter for the company Capitol Security (Bauzá, 2010). Tension between the students and the guards



Fig. 1: Photo by Ricardo Alcaraz, *Diálogo*.

increased dangerously and violence was deflected just in time by a group of students, who after telling the guards that the students 'are not your enemies, but your siblings', and that their quest, after all, was one of educational justice so that low-income communities had better opportunities, offered to shake hands and embrace.

By December 9, private guards, riot police, and Puerto Rican police had virtually occupied the campus. They have, with few interruptions, remained ever since. The police occupation of the UPR campus beginning in December marked the first time that the police had entered university grounds in the decades since the drafting of the No-Confrontation

Policy, created to promote non-violent negotiation between conflicting groups at the university. Developed in the late 1980's following violent confrontations between police and students during the upsurge of university activism in the 1970s and 1980s, the policy required that the police stay off campuses (Ramos et al, 2008).

To make matters worse, the Supreme Court of Puerto Rico ruled on December 13 that university students do not have a right to go on strike. Because students are not employees, the Court argued, what they 'call 'strike' is simply an organized protest.' As a consequence of this decision, the UPR administration was now legally empowered to



‘regulate the orderly exercise of free speech and association within the university community.’<sup>10</sup> Immediately after the Court’s ruling, the chancellor of the Río Piedras campus circulated a letter announcing that large gatherings (of any kind, including artistic) and demonstrations on campus would not be permitted until January 12, when classes were to resume, in order to ‘preserve safety.’ The chancellor’s decision was later found unconstitutional.

Despite the students’ efforts to defy the crackdown by insisting on their right to protest, the \$800 fee has remained in place. It is expected to bring in an annual \$40 million. Meanwhile, the Board of Trustees has decided to request a \$75 million line of credit for new construc-

tion projects that will be outsourced to private developers. Adding insult to injury, one of the projected buildings will house the Army ROTC and bring it back into the main campus area, after they were removed to the campus most remote area in 1971 (Rodríguez Graciani, 1972) due to their controversial nature and the opposition of pro-independence and anti-war groups on campus. Historically, the presence of the ROTC has been a focus of conflict and protest, seen by some as a symbol of US colonial domination and military power, by others as an ethically problematic intrusion of practices and discourses related to permanent war in university space, and yet by others a misuse of institutional funds and spatial resources. (See



Fig. 2: Fuerza de Choque. Photo courtesy of Ricardo Alcaraz, January 25th, 2011.



**Fig. 3:** Fuerza de Choque. By Ricardo Alcaraz, January 25th, 2011

Yudkin, 2005 for a review). The assignment of local resources (space, employees and funds) to the federal program has been described before as problematic (Brusi, 2005), but it clearly becomes an even worse provocation in the midst of a much-touted fiscal 'crisis'. Today, the Rio Piedras ROTC program (the largest in the system) serves only about 100 students (López, 2011). The board's decision raises important questions about the administrative balance being made between educational, financial and symbolic priorities.

### **'Order' through violence**

Although students and their supporters have faced police violence since the first strike began, it intensified in the winter once the \$800 fee was instituted and students defied official limits on their expression. Now there were incidents every day, and numerous students were arrest-

ed, with many of the women reporting being groped by the arresting officers (Stanchich, 2011). In January, UPR professors again joined the chorus of denunciations, condemning the techniques used by the police during the arrests as torture (Díaz, 2011). In February, riot police attacked demonstrators at a sit-in at the Capitol with rubber bullets, arresting more than 150. The same week, a 'paint-in' [See figures 3-5] in which students gathered at the university to paint slogans against the fee and the police presence on campus ended in chaos after the police attacked the demonstration and dozens of student activists as well as passersby's, ended up wounded or arrested (CMI, 2011).

University faculty and employees joined the students' protests against the police violence and occupation of the university, culminating in the resignation of UPR president De la



**Fig. 4 & 5:** After decades of a no-state police policy on campus, they are now a constant presence. Photos courtesy of Ricardo Alcaraz, Diálogo Digital, Feb.2011.

Torre on February 11, 2011. Following a massive march of some 15,000 persons on February 12, Fortuño, who who had spent the weekend in Washington at the Conservative Political Action Conference, returned to Puerto Rico and announced that the police would be withdrawn from campus. By the 25th, however, after the students carried out a 24-hour stoppage to protest the new annual fee and the fact that the administration was ignoring alternative proposals, the police had returned [Fig. 1 &2]. The new interim president declared that they were there to stay (Caro, 2011).

If the university became a testing ground for the violence of the neo-liberal state, it has also become one for an exhausted student movement that has come under increased criticism, including from within its own ranks, for tactics such as wearing hoods, closing down the campus, and throwing smoke bombs inside buildings.<sup>11</sup> This critique reached its highest point in March when Ana Guadalupe the Río Piedras chancellor, was assaulted by an angry mob of protesters. The government and its supporters immediately condemned the incident; some in the media who had supported the students, like Mayra Montero, a popular columnist for *El Nuevo Día*, now scolded them and called the strike 'a failure' (Montero, 2011). Some lamented the incident for its improvised and violent nature, so markedly different from the nonviolent yet

creative and assertive expression people had come to expect from the student movement. Yet others have noted that the state and the university administration were quick to investigate, arrest, and prosecute students for pulling Guadalupe's hair and throwing water at her, but rarely, if ever, investigated the numerous and well-documented abuses committed by police against the students. In May 2010, for example, videos and photos posted online supported allegations that Assistant Police Superintendent José Rosa Carrasquillo had repeatedly kicked a subdued student in the genitals, prompting the ACLU to demand that he be dismissed and charged with assault (Andrade, 2010).

### **Conclusion: The Shrinking University**

Although the use and abuse of police forces and the erosion of civil rights are the most visible -and the most visibly violent- tactics of neo-liberalism being tested at the UPR, they are not the only ones. They complement concerted efforts to shrink the institution and funnel public funds away from it. Although the administration has not explicitly stated plans to close campuses or eliminate programs, it publicly bases its revenue projections on an estimated student body of 50,000 students, which is 15,000 fewer than in 2008, and the lowest enrollment number since the early 1970s. When the administration reported that about

54,000 students had registered in late January and early February, it called this 'a success.' (Inter News, 2011) The number of registered students has declined since 2010 for a variety of reasons: some have been asked to leave, as exchange students recently were, for 'security reasons.' Some have left because of the conflict, as the administration is quick to point out. And some have left because they simply can no longer afford it, though their number remains unknown.

Perhaps the most significant factor in the loss of students, however, has been the deliberate elimination of course offerings, which prevents students from being able to achieve full-time status. Low-income students are particularly vulnerable to this, since to qualify for a Pell Grant students must register for at least 12 credits. These low-income students who leave will become particularly attractive as 'customers' for private colleges. Private colleges may also end up benefitting from the way that the legislature plans to use \$30 million to 'help' the university's budget. Instead of giving the money directly to the troubled institution so that the fee could be reduced for everyone, it will be given away to individual students selected by a board as a 'scholarship.'

In the 'scholarship' program described in the news,<sup>12</sup> as well as in policies such as forbidding student assemblies (thus discussion) and instituting electronic voting

system in their place, we are witnessing an increased emphasis on the individual student vis a vis the institution, and the reinforcement of a 'consumer' identity (see Bauman, 2007), where the state makes higher education more expensive but promises to 'help' individuals 'purchase' their credits; Meanwhile 'citizenship' gets eroded through the limitations placed on civil rights. It is a move, again, with an antecedent in the 1990's, when Puerto Rico's Department of Education pushed for parents to contribute funding and supplies to the public education system, and proposed a voucher system for some kids to attend private schools (Colón-Reyes, 2006). It is also a move towards the personal, to a 'student as client' as opposed to 'student as citizen' model which in turn is part of a more general neoliberal penchant for collapsing the public into the private, for rendering social problems as personal ones, all of which has the effect of 'depoliticizing politics itself...limiting citizenship to the act of buying and purchasing goods.' (Giroux and Giroux, 2004 :121)

More pragmatically, turning institutional funds into individual aid also facilitates the movement of public money into private hands. It would not be at all surprising for these 'scholarships' to eventually morph into a sort of 'voucher' system that students would be able to use in the private colleges that are proliferating on the island. Indeed, the delib-

erate shrinking of the UPR system is equivalent, if not identical, to the privatization of higher education, a trend already well established in Puerto Rico in areas such as public housing and public health (Colón-Reyes, 2006).

Shrinking the student body has the automatic effect of increasing the client base for private higher education institutions in the island. This would be consonant with the broader neoliberal agenda of Fortuño, who once served on the Board of Directors of one of the largest private education institutions in Puerto Rico, the Ana G. Méndez university system. The consequences of this agenda cannot be underestimated; it would be devastating for the diversity of the student body at the UPR. Because socioeconomic inequality translates into pre-college educational inequality, students from poorer communities tend to have lower admission, retention, and graduation rates (see Brusi, Díaz and González, 2010). As the university becomes smaller, the students most likely to be affected (either because they are not admitted or because they cannot find enough course credits to retain their financial aid) are precisely those with the most economic need. This has implications for the student profile and institutional diversity, as it reinforces an existing tendency for middle class students to study in the public university while low-income students go to private institutions of higher cost and lower graduation

rates (IPEDS, accessed February 2010). The tendency is not unsimilar to what is happening in the U.S., where low-income and non-traditional students are underrepresented in public flagship universities and overrepresented in for-profit higher education institutions where their four year graduation rates tend to be low-and their student loan debt high (Haycock, Lynch and Engle, 2010). Policies that disproportionately impact low-income students may also affect Puerto Rico's ability to face its current and future social and economic challenges, which require that we address socio-economic inequalities through increasing the quality of public education, including higher education (Colón-Reyes, 2006; Ladd, 2006 and Rivera-Batiz).<sup>13</sup>

As elsewhere in Latin America and the Caribbean, inequalities of access to higher education have the effect of magnifying existing inequality and increasing the migration of talent and unemployment (Aponte-Hernández, 2008). Historically, albeit sometimes ambiguously, the people of Puerto Rico have viewed their public university not as a cost or as a burden but as an investment—the kind of investment most needed in times of economic crisis. The fast tracking of economic reforms, and its coupling with a legal moralistic discourse of 'order' in Puerto Rico are not limited to the university, but characterize other struggles, especially environmental ones. For-

tuño's government is aggressively pushing forward a gas-pipeline energy project, and doing so over the vigorous objections of the public, civil society, and a significant number of faculty and students involved in the resistance movement as activists and scientists (Justicia-Doll, 2010). Like the UPR's and other recent reforms, the pipeline has been imposed in the name of 'emergency', this time an 'energetic emergency'. Civil disobedience camps are being established in different parts of the island to resist the construction of the project, already awarded to a number of private companies, without finishing the permit process and in some cases before the declaration of 'energetic emergency' that justifies the construction of the pipeline (Pacheco, 2011).

As this article went to press, ex-president De La Torre declared in an interview that he had been subject to undue intervention from the part of the governor's office, and had been forced to name specific chancellors and impose the annual student fee, among other things (López, 2011). Given the public university's need to protect and reclaim itself as the literal and metaphoric space for thinking creatively and independently about the meaning and practice of democracy, the stakes involved in the case of the University of Puerto Rico are high. It is not only students who are being threatened by the demotion of their civil rights; indeed all Puerto Ricans are

facing a similar threat.

NB: A previous version of this article appeared in the magazine NACLA-Report on the Americas, April/May 2011 issue.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Puerto Rico is a territory of the United States. Its inhabitants are U.S. citizens and can travel freely between the island and the continent, however they cannot vote in U.S. presidential elections or have voting representatives in Congress.

<sup>2</sup> Bringing in 'riot-police' forces in the absence of an actual riot seems to be a common tactic of the neoliberal state in dealing with actual or potential protests in other parts of the world. See for example the recent events in Barcelona, Spain (<http://www.20minutos.tv/video/egmnBO47-los-mossos-cargan-contralos-indignados/0/>), where protestors were attacked in the name of hygiene, in order to 'clean' the space.

<sup>3</sup> <http://democrats.edworkforce.house.gov/newsroom/2011/04/gop-budget-would-deny-pell-gra.shtml>

<sup>4</sup> Each campus had a distinct organization. The description above reflects the organization typical of Rio Piedras and Mayagüez. Smaller campuses had only one or two camps. The Cayey campus had a unique model-it had representation not only of students but also of teaching and non-teaching personnel.

<sup>5</sup> For a list of blogs, websites, and indie radio stations, see: [luchasrum.wordpress.com/](http://luchasrum.wordpress.com/)





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# One-dimensional university realised: Capitalist ethos and ideological shifts in Higher Education

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*In the last two decades, states and other stakeholders across all continents have been developing systematic policies that have significantly transformed the fundamental tenets of the university: academic freedom, curiosity-driven scholarship, research and pedagogy. The present article aims to explore the discursive framework through which such transformations have been shaped and presented by way of looking at its ideological presuppositions and political consequences. To do so, the authors, firstly, highlight the capitalist logic behind the current attempts to redefine the ethos of Higher Education through the analysis of a particular debate among academic and educational leaders. Secondly, they focus on the way in which these logics are effectively reproduced within the academic environment through specific patterns of subjectification. Finally, the article argues that the ideological patterns examined here are successfully attempting to impose an exclusionary and instrumental conception of knowledge functional to the neoliberal agenda.*

*Keywords: capitalist ethos, neoliberalism, Higher Education, Žižek, knowledge, ideology*

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## Introduction

An unprecedented assault on Higher Education (HE) has been taking place in Europe and elsewhere. In the last two decades, states and other stakeholders across all continents have been developing systematic policies that have significantly transformed the fundamental tenets of the university: academic freedom, curiosity-driven scholarship, research and pedagogy. 'Budget cuts, efficiency reforms, new ways of cost-sharing

and of managing degrees, tuition-fee rises, privatisation and selective strategies for excellence' (Corbett 2011) have been major concerns of many academics and students alike. In the last two years, they took to the streets and launched occupations in many parts of Europe such as – Ireland, Austria, Greece, Italy, Denmark, Croatia, Finland, Spain, France, Holland, and the UK – and beyond, for instance in Puerto Rico, Argentina, United States, Canada and Iran. International financial insti-

tutions, policy makers, governments in alliances with industries, business interest groups and think tanks have been constructing a new model of HE which radically reinvents the core pillars of the academy. Universities are now competing in the global arena and are expected to be accountable engines of economic growth. It is expected that HE as the producer of high-skilled brainpower, high-tech knowledge and innovations is and will be the major motor and stabilizer of economic systems. Not only has this purely economic conception of HE provoked strong opposition and resulted in political tensions, but it is also becoming increasingly doubtful whether economically driven education will lead to greater individual and collective prosperity.

These developments are taking place within the context of the hegemonic discourse of 'knowledge-driven economy', a key strategic imaginary that seeks to resolve the ongoing problems of capital accumulation evolving since the crisis of Fordism. The neoliberal project – which dates back to the 1970s and mostly the 1980s – has been seeking to implement and universalise the ideology of laissez-faire market economics and restore the global capitalist system. This has meant sustained economic restructuring and social and political readjustment (see Harvey 1989). Importantly, one of the most significant aspects of the project has been to strengthen

ties and relationships between HE and global, regional and national economies. Ever since, discussions about the organisation and purpose of knowledge production and about the institutional setting and governance of universities have been dominated by analyses of the methods and ways in which universities best fulfil their economic function (Boulton & Lucas 2008). With the collapse of the Berlin Wall, the ubiquity of information and communication technologies and subsequent extensiveness and intensiveness of capitalism, these discussions have acquired a global significance. Even though approaches focusing strictly on developments of national HE systems may currently appear limited due to the changing national and world orders and the global nature of contemporary capitalism (Robertson 2010), we will use the case of the UK to illustrate certain hegemonic tendencies taking place – albeit in various degrees – on a global scale. We have chosen the UK as a case study for two reasons. Firstly, the transformation of HE under neoliberal auspices in the UK has a longer tradition rooted in the 1970s. Secondly, the UK can serve as a 'laboratory' where we can microscopically detect and dissect trends and tendencies which also occur elsewhere but are either not as visible or not yet as fully 'developed'.

By focusing on the UK as an exemplary case study, we aim to

deploy the global relevance of the political questions raised by the ongoing opposition to the present reform by large sectors of university staff and student body. How is the role of HE and the university as an institution being reframed? What types of subjectivities emerge? How is the concept of knowledge being transformed? This paper addresses these compelling questions by operating on different layers of inquiry. Firstly, we highlight the capitalist logic behind the current attempts to redefine the ethos of HE through the analysis of a particular debate among academic and educational leaders, and by looking at the processes of subjectification operating within the new neoliberal landscape. Secondly, we address the specific significance and implications of such logics by investigating the emergence and dissemination of an exclusionary and instrumental conception of knowledge. Finally, we will refer to the theoretical framework developed by Slavoj Žižek to relate the above mentioned processes with their wider ideological implications and to delineate the possibility of an alternative, emancipatory valence of knowledge. In summary, we aim to demonstrate how the neoliberal restructuring of HE albeit operating at different levels tends to reduce the various instances under analysis (ultimately intellectual life itself) to what Marcuse (1964) defined as ‘one-dimensionality’, namely to an exclusivist

criterion of rationality instrumental to the logic of capital accumulation.

### **The ‘Grand Challenges’ discourse: towards a new higher education ideology**

In order to frame the discussion, we will now explore a particular ongoing debate among several representatives of big universities, academic leaders and senior administrators published on the influential *GlobalHigherEd* blog (GlobalHigherEd n.d).<sup>1</sup> This debate provides rich material from which we can reconstruct the essence of the new ‘spirit’ or ethos of the university and disclose what ‘idea’ of the university it may embody. The project of transformation that emerges from this debate is composed of three inter-related features: 1) The university should be an active economic and social interventionist; which 2) provides solutions to the world’s ‘real problems’ – whatever they are; and 3) produces high-powered job qualifications – meaning that instead of full human beings and full citizens, it forms and shapes human capital subjected to market fluctuations like any other capital or commodity (cf. de Sousa Santos 2010).

Apart from a few exceptions most of the academic leaders taking part in the debate at *GlobalHigherEd* seem fascinated with what has been called ‘grand challenges’ (global poverty, environmental threats, energy resources, economic stability

and inequality, international security etc.) and suggest that universities and HE have to address these challenges at the pace they deserve – which essentially means immediately and effectively. Organisational structures, ethical and intellectual missions of universities should be subordinated to the needs for the resolution of these grand challenges. A global agenda for tackling the most burning issues must be developed, articulated and put into practice. As the initiator of the debate Nigel Thrift, vice-chancellor of the University of Warwick, claims: '[First], it could be argued that universities are the primary intellectual fire-fighters in the current situation, not least because that responsibility has increasingly been abrogated by so many other actors. Second, the vast majority of universities have always – quite rightly – taken their ethical responsibilities to the world seriously...Third, if the situation is really so serious, perhaps it could be argued that we are now on a kind of war footing and need to act accordingly' (2010).

Thrift normatively assumes that the main and the only function of a new globally operating university should be primarily problem-solving of planetary issues. Hence, he implicitly sets up a meta-framework which renders knowledge production *teleological*. Among canvassers reacting to Thrift, David Skorton, president of Cornell University, acknowledges Thrift's assumption:

'The world is increasingly turning to HE to develop and share the knowledge needed to solve its most critical problems' (Skorton 2010). In a similar vein, Daniel Linzer, provost of Northwestern University, claims that universities should be organized in 'such a way as to enable the big problems of the day to be tackled effectively' (2010). Lucia Rodriguez from Columbia University is concerned whether universities are doing 'all they can to prepare their students for the complex challenges facing this interconnected and interdependent global community'; and maintains that 'universities have a role in training and developing the problem-solvers of the world' (2010). These statements represent a general attitude of other discussants and indeed embody a discourse of the pressing need to address issues that have a global scope. Even though the existence of 'global community' is exaggerated or at least debatable, it must be said that the calls for tackling global challenges are legitimate and universities should address the problems emerging in our epoch – and they indeed do.

However, there are at least two problems in framing the purpose of HE in this particular perspective. First, by accepting a certain paradigm of intervention, what this discourse of grand challenges and even grander remedying visions neglects is that universities are also significant *contributors* to the

world's critical problems because they largely reproduce dominant economic system(s). Thus, one of the fundamental instances that is missing in these debates is that most of the academic leaders create these visions as if HE, universities, science and pedagogy existed somewhere *outside* social formations and economic structures. The way in which universities should address the global challenges in the neoliberal framework essentially further reinforce a given *status quo* and the dominant ideology. The discussants portray HE as a readily and always available 'toolbox' that provides solutions for societal and economic ills. To put it briefly, if there is a problem – which according to the debate is always global – universities should come up with an appropriate solution to address it. However, this picture is radically undermined once we problematise the whole redemptive telos implicitly attributed to the smooth running of neoliberal economy by the grand challenges discourse. We claim that universities themselves – especially particular curricula – may be at the core of those grand problems and challenges that academic leaders so zealously address and vie with each other in coming up with ever-more spectacular, planetary and safeguarding visions. It could be argued that mainstream, orthodox or 'bourgeois economics' (O'Connor 1973) dominate particular university curricula and arguably (re)pro-

duce the neoliberal ideology. Business schools and the disciplines of finance, management and accounting situated within universities and HE sectors (for-profit MBA schools) are the very centres of reproduction of the dominant capitalist logic. Thus one must concur with Dunne *et al.* (2008) when they argue that business curricula are 'Trojan horses' of modern capitalism and training sites whereof neoliberal subjectivity is generated and moulded.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, it is doubtful to claim that these highly popular subjects and degrees generate and provide 'knowledge that improves the world' – as will be clarified below.

Secondly, the debate itself to a large degree reads as an 'advertising billboard' whereby various institutions compete among each other in providing ever-better solutions for the grand challenges. As one of the critical voices in the debate maintains, the 'solution-seeking culture' broadly means that the "fairly traditionalist structure" of "curiosity-driven projects" is giving way to a "fast and effective" modality, enabling us [academics] to "keep pace" with the big challenges, for which we need to "copy the organizations that work the best" (McLennan 2010). In a rather self-celebratory way, other contributions in the blog debate usually foreground the very institution they represent as *the one* that works and addresses the global challenges the best – efficiently and rapidly. Although Thrift's main call was to



think about increased academic and scientific collaboration across the globe, almost every single reply is conceived of as the presentation of the 'more-or-less-successful' vision and competitive tactic by an institution that a particular discussant represents. Thrift's rather dramatic plea for increased 'business of scientific cooperation [which] now needs to go on apace and perhaps even as one of the conditions of the survival of the species' (2010) is understood by the majority of debate participants as an opportunity to promote their institutions' past and/or present attempts to tackle and resolve planetary problems.

From a Marxist perspective this means that universities and academic leaders have ended up being (willingly) responsible for solving problems for the establishment – which are essentially capital-related problems (Harvie 2000). In this vein it is possible to argue that the entrepreneurial and competitive spirit that underpins this 'idea of university', which will face and solve global challenges and 'real problems' resembles a 'university without idea' (Fish 2005) wherein core pillars of the modern university such as critique, culture, education and curiosity-driven inquiry lie in ruins. In turn, capital can shape and load HE and universities in line with its demands. According to an Enlightenment thinker Johann Gottlieb Fichte 'the University exists not to teach information but to inculcate

the exercise of critical judgement' (Readings 1996: 6) and as we discuss below, this dimension is gradually and systematically trailing off. In this sense – however apocalyptic it may sound – the university as a modern institution and the site of society's intellectual gravity ceases to function and – despite the calls to collaborate – we are entering an era of one-dimensional 'knowledge business' institutions.

The call for a 'new social contract' between HE institutions and society is largely constructed around research, scientific inquiry, scholarship and pedagogy. It suggests a particular trajectory and direction not only of the university as such, but also of knowledge production and of the purpose and role of education in general. Essentially, a new consensus, 'common sense' and normalcy about the mission of the university and the role of HE is being produced. However, it must be noted that this is a very exclusionary and specific conception: university degrees are to be understood as credentials for job markets and knowledge is increasingly becoming a commodity. In the words of Slaughter and Rhoades: 'In the new economy, knowledge is a critical raw material to be mined and extracted from any unprotected site; patented, copyrighted, trademarked or held as a trade secret; then sold in the marketplace for a profit' (2004: 4). Nevertheless, the emerging discourse – such as the

one that has been taking place on the pages of *GlobalHigerEd* blog – that frames the *raison d’être* of the university considerably masks corporate, managerial, and competitive imperatives. The fabric and structure of HE is being strategically reconfigured and recalibrated and subsequently academic practices, realities, values and meanings acquire new contents. Therefore, what appears to be a progressive and redemptive ethos governing the new ‘enlightened’ purpose of the university is, in essence, an offspring of the ongoing convergence of science, research, education and the circuit of capital.

### **The neoliberal subject**

In order to further illustrate what this particular (neoliberal) vision of HE entails in terms of subjectification, let us take as an example the recommendations about the future of HE as expressed in one of the most recent attempts to systematise the current trends advocating for the reform of universities in the UK, i.e. the Browne report (Browne 2010).<sup>3</sup> According to the – one-dimensionally economic – definition of HE offered by the report: ‘Higher education matters because it drives innovation and economic transformation. Higher education helps to produce economic growth, which in turn contributes to national prosperity’ (2010). The statement makes it clear that universities are not thought of anymore as a public

good but merely as a financial investment. However it also demonstrates that their primary aim is not to provide education in the humanist sense, i.e. in the sense of developing the full potential of the self, as a citizen, as a social and political subject, as an employee and so on, but rather a certain kind of training, one that forms young people into identical copies of the neoliberal *homo economicus*: ‘Higher education matters because it transforms the lives of individuals. On graduating, graduates are more likely to be employed, more likely to enjoy higher wages and better job satisfaction, and more likely to find it easier to move from one job to the next’ (2010). The only transformation that matters in the lives of ‘individuals’ (notice here the choice of vocabulary which puts the emphasis on the individual whilst eliding any notion of collectivity such as ‘society’) is the possibility to pursue an endless job hunting ‘from the one job to the next’. What also goes unnoticed in this short but extremely revealing definition of the purpose of HE is the presupposition of the precariousness of employment. The phrase from the ‘one job to the next’ implies that for the neoliberal reformers the university is only part of the general dismantlement of the ontological security that underpins the life of the modern subject. In this neoliberal perspective then, precariousness can start even earlier in life, at the moment one attends HE which becomes hence-

forth a kind of mortgage. As Vernon (2010) notices: 'Higher education is now modelled on the types of financial speculation that has helped get us in to this mess'. Students are encouraged to get expensive loans based on an imagined income and to hypothecate their future from the perspective of a non-guaranteed and most likely precarious job with only speculative earning power.

But there is more that goes unquestioned under the proposed restructuring of HE into the one-dimensional economic perspective. In addition to the illusion of the university degree as a highly profitable investment, prospective students are also led to believe that they are in a position to dictate their views, expectations and needs to the university curricula via the market rules of demand and supply, choice and competition. The new mantra of 'student satisfaction' shifts the focus of education from learning into consumption and the instant satisfaction associated with contemporary consumerism. The empowered 'student-customer' is led to believe that, in this way, s/he becomes sovereign over his/her investment, over the degree product s/he purchases. The empowered students are invited to join the 'e-bay' system, where their purchasing power will decide – always on the basis of product satisfaction – whether university staff will keep or lose their jobs, or whether courses and departments have a reason to exist. As Collini (2010)

notices students are not always in a position to know, until long after their graduation, whether a particular line of study is worth pursuing. Marx, Weber, Durkheim, Kant or Hegel may not offer immediate satisfaction to undergraduate students but familiarising oneself with difficult and nonetheless essential material is what creates the infrastructure for future inquiry, healthy curiosity and intellectual development. Besides, as Williams (2010) astutely reiterates through John Henry Newman, 'the biggest problem with posing high levels of student satisfaction as the principal outcome of education is that this is not always compatible with intellectual challenge, which is surely the real purpose of higher education'. If teachers feel under pressure to keep the levels of student satisfaction up, then difficult, challenging, controversial or unsettling material - as it is for instance in the case of studies dealing with cultural difference, ethical, medical or biological issues – may well be avoided in order not to upset the customer-king.

Nevertheless, even if the empowered student-customer seems sovereign over the brand name of the degree product s/he is purchasing, that same student is quite powerless when s/he faces the subtle power of technologies of control, which already are an indispensable part of the postgraduate curricula. Often under the banner of minimising the misuse of power from thesis

supervisors or other authorities of the institution as well as an opportunity to measure 'how much you have done', a wide range of assessment and self-assessment exercises are being imposed on PhD candidates in universities across England. Naturally, assessment is part of any meaningful process of intellectual progress; nonetheless, the endless bureaucratic completion of forms, which often measure progress in terms of conferences and training courses attended (and where, for instance, there is no space and time for a six-month reading of Hegel or Kant) and request the ultimate confirmation by authorities such as the Deans of Faculties who have little idea about the topic or substantial progress of x or y PhD student, poses certain questions about the real purpose of such assessment exercises. The constant monitoring and self-monitoring of the student in order to develop an employable personality is a prime example of the technologies of disciplining the self and of biopower at work, as systematically explored by Foucault throughout his oeuvre about modern subjectification (1997, 2004). In other words, what is at stake here is the shaping of the subjectivity of students and their formation according to the discipline of the market. 'Aims and objectives', ratings, quantifiable outcomes, 'public engagement', 'business awareness' are telling examples which bear witness to the way the market economy has

already left its mark on HE.

The debate on *GlobalHigherEd* blog analysed above as well as the way its vision currently materialises in concrete processes of subjectification strongly suggest a future direction of the ideology of HE. There is a peculiar dialectic at play though. First, redemptive, interventionist and entrepreneurial ideas conceal the role of HE institutions in the origins and formations of grand challenges. Second, the generation of these redemptive visions is imbued with the imperative of competition and underpinned by the market ideology. This gives us a blueprint whereof we can situate further investigation. What is concealed in HE ideology and in the new seemingly progressive ethos is the revenue orientation, profit motive and the foregrounding of an economic benefit of knowledge. Bourdieu suggests that in the neoliberal discourse 'the economic world is a pure and perfect order, implacably unrolling the logic of its predictable consequences...prompt[ing] to repress all violations by the sanctions that it inflicts...' (Bourdieu 1998). This succinctly articulated principle unfolds the dominant element in the contemporary ideology of HE whilst materially and discursively informing the conception of knowledge we investigate below. Using economic parameters, policy makers, politicians and many academic leaders have to be inevitably selective when they favour a certain type of knowl-

edge over another, which means that there is a need to define and bracket ‘useful’ and ‘useless’ knowledge. And this false usefulness/uselessness dichotomy is formed *predominantly* along the lines of economic benefit. Contemporary attempts to define what exactly the content of knowledge should be tend to reduce and essentialise its historically shaped, yet ineffable, meaning and content according to the codes and practices of commerce, business and entrepreneurialism. As noted among others by Harvie (2000), we are witnessing the enclosure of knowledge commons and the formation of capital-related proprietary knowledge which mobilises as well as generates capital. From this specific standpoint we will now elaborate on the changing conception of the idea of knowledge and its shifting meaning(s).

### **Realism and fantasy in the new ideology of Higher Education**

The exclusionary dynamics described in the previous section can be clarified further by exploring the way in which the concept of knowledge as an empty signifier<sup>4</sup> is being successfully hegemonized and ideologically reframed by the dominant neoliberal discourse. In order to explain the effectiveness of such hegemonic operation, we will draw selectively on Žižek’s combination of Marxism and psychoanalysis. As illustrated by the Lacanian philosopher, psychoanalytical categories

– by focusing on the affective relation of individuals with their socio-symbolic environment – can contribute to clarifying the mechanisms behind the subjective investment in ideological patterns functional to the reproduction of specific institutional policies. Accordingly, this section aims to reconstruct the interaction between the dominant form of managerial ‘objectivism’ in HE and the ‘fantasy’ framework which – by envisaging an a-political common good beyond contingent contradictions – enables its successful dissemination.

In the first place, the necessity of the process of neoliberalisation – the new role of the university under neoliberalism described in the previous sections – is justified in the UK through variants of the classic Thatcherite ‘There Is No Alternative’. In other words, the sound, ‘down to earth’, problem-solving approach described by a growing number of zealous policy makers composes an overall ‘realist’ frame. Its peculiar form of expression is the ‘call to responsibility’ in a moment of crisis. As pointed out by numerous commentators, the mainstream presentation of the overall economic crisis follows similar patterns: the economic breakdown is used to justify the implementation of specific neoliberal logics – logics which, incidentally, contributed to the crisis in the first place (Harvey 2010, Klein 2007).

This discourse is meant to com-

pel us – interpellated as responsible citizens – to accept and support the restructuring of HE. It can be helpful to recapitulate some of the major consequences implied by this process: 1) the shift from a concept of university as a service offering the right of education to citizens to a corporate enterprise doing business with clients, in a peculiar condition of state-regulated competition with other enterprises; 2) the proliferation and growing importance of assessment exercises, rankings, leagues and tables, indispensable tools for Taylorising and optimising knowledge production and 3) the unavoidable related worsening of work conditions for staff that have to research and teach in the situation of precariousness and constant pressure (Callinicos 2006).

Within this context, the realist approach affects directly the content of academic research by delineating specific criteria to assess and separate valuable from dispensable knowledge – in other words, what is worth funding and what is not. Such distinction is implemented through the above mentioned ‘neutral’ tools of measurement. The ‘call to responsibility’ is directed at arts and humanities in particular: in this difficult moment – so the discourse goes in the UK – research needs to demonstrate its usefulness in relation to the real problems of our era. In this perspective, only two categories of knowledge are deemed worthy: knowledge that can promote

economic growth but also knowledge that can ‘ease’ social tensions. In the words of the UK Department of Education and Skills: ‘Our national ability to master that process of change ... depends critically upon our universities. Our future success depends ... on using that knowledge and understanding to build economic strength and social harmony... we have to make better progress in harnessing knowledge to wealth creation’ (Department for Education and Skills 2003: 2).

This vision translates in the current ‘fetishism of impact’, informing – among other similar initiatives at EU level – the current ‘Pathways to impact program’ developed by the Arts and Humanities Research Council. The AHRC is the main UK public body which distributes governmental funds for postgraduate projects and research in the Arts and Humanities (currently, the Council is sponsored by the UK Department of Business, Innovations and Skills). As stated in the AHRC website, ‘The research councils define impact as the demonstrable contribution that excellent research makes to society and the economy. (...) It is necessary to show public value from public funding.’ (AHRC n.d). The AHRC website provides a number of precious examples of useful or ‘impact-driven’ research:

Practice-led design research that tackles crime... Impacts include: Improving the UK’s economic

competitiveness by creating new innovative products, such as chairs and clips that reduce the opportunity for bag theft...Creating consultative multi-stakeholder networks that deliver multi-agency approaches that generate new solutions to reducing crime... There have also been international links. For example, Grippa, an anti-theft bag clip...was shown at the 'Safe – Design Takes on Risk' exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. This attracted interest from the Manhattan Robbery Squad and Starbucks Senior Management, highlighting how relatively simple dissemination activities...can lead towards making links with potential users and beneficiaries (AHRC. nd.b)

It is worth stressing how the worth of a research project is ultimately sanctioned by agents such as 'Starbucks Senior Management' and the 'Manhattan Robbery Squad'.

The call to responsibility is sustained by urgency – as the problems are well-known, we only need to act. Any political and intellectual effort implying a reflection on the systemic nature of problems, confronted with the *urgency* of the situation, is constantly invited to recede. The great challenges are practical, technical, whilst the political origin of the 'objective conditions' demanding adaptive compliance dissolves in the background: we, as academic workers, have to cope with objective restric-

tions set by universities, universities with competition and governmental policies, governments, finally, with the 'natural' laws of the market. The origin of the problems is as remote as a natural occurrence.

### **The fantasy of engagement**

As anticipated, it is possible to individuate at the very core of the realist conception a specific variant of the classic fantasy of 'social harmony'. In general terms, it is possible to define the concept of 'fantasy' (within Lacanian oriented discourse analysis) as a construct which supports the subject's affective investment in specific, contestable social arrangements by displacing structural contradictions in contingent impediments. As pointed out by Žižek (1989, 1999) the dominant ideological framework presents nowadays a fantasy expurgated of antagonism, in which the arbitrary organizational role of the 'master' is taken up by the 'chain of knowledge'. In other words, individual and social harmony depend entirely on the subject's ability to perform an objective set of 'correct' operations, rather than on overcoming an external obstacle. It is only logical that universities, as 'knowledge factories', hold a central role in this process: they are supposed to inform policies by providing concrete plans of action.

This fantasy framework is at its purest in the myth of engagement: universities can gain public legitimacy only by 'engaging with the com-

munity'. 'Community' represents the empty signifier *par excellence* in contemporary public discourse: the term (like 'nation' or 'race' in specific socio-historical contexts), by envisaging 'something more' than any meaning attached to it – e.g. a metaphysical 'social harmony' beyond any specific semantic referent – acquires a strong affective value. In other words, the elusive conceptualization of 'community' plays a central role in the way subjects construct their identity vis-à-vis the socio-political context in which they operate. In this perspective, the 'engagement with the community' mantra provides – as we hope to illustrate – the moral undertone supplementing the aforementioned instrumental framework: in a 'post-ideological' era, universities are called to contribute by solving the 'real problems' of 'real people'.

The ideological manoeuvre behind this engagement model needs further clarification: the fantasy of the communitarian space in the first place hypostatizes two agents (university and community), then obliterates the line of fracture that traverses both (thus naturalising neoliberalism) by delineating 'shared problems' and 'common goals'. The discursive production of this inter-classist space is the condition of possibility of the objectivist-realist de-politicisation: the usefulness of knowledge can be assessed only insofar as there is a pre-given, conception of the common good –

a concept which, we argue, is being silently hegemonized by neoliberal imperatives such as 'economic growth and social harmony'. The discourse concerning the role of HE is thus marked by a central displacement: the contradictions which characterise the university, as well as other institutions driven within the circuit of capital, are hidden by re-framing the concept of engagement as action towards an external object (the grand challenges).

It is necessary to point out here how this fantasy framework legitimises only two conceptions of knowledge. The easier to detect is the hardcore realist one – knowledge as contribution to productivity and social control. However, it is possible to draw attention to a more insidious aspect of the logic underlying the imposition of the 'impact' parameter in social and human sciences. What makes 'impact' find supporters, even amongst the disciplines which are the most affected by its imposition, is the trivialisation of social struggles, which allowed the populism of 'community' or 'public engagement' to spring forth. The subversive content of the social and political causes of the 1960s and 1970s which strove for the politicisation of scholarship – as anti-sexist, anti-racist, anti-homophobic – were emptied in the process of its assimilation into the academe (Ahmad 1997). From a locus of dissent, universities were transformed into a locus of normalisation where social



and political struggles have been reduced into parameters of 'social identities and divisions' ('gender', 'race', 'ethnicity' and so on) which allow the researcher to secure better chances in the competition for funding<sup>5</sup> and to subconsciously contribute to the elimination of the subversive or dissenting - *and in the last instance political* – content of such categories of analysis. Throughout this process the production of knowledge has been shaped in a relation of oppositional determination vis-à-vis the 'arid' economic criteria and the positivist organizational principles imposed by the establishment. According to the engagement discourse, the impact of research needs to be measured in terms of its capacity to provide advocacy for disadvantaged groups or excluded 'Others', as well as to enlarge democratic participation and promote social inclusion.

The problem with these forms of opposition is that they share the same imaginary frame provided by the dominant discourse – they exclusively locate knowledge in the field of positivity, thus characterising its pursuit as a necessarily constructive endeavour. In this perspective, both the economic and the 'engaged' variant can arguably refer to the Lacanian 'discourse of the university' (Žižek 2008). Such variants delineate a type of knowledge that can operate only within the objective constraints and normative criteria that have been set in advance

by/within a given socio-symbolic system. Universities are called to provide the 'know-how' to reach universal goals (a more or less 'noumenal' common good), which the community recognises as its own. Social responsibility equates in this perspective to social reproduction.

### **Knowledge and/or emancipation?**

Within the above mentioned framework, the production of knowledge is bound to result in the foreclosure of politics – intending with politics the act of setting the very criteria against which usefulness is tested. In contrast with this conception, we will attempt to delineate briefly a different valence of knowledge – a valence which, arguably, has been constantly operating within the humanist tradition (at least as its obverse) and which is being completely excluded by the dominant ideology operating in HE. Such valence can be described by referring – in very broad terms – to the interrelation between a cognitive and an affective emancipatory dimension.

The first dimension can be related to the possibility of providing a cognitive map of the 'social unconscious'; intended here not in the Freudian sense (e.g. related to the processes of repression variously associated to the Oedipal complex), but as the network of unintended consequences and relations determining the subject's position in the social whole (Ciattini 2005). Knowl-

edge in this perspective operates on both a synchronic and diachronic axis. Synchronically, it traces the network of relations that determine otherwise idiosyncratic, apparently autonomous social phenomena (e.g. questioning the very premises behind the grand challenges). In this perspective, knowledge allows both the transformation of contingency (disparate heterogeneity) into necessity (the works of a system, e.g. neoliberal capitalism) and the wider relevance of the subject's actions *vis-à-vis* the reproduction or challenge of his/her socio-symbolic surroundings. Diachronically, it allows the de-naturalisation of social objectivity by reconstructing the historical-political (thus contingent) inception of otherwise 'natural' institutional frameworks and power relations. In this perspective, emancipatory knowledge is meant to open up a space of political intervention beyond the ideologically grounded objectivity of the existing social arrangements and the positivistic criteria of functionality grounding their reproduction.

However, uncovering the objective mechanisms structuring a given socio-economic formation does not automatically result in subjective emancipation. As pointed out by Žižek (1989), the dominant ideology in late capitalist societies – e.g. in Anglo-culture academic circles – includes and welcomes a certain degree of mistrust or cynical distance towards the working of the capitalist

system. Such mistrust – by marking a symbolic, discursive distance – leaves untouched the more fundamental structuration of the subject's desire and identity, thus assuring its participation in ideological social practices shaped by neoliberal imperatives. In other words, neoliberalism is not only a worldview but a deeper set of practices, which reproduces specific patterns of subjectification.

It is possible to introduce here the above mentioned second emancipatory dimension consubstantial with the 'useless' knowledge presently driven out from HE. Such dimension refers specifically to the way in which the disinterested pursuit of knowledge, independently from the dissemination of specific-positive ontic contents, can work to undermine the subject's affective dependency from its socio-symbolic surroundings. In other words, knowledge can unsettle the process through which, beyond explicit discursive acceptance or rejection, the subject spontaneously constructs its identity through the medium of pre-existing ideological formations.

Arguably, it could be possible to describe this conception of knowledge in relation to the Lacanian 'discourse of the analyst' (Žižek 2008). In extremely general terms, the analyst does not provide the subject with pragmatic solutions, but confronts him/her with the absence of a complete (pre-fixed) meaning and identity, thus undermining the

fantasy framework of an 'objectively effective' course of action. As a result, the subject is estranged from the naturalness of the given, thus called to assume his/her investment in the partial, unbalanced political decision at the basis of any socio-symbolic arrangement. From this perspective it is perhaps possible to delineate a dynamic valence of knowledge, whose aim is not to subsume the object, but to unsettle the subject's adaptive engagement with a given field of objectivity. Whilst this operation is what could be called 'an end in itself', it is arguably central to reactivating the space of 'undecidability' necessary for the emergence of any radical political project.

It is important here to clarify two points: firstly, this endeavour cannot be defined (immediately) in relation to a particular content, it is rather a form of sensibility or anxiety – an awareness of the thinness of reality – that can be developed only by means of dialectical mediation. From this perspective, the contemporary focus on 'critical thinking' and 'reflexivity' represents only a form of reification typical of instrumental reason. The emergence of critique, the de-naturalisation of reality, arguably implies a process which cannot be immediately signified – it is rather the byproduct of a disinterested effort of understanding something (a product of thought) in its radical otherness, beyond instrumental subsumption. This is what can happen by studying a Greek

tragedy, the development of English poetry in the 19th century, the work of a particular philosopher, but also in the process of reading literature or tracing the historical development of a social phenomenon. Through this effort, the subject is indirectly estranged from its cultural context, thus confronted with the limits and contingency underpinning its own symbolic identity and/or categories of analysis.

Secondly, the aforementioned valence of knowledge (in both its cognitive and affective dimensions) is not only incompatible with economic criteria of usefulness, but with the very concept of utility. It is not a knowledge that can tell us what to do to solve social problems, however practically or morally compelling they might be. In other words, it cannot be thought in terms of positivity; otherwise it would fall again within the instrumental framework that we have been describing. Accordingly, it cannot directly result in the establishment of a new objectivity, normativity, or in a universalist political project. What this knowledge can do and, historically, has been doing is not devising solutions on demand, but creating new problems by undermining the fixity and naturalness of dominant ideological constellations and identities.

In terms of political action, it is possible to delineate to further considerations. The type of endeavour we have been describing can neither be defended referring to its

economic impact, nor to its wider long-term societal effects or potentialities, but only in terms of a precise political choice. In other words, a rupture is needed from the apologetic framework which attempts to justify the 'objective worth' of 'blue sky thinking'. The point is rather that only *curiosity-driven* intellectual enquiry can open up the space for contesting the very idea of worth and utility reproduced by the dominant ideology. In this perspective, preserving and diffusing the so-called 'useless' knowledge is central in order to break with neoliberal realism and contest the very notion of common good and social harmony which underpins it.

### Conclusion

The trends described throughout this paper, i.e. the transformation of the university in line with the imperatives of the capitalist ethos, the increasing prominence of an exclusionary and instrumental conceptualisation of knowledge and the conditioning of subjectivity according to the discipline of the market, favour the emergence of a generalised condition of instrumentalization not only of HE but of intellectual life itself.<sup>6</sup> In other words, they create the conditions of rise of a 'pattern of one-dimensional thought and behaviour in which ideas, aspirations, and objectives that, by their content, transcend the established universe of discourse and action are either repelled or reduced to terms of this

universe. They are redefined by the rationality of the given system and of its quantitative extension' as Marcuse explains in his seminal *One-Dimensional Man* (1964). The neoliberal blackmail of 'elite' education of 'ivory towers' versus the 'pragmatic' education of 'real problems' to which there is only one choice and one alternative – that of disciplining knowledge, politics and society to the logic of the market – needs to be superseded in order to imagine the university beyond the elitism of the past and the presentist discourse of market capitalism. Dissecting the dominant neoliberal ideology requires the intrinsic critical power of arts, humanities and interpretive social sciences more than ever. 'In the totalitarian era', Marcuse (1964) urges us again:

the therapeutic task of philosophy would be a political task, since the established universe of ordinary language tends to coagulate into a totally manipulated and indoctrinated universe. Then politics would appeal in philosophy, not as a special discipline or object of analysis, nor as a special political philosophy, but as the intent of its concepts to comprehend the un-mutilated reality.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> A major forum that monitors and maps developments in the global HE landscape.

<sup>2</sup> However, note here that there is also a rather non-conventional and highly critical and progressive stream within business schools themselves, for instance Critical Management Studies (e.g. Alvesson & Willmott (eds) 2003; Parker 2002).

<sup>3</sup> The Browne report is the outcome of The Independent Review of Higher Education Funding and Student Finance which was launched on the 9th November 2009. As stated on the report's webpage 'The review was tasked with making recommendations to Government on the future of fees policy and financial support for full and part-time undergraduate and postgraduate students', <http://hereview.independent.gov.uk/hereview/report/>

<sup>4</sup> An empty signifier is a concept that does not present a fixed referent but acquires a particular meaning in relation to its position in a given discursive ensemble.

<sup>5</sup> The anxiety about securing funding and a more permanent position in the university is also manifested in the im-

perative of 'publish-or-perish' which results in endless variations and recycling of the same research in order to improve the number of publications (for the accelerated production and proliferation of publications in social sciences see Gilbert 2009).

<sup>6</sup> Even though the case we make here draws predominantly on the developments of HE in the UK, it must be noted that similar tendencies and trends are indeed evident elsewhere – for instance in the US (Aronowitz 2008, Slaughter & Rhoades 2004), Australia (Marginson & Considine 2000) and broadly in Europe (Lock & Lorenz 2007).

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# Strivings towards a politics of possibility

Sarah Amsler

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*It stands to reason that critical theorists should be interested in the newest student movements working to challenge the neoliberalisation of higher education. Yet, while these politics are pushing the limits of critical knowledge about the cultivation of new modalities of radical political resistance, their theoretical significance remains marginalised within the academy. While the academic literature is replete with analysis of the long-anticipated 'crisis of the university', many professional responses to the most recent privatisation policies have been muted and ambivalent; or, at the very least, hopeful that the trends can be arrested or mitigated by sanctioned operations of professional critique and opposition. In this essay, I suggest that some of the recent work of student activists demonstrates both the contingency of this position and the possibility of cultivating new political subjectivities and critical-experimental modalities of resistance, within and beyond the university.*

*Keywords: neoliberalism, politics of possibility, professionalisation, student movements, university*

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It stands to reason that critical theorists should be interested in the newest student movements which are developing in Britain, and around the world, to challenge the neoliberalisation of higher education. Yet, while these movements are pushing the limits of taken-for-granted constraints on critical knowledge and the cultivation of new modalities of radical political resistance, they remain marginalised within the academy which, at least in some corners, longs precisely for the politics of possibility they seek to create. There are various reasons for this, including entrenched antagonisms between

habits of opposing rigorous 'scholarship' and social 'commitment', the ascendancy of instrumentalist conceptions of teaching and research in the UK academy and a devaluation of post-1968 student politics more generally (Bourdieu 2002). As governing powers within universities increasingly discredit challenges to both local policies and wider politico-economic processes as disruptive or irrational and scholars are increasingly pressured to produce work that conforms to criteria of economic and political value, the theoretical significance of these particular forms of resistance to neoliberal

eral power is muted even further. In this essay I suggest that the fusions of what Jacques Rancière calls the unauthorised 'intervention in the visible and the sayable' with transgressive, prefigurative experiments in new ways of knowing and social practices illustrates the importance of the critical-experimental attitude in contemporary struggles against neoliberal power both within and beyond the university (Ranciere 2010, 37).

### **Capitalist realism, academic style**

In recent years, Anglophone and Continental social theorists have been preoccupied with the ascendance of what Mark Fisher has called 'capitalist realism', or 'the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to imagine a coherent alternative to it' (Fisher 2009, 2). There have indeed been so many different articulations of this sentiment that it hardly bears attempting a review; even Fredric Jameson, to whom the idea is often attributed, simply wrote that 'someone once said that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism' (Jameson 2003). From Jürgen Habermas's (1989) diagnosis of the 'exhaustion of utopian energies' in modernity to Nikolas Kompridis's (2006a, 2006b) reflections on the deeper philosophical disenchantment with radical possibility itself,

and in recent empirical research on mechanisms of closure in neoliberal forms of institutional power, efforts to lay bare the new forces of repression in advanced liberal societies have been concerted indeed. It might thus be presumed that critical theorists are in a privileged position to visiblise new possibilities for resisting or escaping these forces, particularly as neo-liberalizing agendas intensify and consolidate on the home turf of the university itself.

However, one of the ironies of this dedicated academic critique of the ascendance of neoliberal rationality is that it can also produce a 'politically counterproductive and ultimately disempowering form of "strong theory"' which does as much to embolden the dominant order as it does to denaturalise it (Peck, *et al.* 2009, 97; Clarke 2008). That is, when analyses of neoliberal hegemony focus on illuminating the power of mechanisms of self-discipline and measurement to create docile forms of subjectivity, or on making visible the inordinate complexity of power that flows through the closed networks of the transnational elites, it may easily become difficult to see any alternatives or spaces of possibility for effective political resistance at all. The literature on the neoliberalisation of higher education in Britain, for example, is replete with laments of enclosure through the 'death of educational autonomy' (Beck 1999), the 'impossibility of critical pedagogy' (Gray 2003), and 'the (im)pos-

sibility of intellectual work in neoliberal regimes' (Davies 2005) – early expressions of mortality which suggest that a sense of crisis has in fact long been immanent. It is, as Rosalind Gill has pointed out, incredibly important to speak these criticisms into public existence, since breaking the silences about the 'psychosocial aspects of neoliberalism...[can] be seen as part of a wider project to make intelligible contemporary modalities of power and thus as connected ineluctably to the struggle for a better, more just world' (Gill 2009, 16). However, this capacity to make such knowledge meaningful in (or indeed, through) struggles for political autonomy, and for the possibility of non-market systems of value to orient social life, remains limited by the professionalization of academic work within the university.

Within my own field of sociology, for example, David Brunnsma and Dave Overfelt have argued that the historical mission of critical theory has crept from being a resource for advancing our various 'walks towards social justice' to becoming a relatively soulless institution of and for capitalism, produced primarily by individuals who 'jump through the flaming hoops that are our graduate programs and tenure processes', and whom they argue 'have lost touch with [their] humanitarian roots' (Brunnsma and Overfelt 2007, 65). More prosaically, much of the guidance offered to newly qualified social scientists today has less to do

with the substance of their work as educators, researchers, public servants or political actors and more to do with maximum academic capital for career advancement, gaining competitive advantage in relation to one's peers, fulfilling bureaucratic programme requirements, securing research funding, managing limited time, and using educational technology (Newson and Polster 2010; Noy 2009).

Nevertheless, the reclamation of space and time for developing clear understandings of what education is and how it might be organised is vital for academics, particularly as the theoretical terrain upon which we base our analysis differs from that of our predecessors', and certain inherited assumptions about critique are in need of re-evaluation. Ours is not the same 'paralysis of criticism' about which Herbert Marcuse (1964) wrote, regardless of how much of ourselves we might see in situations where a lack of resistance to power seems to intensify into the deeper absence of evidence of desires for autonomy at all. Marcuse argued then that an efficacious critical theory would need to begin from a conception of the human as inherently freedom-desiring. This would, he argued, necessarily be oriented towards extracting 'the historical alternatives which haunt the established society as subversive tendencies and forces articulating them in ways that could shatter both the comfort of incorporation and the

illusion of total technological control' (Marcuse 2002, xlii). But we can no longer rely on such fixed figures of human nature or characterisations of revolutionary subjects, and the logics of capital, utilitarianism and technology are believed to have permeated not only the most radical of alternatives but the very realm of possibility and anticipatory consciousness itself. What for Marcuse was an alarming tendency in the ascendance of technological rationality has, for some critical theorists, actually turned into the phenomenological condition of everyday life.

It is thus not surprising that provocative work about knowledge, education and culture is emerging through attempts to theorise resistance in everyday life, in particular in practices which focus deliberately on the transformation of subjectivity in 'the myriad ways in which actions, habits and language produce effects, including effects on subjectivity, ways of perceiving, understanding and relating to the world' (Read 2011, 114). This work is not wholly new and does not sit completely outside of the university. There is a wealth of critical pedagogy projects ongoing around the world, and a growing circulation of knowledge and shared experience amongst academics and activists in global anti-capitalist movements, including those sited in and around universities (Coté, Day and de Peuter 2007; Shukaitis and Graeber 2007). What distinguishes this knowledge work

from more professionalised forms, however, is that it is grounded in radical critiques of neoliberal rationality and integrated into localised struggles to determine the practices that reproduce or challenge this rationality in everyday life. The dual emphasis of this new work is thus on the politics of possibility; produced not simply to make intelligible the effects of power on our lives (much less to acquire professional prestige), but rather 'to find methods and strategies of how to most effectively use the space we find ourselves in to find higher positions of subversiveness in struggle' (Shukaitis and Graeber 2007, 31).

### **Surprised by power – waking up to neoliberalism in the house**

The political weaknesses of our strongest theories of neoliberalism became apparent in the autumn of 2010 when Britain's new conservative-liberal coalition government confirmed the details of its 'radical plan to shake up higher education' (Independent Review of Higher Education Funding and Student Finance 2010).<sup>1</sup> Far from just another shift in a long succession of policy reform, the proposals were designed to holistically transform higher education from a public, cultural good into what Stefan Collini, in a series of articles, has called a 'lightly regulated market in which consumer demand, in the form of student choice, is sovereign in determining what is offered by service providers', and in

which corporate funding will come increasingly to shape the purposes of research (The Times, November 2009, *The Guardian*, March 2011, and Collini 2010).

Revelations of the scale and depth of these plans came in waves following the publication of key government texts. The first was the long-anticipated 'Independent Review of Higher Education Funding and Student Finance,' commonly known as the 'Browne Review', commissioned in 2009 by the outgoing Labour government to review the implementation of the country's first 'variable' fees regime in 2004 (Browne 2010). It recommended increasing fees, expanding student loans, introducing new forms of hierarchical competition between institutions and deploying state resources to 'marketize' the entire system. The 'necessity' of these changes was produced in a second text – the government's Comprehensive Spending Review, published some weeks later, which outlined departmental settlements for the nation's fiscal-crisis 'austerity' budget (HM Treasury 2010). In the context of a 25% reduction to public spending, it announced a 40% cut to higher education, including up to 80% of funds for teaching in all subjects and translating into a withdrawal of all support for teaching in the arts, humanities and social sciences (Fardon 2011, 3). 'Institutions which are chosen by students because they offer better quality, responsiveness

and value for money', the Ministry clarified, 'should be able to grow if they wish and, if necessary, at the expense of those that perform less well (Department of Business, Innovation and Skills 2010).' Universities must privatize and compete against one another for scarce resources in a quasi-regulated marketplace of provision, or elect to perish in what promises to be a wasteland of structural and cultural irrelevance.

These proposals were not anomalous in the post-war history of the English university. The recommendations display key elements of structural adjustments which have been transforming universities globally since the 1970s, including the expansion and diversification of higher education systems for economic purposes; the shift from public to private funding for universities and the construction of political mechanisms to facilitate their competitive marketization; the subordination of academic governance, professional identities and intellectual cultures to market rationalities; and the redefinition of 'public' as 'clients' and 'students' as 'consumers' or 'knowledge-entrepreneurs' (Mars, Slaughter and Rhoades 2008).<sup>2</sup> The subordination of intellectual work to market rationalities in the UK, described in the 1980s by one politician as a '*kulturkampf*' against academics, was set in motion well before universities were subsumed into a Department of Business, Innovation and Skills in 2009 (Beck

1999; see also Hall 1990).

Despite talk of a sudden privatisation, English universities have also really been only quasi-public since they began charging international students in 1979. By the early 1990s, many vice-chancellors were either resigned to, or invested in, privatization and the lobbying of government for the power to charge 'home' students fees as well, as explored in an article by Trainer (*The Guardian*, December 3, 1996). Under their continuing pressure and despite public opposition, the New Labour government broke precedent and introduced the first national tuition fee of £1000 in 1998. More than two million students walked out of lectures to protest the plans; some went into occupation of university facilities. The chief of the Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals accused them of being 'misguided', asserting, as reported by Amelia Gentleman, that fees were the 'only realistic way of maintaining the long-term quality of provision in higher education' (*The Guardian*, March 5, 1998). In 2004, against further opposition, New Labour eked through both a threefold increase in fees and a new system for their quasi-deregulated marketization (Harrison 2011). And in autumn 2010, after more than 50,000 students marched in anger and as thousands occupied a third of the country's universities, the head of Universities UK urged vice-chancellors to accept that as 'the cuts to

the HE budget are a painful reality', opposing higher fees would have 'devastating' consequences (Smith 2010). In some senses, the Browne Review merely normalized an ideology of university reform that corporate powers, politicians and some vice-chancellors have long insisted is both necessary and progressive (Gilbert 2010).

In other words, for over thirty years there have been concerted (albeit often disarticulated) efforts to subordinate critical rationalities to the logic of the market in academic work and transform educational relationships into practices of economic exchange. Any sense of a sudden attack on the public university here is out of joint, and as Michael Burawoy (2010) bluntly notes, 'the university is in crisis everywhere' (Burawoy 2010). By finally subordinating all knowledge and educational relationships to crude market ideologies and mechanisms of economic exchange, the policies go beyond the tactical reforms which have accumulated in recent decades to constitute a politico-ideological strategy that denies the very possibility of the public university and institutionalizes political mechanisms to mitigate its future realisation in any form. This distinguishes a long period of neo-liberalisation from a new settlement of 'deep neoliberalism' in higher education (Brenner, *et al.* 2009, 185). While they use this concept to theorise changes in global regulation, it is also useful for con-

ceptualizing the shift from a cumulative implementation of neoliberal practices to a consolidated restructuring of the 'rule regimes' governing the finance, management, and social function of higher education itself. To put it in Michel Foucault's terms, we move from a complex field of governmental technologies and strategies of resistance to a relative state of domination, in which 'the relations of power, instead of being variable and allowing different partners a strategy which alters them, become themselves firmly set and congealed' (Foucault 1988, 3).

This has wide-ranging consequences for all of academic life, but particular implications for the arts, humanities and critical social sciences, which as James Vernon argues, 'speak to different systems of value, different orders of pleasure and enjoyment' and cannot assimilate to market logics without being somehow transmogrified or negated (Vernon 2010, 6). For many in these fields, the proposals thus not only threaten passions, livelihoods, research, teaching programmes and institutions, but promise a Procrustean existence. By the beginning of 2011, mortality had become a common currency of political expression. Philosophers protested that the government was 'putting the university to death;' students carried cardboard coffins painted with the epitaph 'R.I.P. education;' education was 'on life support' according to a flat-lining placard; a skull-adorned

banner simply requested 'don't kill the arts' (Düttmann 2010). The moment has been described as, in no particular order, a dark day (Gerada 2010), tsunami (Reisz 2010), as a nuclear catastrophe (McQuillan 2010), by Mike Baker as a nightmare (BBC News, June 5, 2010), and by Toby Helm and Anushka Asthana as act of vandalism (*The Guardian*, December 5, 2010). Indeed, whilst such possibilities were on the horizon for decades, 'such far-reaching transformations, with their apparently utilitarian rationale, have never before been contemplated' by many inhabiting the university today (Fowler 2011). This is exacerbated as the changes are being imposed in ways and for reasons felt widely to be beyond democratic accountability, explored in an article by Smith (*The Guardian*, October 19th 2010). It was above all the government's hostile response to opposition, including speeding through a tightly-whipped parliamentary vote to raise fees despite dissent, deployment of violent policing to discipline the student opposition, and a cavalier use of Dickensian language to justify social inequality, which elevated university politics into concerns about an attack on democracy itself. It soon became clear that these were not educational reforms at all, but communiqués pronouncing the creative destruction of the public university system and the futility of its contestation on intellectual, professional, political, or moral grounds.

Thus was accomplished a thirty-year project to 'close off and render impossible the experience of education as a collaborative pursuit' and this creates new demands of anyone concerned for the future of critical education (Gilbert 2008, 174). We clearly cannot go on as we have been accustomed to, so can either fatalistically declare defeat in the face of what has been described as a cultural and economic tsunami, retreat into reactive modes of 'survivalism' and defence, or become open to new conceptions of professional practice, modalities of political resistance and imaginaries of the future, including those in the realm of 'untested feasibility.'<sup>3</sup> For as Simon Critchley argues, 'the massive structural dislocations of our times can invite pessimism, even active or passive nihilism...but they also invite militancy and optimism, an invitation for our capacity of political invention and imagination' (Critchley 2007, 131). But what might make the difference?

### **Demanding the impossible, nevertheless**

Responses to the present crises of the university are multiple and divided. For the architects of the neoliberal versions of the new university, things are progressing in a period of hyperactive innovation – responding to changing market demands and public discourses, gaming the rankings, securing superior position against 'competitor'

institutions. Indeed, as a missive circulated recently at one university asserted, this is no time or place for 'negative thinking'; academics were instructed to 'be enthusiastic, persistent and courageous supporters in the face of cynicism'. For students and academics who can adapt to the new regime, it will offer new routes to certain forms of professional recognition. For those more deeply committed to the idea of the public university as a democratic institution governed by a community of scholars and students for educational rather than solely economic purposes, however, academic life is continually disorienting.

To an extent, such 'out-of-placeness' and 'out-of-timeness' constitutes a critical distance between nonmarket and neoliberal rationalities and offers reminders that neoliberalism 'is always contingent and can never completely close down alternatives' (Nonini 2008, 152). There are thus ongoing attempts by academics to re-establish the authority of professional knowledge and reasoned argumentation in processes of political decision-making about both universities and social life more generally. These have taken various forms: a silent protest by Cambridge professors (to 'insist that the university is not...a business, but a place of free intellectual activity'), a campaign by the British Academy of Social Sciences (to 'amass evidence' of the social utility of social science), a blog by the



British Sociological Association (to publicize analysis), work by the UK Council of Heads and Professors of Sociology (to engage in 'private diplomacy with politicians') and a Campaign for the Public University (to 'defend and promote the idea of the public university'). These are not presently coordinated; indeed, there are some fundamental differences between them. In each, though, the emancipatory promises of critical knowledge are defended not simply because they are familiar modes of professional action, but also because they are understood to be important for any democratic project and to be themselves under threat. These responses are also bound by a more substantive conception of the political, in which 'subjects raise a problem about a rule of practice' in sanctioned languages and procedures of 'negotiation, deliberation, problem-solving, and reform' (Tully 2002, 540). In other words, they are bound into the hope of a politics of demand.<sup>4</sup>

The first student-led demonstration against budget cuts and tuition fees held in London in autumn 2010 also made such demands, mainly of the state. While represented in mainstream public discourse as being an affront to liberal democracy, students' early protests affirmed a faith, or at least an avid hope, in a liberal democratic process that many had in fact just discovered. Placards appealed for politicians to 'honour their promises,' chided the

Deputy Prime Minister to 'act like an anthropologist' because he was educated as one, and accused the government of cheating young people out of promised futures. Even many of the student occupations during this time were undertaken in defence of the values of intellectual freedom and critique, the idea of the university as a public good, and principles of democratic process. In seeking to save academic programmes from arbitrary closure and workers from unfair dismissal, students employed a range of classically 'liberal' tactics such as the presentation of evidence, publication of analysis, initiation of dialogue with management and petitioning.

What radicalised such practices, however, is that they were framed by an alternative reading of power which hopes but does not presume that these principles can now be defended or realised within extant institutional forms. What may be under more liberal conditions a *reformist* practice of calling logics into question, thus often became a performative act of resistance. Students' aim in occupying university spaces was generally not to partake in an ongoing strategic game but to short-circuit relations of power that were understood to have become, as James Tully describes it, 'not open to challenge, negotiation, and reform' (Tully 2002, 540). When students occupying the Old Schools at Cambridge in November 2010 demanded that the university 'ensure the autonomy

of education from corporate interests', for example, they 'had no illusions that the University would do any such thing (and...were proved right)' (Nineteensixtyseven 2010). But this was no failure according to one student involved, 'indeed, one of the major achievements of the occupations was to erode the myth of a cozy academic community as an oasis of humanism in an inhuman world, set apart from capitalist society' (Nineteensixtyseven 2010). It was not a rejection of democratic process or of the university, but a demonstration that those now governing the institutions which claim to value these principles do not. This hypocritical distance between what is said and what is done by those in power pervades other social institutions as well. Students' refusal to consent has therefore inspired other groups engaged in parallel struggles against neoliberal restructuring. The president of the National Union of Journalists, for example, wrote that 'the student occupations have lit a fire under the whole movement – they have shown all of us the power of resistance' (Murray 2010). According to another commentator, they have 'played a concrete role in widening the realm of the possible beyond the constrictive paradigm of the status quo and "common sense"' (Nineteensixtyseven 2010).

Many academics agree with this diagnosis. Indeed, all the metaphorical invocations of death and dying circulating these days suggest they

sense it all too well, and as Hallward wrote after seeing his students beaten at a demonstration, 'with each new protest, we learn a little more about what we are up against' (Times Higher Education, December 2010). But for those who feel their futures to be intertwined with the survival of a university that is already deeply de-democratised and commodified, the example is less a mobilising call to arms and more of a disarming summons to do a 'different reading of our attachments and possibilities' (Brown 2006, 41). For many, the university is materially a primary site of intellectual work and professional recognition, and its wages pay the bills. Ideologically, it is still imagined as, and sometimes is, a space for intellectual activity, free inquiry, enlightenment, and emancipation – a place of relative freedom where it is possible to carve out spaces of alterity in scholarship, pedagogy and political action. Politically, it is also experienced as an alienating and repressive arm of the state-capitalist apparatus. The university is at once real, nostalgic, and utopian and the more distance grows between the desire and its eventualized forms, the more effort seems to be channelled into repairing the latter. But when students say, as some do now, 'we don't want to defend the university, we want to transform it,' they are also calling academics to account (Really Open University 2010). They are rejecting, reclaiming, re-imagining and trying

to repurpose universities that have been undermined on our watch, albeit not generally with our approval. It is thus not surprising that some students decided 'it was time to take our campuses back into our own hands' (Casserly 2011, 71).

It is thus instructive to explore the logic of this position, not only for its political gumption but because it appears to reflect what Nikolas Kompridis argues is a critical consciousness of seeking the 'disclosure and realization of possibilities for going on with our practice more reflectively, cooperatively enlarging the space of freedom as we cooperatively enlarge the space of possibility' (Kompridis 2006a, 182). However, while there has been considerable commentary on the causes, character and political efficacy of students' responses, there has been less serious exploration of their contributions to the cultivation of new political subjectivities and critical-experimental modalities of resistance.<sup>5</sup> It is these formations that I turn to now.

### **Student resistances and the 'newest' logics of political intervention**

The newest student movements in the UK, as internationally, are plurivocal. They are comprised at different points by a number of often student-led organisations which formed around university occupations in 2009 and 2010, new articulations of existing political networks

and parties, heterogeneous action groups focused on work in particular communities and locales, faculty-student groups rooted partly in university centres and departments, and national, international and transnational networks of loosely affiliated educational and social activists. They are brought together, and divided, through demonstrations, space occupations and reclamations, 'people's assemblies', international conferences and networking meetings. They create affinities through opposition to anti-social policies, the critique of neoliberal capitalism and anti-democratic politics, and a will to practice solidarity with other communities of struggle in broader anti-capitalist and anti-authoritarian movements worldwide.

It is tempting to want to name these formations, and numerous labels have already been applied: the international student movement, the new student movement, the new student rebellions, university struggles, the free education movement, the precarious and student movements, autonomy-oriented movements, and a decentralised confederation of non-aligned anti-capitalist and anti-authoritarian struggles. Indeed, this paper itself is part of a volume that aims to map out responses to the 'crisis of the university' and explore developments in the re-imagination of the university itself. There are concerns, however, that the very desire to pin the resistances into existing identity categories may not only

homogenise what is in fact a very pluralistic and often divided field of action, but may also be antithetical to the epistemologies and practices of resistance being cultivated within it. Despite these worries, there is some interesting connective tissue that distinguishes them from both previous student politics and more professionalised forms of academic politics, and that links them to other parts of what Richard Day refers to as the 'newest social movements' (Day 2005). This is a commitment to, and belief in the necessity of, what might be named a *politics of possibility*.

The 'politics of possibility' is J. K. Gibson-Graham's name for an emergent political imaginary which has been 'radically altering the established spatiotemporal frame of progressive politics, reconfiguring the position and role of the subject, as well as shifting the grounds for assessing the efficacy of political movements and initiatives' in recent years (Gibson-Graham 2006, xix). This imaginary frames a 'vision of transformation as a continual struggle to change subjects, places and conditions of life under inherited circumstances of difficulty and uncertainty' (Gibson-Graham 2006, xxvii). However, it does not presume that such conditions can simply be resisted or altered by individual will and on demand. Indeed, it does not presume that 'the currently hegemonic formation will recognize the validity of the claims presented to it

and respond in a way that produces an event of emancipation', but, like all anarchistic politics, works through 'disengagement and reconstruction rather than by reform or revolution; with the end of creating not a new knowable totality (counter-hegemony), but of enabling experiments and the emergence of new forms of subjectivity' (Day 2011, 108, 113). A politics of possibility cultivates conceptions of the political that privilege not only institutional structures and forces of power, but equally practices of cultural representation and radical imagination, and the micropolitics of space, time, language, the body and the emotions (Gibson-Graham 2006, xxvii). It centralises the collective production of a critical-experimental attitude towards being, which seeks to expand and re-signify space and time while inhabiting them with others (University for Strategic Optimism 2010).<sup>6</sup>

Further, a politics of possibility does not view complex political struggles as simple matters of failure or success. Instead, it conceptualizes all political conditions and outcomes as limit-situations which create further theoretical questions and political demands and thus as a rationale for building a politics that engages simultaneously with both the present and future. Applying this logic to present crises within the English university, for example, it is possible to consider that while the 'proposed reforms triggered large student demonstrations [which] had

no impact on any constituency of real influence either in the universities or in politics,' this might signal the need for as-yet-untested modalities of engagement, rather than delimiting the bounds of possibility itself (Pears 2011, 12). As Parliament was passing the legislation which accepted the proposals for university restructuring in December 2010, for example, two demonstrations were held. One was a small candlelight vigil organized by the National Union of Students to mark the closure of the possibility, and thus the legitimacy of critique and resistance. The other was a thirty-thousand strong protest organized by a network of student activists, for whom the passing of the vote was both anticipated and illegitimate, and marked the emergence of a new political terrain upon which new ways of thinking and being must be formed. 'No need for a vigil,' wrote Clare Solomon. 'We were celebrating the birth of a movement, not the death of education' (Solomon 2011, 16).

Such practices illustrate the materialisation of an ethos of critical experimentation in political resistance that shifts 'critique conducted in the form of a necessary limitation into a practical critique that takes the form of a possible transgression' (Foucault 1984, 45). As such, it also shifts efforts to oppose the further neoliberalisation of higher education in Britain from a 'politics of demand' to something more re-

sembling a 'politics of the act'. Alternatively, in Day's terms, from modalities of resistance which refuse to wait for power to either come to see the reason of its opponents or to dissolve itself, towards practices that favour 'inventing a response which precludes the necessity of the demand and thereby breaks out of the loop of the endless perpetuation of desire for emancipation' within the existing system (Day 2011, 108).

### **The problem of the professional philosopher**

The need for at least a critical openness to such a politics of possibility amongst academics could not be clearer. We know that our universities are not fully democratic institutions and yet we cannot quite believe that they are otherwise. We continue to assert the political authority of the critical academic even when bypassed or suppressed. In one article (*The Founder*, January 21, 2011), Stuart Stone even synonymised the idea of 'the academic' with inefficacy and irrelevance, reporting that the 'protests prove academic as government win fees vote'. By channelling critical intellectual work into the logics of the neoliberal corporation, distorting words and minds simply so to survive the broader structural changes without being too much transformed ourselves, we seem to have forgotten, or at least forgotten to consider, Marcuse's warning that 'the philoso-

pher can only participate in social struggles so long as he is not a professional philosopher' (1989, 66). As Kompridis further suggests, philosophy abstracted from practice cannot yield solutions in moments of crisis precisely because 'that knowledge is part of what is in crisis, along with the perspective(s) in light of which we apply it' (2006a, 167).

Faced with the imposed reconstruction, and in some cases the wholesale destruction, of some of the most basic conditions of legitimacy and meaning for academic work in critical social science, philosophy and education, many people now hope that the exercise of deep neoliberal power can still be arrested, reversed, or at least adequately mitigated by institutionally sanctioned resources of critique within the universities. I write, sort of, as one of these people. There is a fear that calling this into question would betray commitments to reasoned argumentation, intellectual autonomy and the promises of the university as a potentially democratic institution, or in Edward Said's words, a preserve for utopian imagination (Said 1996, 224). There is also a fear of what might happen if we were to demand the rights that are routinely denied for us to make it so, and even greater anxieties about whether we could in fact pursue this project if permitted to or not. One insight from the emergent student resistances, particularly in tactics such as occupation, is

that while the critical-experimental ethos is a necessary component of any response to processes of deep neoliberalisation, it is not sufficient; that indeed, it must sometimes be defended through political action.<sup>7</sup>

But despite understanding that the imposed neoliberalisation of higher education is an attack on the very possibilities we seek to expand, the university is generally not regarded as a legitimate site of political commitment. It is not even necessarily regarded as a place where we can or should make 'cautious experimental modifications of our specific forms of subjectivity' as we undertake to 'go on' with our work in conditions of crisis (Tully 1999, 98). This is not a new situation and similar debates emerge whenever the role of the university shifts in relation to (and particularly to converge with) the state, capital, industry or military interests (Chomsky 1998; Wallerstein and Starr 1971). But each time is new and in the conditions of deep neoliberalisation in which we are emplaced today, responding critically will take some considerable work, of the sort that, which in our professional roles, we will likely be neither recognised nor rewarded for. Indeed, the challenge lies in being receptive to other possibilities such as those illustrated in this article and to undertake serious experimental work in rearticulating reclaiming and creating conditions for knowledge production 'as a critique of existing cultural practice,

with a view to how one might be emancipated from forms of un-free praxis towards more free praxis' (Critchley 2003).

The pressing question now may not be whether the public university will survive but how any form of democratic education and critical knowledge production will be possible despite its deep neoliberalisation. The students who have been protesting on the streets and occupying the universities admit they do not have definitive answers to these questions and that they cannot answer them alone. But they also reject the injunction that there can be no answers at all and illustrate what it takes to engage practically in the awkward, messy, joyful, and risky work of thinking and acting differently in seemingly frozen states of domination. As one student wrote, 'you fight the closing down of possibility by opening it up, by widening the field of potential historical actors – we are engaged in a battle over the conditioning of the future' (Russell and Milburn 2011) The material and subjective forces of neoliberal rationality are present in such responses to the current crisis of the university, but their inevitability is not. Perhaps, when capitalist realism meets the politics of possibility, it loses its grip.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> This and the following section of the paper draw heavily on another article

which is now in press (Amsler forthcoming).

<sup>2</sup> For discussions of post-war structural transformations of the university see Calhoun (2006), Fischman, Igo and Rhoten (2007), and Peters (2005).

<sup>3</sup> 'Untested feasibility' is a concept introduced by Paulo Freire in *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (2000, 117).

<sup>4</sup> Richard Day's notion of a 'politics of demand' refers to reformist political logics which appeal 'to the benevolence of hegemonic forces' and through such appeals to transform their relations, in a desire to be recognised by them. This is contrasted in his work to a 'politics of the act', which abandons hope that such forces (particularly in the forms of state and market) 'are somehow capable of producing effects of emancipation' and thereby orienting action towards the assertion of rights and creation of autonomous possibilities (Day 2005, 80, 15).

<sup>5</sup> The notions of 'critical' and 'experimental' attitude are both from Foucault. For Foucault's explanation of the first, see 'What is critique?' (Foucault 2007). For a discussion of the second, see Tully (1999).

<sup>6</sup> Significant parts of the emergent student movements in Britain, wider Europe and the United States also share what Day describes as a '(post)-anarchist logic of affinity', including 'a desire to create alternatives to state and corporate forms of social organization, working "alongside" the existing institutions; proceeding in this via disengagement and reconstruction rather than by

reform or revolution; with the end of enabling experiments and the emergence of new forms of subjectivity; and finally, focusing on relations between these subjects, in the name of inventing new forms of community' (Day 2011, 113). However, there are also elements of and cross-fertilisations with orthodox and heterodox Marxisms, more classical anarchisms, and liberal-democratic orientations, and the movements thus defy such generalisation.

<sup>7</sup> Debate on the tensions arising within such situations now circulates within the movement broadly defined, as deeper questions about the relationships between scholarship and activism (Autonomous Geographies Collective 2009), horizontalism and hierarchy (Nunes 2005), and democratic openness and defensive closure (UMN Solidarity Network 2011) have become, often abruptly, questions of practical import.

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**Conference Report**  
**Sexual Nationalisms: gender, sexuality and the politics of belonging in a new Europe, 27-28 January 2011, Amsterdam, The Netherlands.**

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*Keywords: sexual nationalism, homo-racism, anti-Muslim feelings, sexual rights, post-secularism, femo-nationalism*

On the 27th and 28th of January, approximately 60 international scholars from the fields of gender and sexuality studies presented papers at the Sexual Nationalisms: gender, sexuality and the politics of belonging in a new Europe conference. The conference was hosted by the University of Amsterdam and co-organized by two new research centers, the *Amsterdam Research Center for Gender and Sexuality, Uva* and the *Institute de Recherche Interdisciplinaire sur les Enjeux Sociaux, EHESS, Paris*. The list of participants included numerous established authors such as Rosi Braidotti, Judith Butler, Jasbir Puar, Didier Eribon, Joan Scott, and Lisa Duggan. The conference drew more than 250 participants over two days. The large number of attendees as well as the controversies that arose during the conference, were perhaps indicative of the current political interest in the conference theme.

Sexual nationalism was exhaustively interpreted by participants, leading to a surprising diversity of presentations on topics connecting sexuality to race, migration policies, secularism/religion, nation and global capitalism. The event was firstly an exploratory one, aimed at mapping the ways in which current nationalisms, such as the right wing conservative agendas adopted by a number of European governments, deploy gender and sexuality in creating violent exclusionary instruments such as anti-immigration policies, wars on terror, burqa bans, increased surveillance and policing of the poor. Moreover, the conference was also a platform for forging alliances between academics and activists committed to anti-racist, pacifist, inclusive politics and working on issues related to migration, Muslim communities in Europe, and sexual rights. The dialogues started during this event seem crucial for

sketching a progressive agenda in today's ever more stultifying and murderous political landscape.

As with any conference of this magnitude it is challenging to capture all of the rich discussions that took place within the confines of a short review. For this reason, this review will only offer a very general picture of the atmosphere and intellectual confrontations that enlivened this conference.

The conference created a tense milieu from its opening panel. On the theoretical level, the main disputes took place between defenders of liberal human rights legalism and their critics. The latter camp was keen to pinpoint the inherent bodily, symbolic and legal violence on which human rights universalism rests. Another stream of controversy was much more contextual and was ignited by the four panelists in the 'Homo-nationalism, homo-neoliberalism, homo-neo-colonialism: crises and travels, Europe and beyond' semi-plenary. Instead of delivering their announced papers, the panelists publically critiqued the conference organizers for what they considered to be a systematic marginalization of their critical voices as queers of color, as less senior academics and as radical voices coming from an activist scene. A number of conference participants resonated with the panel protesters and expressed similar feelings of marginalization as less privileged attendees (be it due to their precarious work

status, their religion or their race). Finally, Gert Hekma, a sociologist at the University of Amsterdam, well established for his gay rights activism, literally shocked the audience during the final panel when, he not only criticized the conference aims but more blatantly, delivered an outright racist attack on Muslims and Islam from the perspective of 'sexual patriotism'. In retrospect, the organizer's decision to invite Hekma was an ill-fated one, a fact acknowledged by the organizers in their post conference press release. To a large degree, these three controversies reflected the core themes debated during the conference: new nationalisms (including homo-nationalism; femo-nationalism), multiple intersections of precariousness and sexuality, and violent forms of subjection via rights discourse or religion.

As many speakers attending the conference showed, nationalist rhetoric is not what it was during interwar Europe. Over the last decades, a dramatic change occurred in relation to the legitimate subjects called upon to form the 'national body'. Past abject sexual subjects are now not only fully accepted as citizens of the mother/fatherland but function as core imaginary entities upon which patriotic and nationalist affects rest. In this vein, Jasbir Puar reiterated the main arguments of her seminal work, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*. Homo-nationalism is

a critical term that defines the current state of affairs in which the figure of the gay man embodies a fictional self-congratulatory image of civilized western culture, which is constantly threatened by the intolerant, 'fundamentalist' forces of non-European others, particularly Muslims. Lisa Duggan further emphasized that the inclusion of gays and lesbians as legitimate nationals entailed an acceptance of a depoliticized, consumption-oriented homolifestyle that rests upon a series of excluded 'others' for its support and respectability. Precarious migrant workers, Muslims, the Roma and non-normative queers remain figures of hate, disdain and danger. Sara Ferris's paper, a fresh and well-articulated contribution, introduced the term femo-nationalism in an attempt to grasp the side effects of European policies that address gender equality. The author stresses that women's labor together with the radical potential of feminist critiques has been instrumentalized by this legislation that integrated them both in a nationalist and xenophobic discourse. The author argues that the implicit purpose for engulfing feminist ideas into mainstream discourses is to perpetuate the exploitation of migrant women's labor. For Ferris, it is crucial that western women's emancipation must be revised and placed in a wider context of capital accumulation and nationalist feelings.

Stefan Dudink, focused on the

dynamics of nationalisms across different time frames. He thus showed similarities between the discursive strategies employed in the construction of the internal enemy - the Jew/Homosexual during the interwar period and those employed today to 'describe' Muslims. The exploratory paths presented here echoed in smaller paper sessions, especially those addressing integration and immigration policies in Europe.

Another strand of papers used the theme of sexual nationalism in order to revisit the liberal paradigm of rights discourse. Again, seminal for this theme was Puar's presentation as well as Judith Butler's intervention. The latter pointedly argued that human rights have turned into a war machine, while gay rights are presently enforced in non-Western contexts by armies, through murder and torture. In response to these critical views, Didier Eribon endorsed an all-encompassing international LGTBQI activism with the purpose of protecting those sexual subjects at risk at the hand of national homophobic authorities. The tragedy of David Kato's death (the Ugandan sexual rights activist who was murdered right before the debut of the conference) invoked by Eribon made it easier for the speaker to support a paradigm with obvious limits and more often than not instrumentalized for political purposes ignorant of gay lives. Eric Fassin's intervention rested on the same ideological presuppositions as those of



this fellow national. However, Fassin's intervention was much more nuanced and acknowledged that in the French context, sexual rights discourse was fully instrumental in constructing a national (gay) sense of pride and thus reinforcing the exclusion of French Muslims from belonging to this imagined community on the grounds of belonging to an intolerant religious culture.

Lastly, I would like to briefly mention another significant conference strand which discussed the relationship between religion and secularism in the context of contemporary Europe. It is common place for many conservative debates regarding Muslims in Europe to point to the irreducible difference between the highly religious culture of Islam and the secular West. Many of the papers presented in the semi-plenary 'Secularism and Sexual Nationalism' deconstructed this simplistic dichotomy and went further to question the very secular nature of Western liberalism itself. Rosi Braidotti, gave an exciting expose on the post-secular condition by re-assessing Western European feminism's relation to spirituality. While European feminists engaged in a harsh critique of religious institutions at the same time they produced their own versions of feminist spirituality ranging from neo-pagan movements to cyber-spirituality. This grounded example exposes the false pretense of non-spiritual western secularism thus building a possible connection

between religious cultures and a spirituality-imbued secular West.

The Sexual Nationalisms conference will for sure remain a milestone event in gender and sexuality studies. Its significance echoes Judith Butler's own controversial gesture at the Berlin Gay Pride in 2010 when she refused the Civil Courage Award offered by the organizers and spoke out against the racism and nationalism that permeates mainstream queer communities. The Amsterdam conference has had the same in-your-face outspoken confrontational attitude in denouncing racism (on the conference premises), in confronting un-reflexive human rights proponents and in debating on the nexus of homo-national liberalism and its complex connection with flexible labor capitalism.

Interestingly enough the papers presented at this conference tended to move away from a queer studies paradigm that focuses extensively on the question of subjectivity and its relation to sexuality. At Sexual Nationalisms, most debates centered on macro-level processes, and took the discussions on abstract (yet very concrete) plains of global flows of money, of precarious 'others', of xenophobia and armies that *make die and let live*. Indisputably, these are meaningful processes to consider but perhaps in their overwhelming complexity what is once again lost are the very voices of those who embody these complexities. In a similar way, entities such as Europe

and Muslims, common references in most papers delivered, also suffer from hasty conceptualizations leaving the audience to ponder over the plural and somehow slippery meanings of these two over-used referents. Overall, the conference was an important step towards drafting a common agenda for both research and activism related to sexualities in Europe and its intertwinement with the common matters of the day such as militarism, racism and varied forms of precariousness.

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**C. Steele. 2010. *Whistling Vivaldi: And other clues to how stereotypes affect us*. W. W. Norton & Company, Inc. 242 pp., (hardcover).**

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*Keywords: academic performance, stereotype threat, identity, social psychology, achievement gap*

With the ever increasing diversity of our societies, *Whistling Vivaldi* offers a perspective on one of the more relevant issues of our time: how stereotypes affect us. The author, Claude Steele, is a social psychologist with a doctorate from the Ohio State University, and is currently provost at Columbia University. Dr. Steele has received many academic and professional accolades, most notably two awards for Distinguished Scientific Contributions from the American Psychology Association and American Psychology Society, respectively. Central to his accomplishments is his quest to better understand the nature of race, gender, and ethnicity and their impacts on the individual and society. This enduring goal can be attributed to a pivotal experience from Dr. Steele's childhood. When Claude turned thirteen he tried to obtain a

job at the local Country Club as a golf caddy. After being ignored all day standing outside the gated entrance he began to question whether his identity limited him access to some opportunities. Claude is black, and in Chicago during the 1950s, black children were relegated certain times they could visit swimming pools and skating rinks; and they most certainly could not carry golf clubs at the Country Club. Dr. Steele's experience led him to theorize on how identity can alter one's success in a given society, not only by limiting an individual's access to certain opportunities, but also by affecting one's performance.

Identity contingencies are, as discussed by Dr. Steele, 'conditions one has to deal with in a setting in order to function in it (p. 68).' These contingencies are affected by one's social identities as white, black, rich,

poor, politically conservative or liberal, educated or uneducated, and so on. Of particular interest to Dr. Steele are the contingencies brought on by stereotype threat.<sup>1</sup> As he describes it, [w]e could all take out a piece of paper and write down the major stereotypes of other members of our society (p. 5).’ He argues that there would be a high degree of similarity on the content of these lists generated by society’s members, and this substantiates the fact that each member is keenly aware of his or her own social identity. Stereotype threat then arises when an individual becomes consumed with the fear of confirming a particular stereotype by his or her actions (e.g., a female performing poorly on a math exam). Dr. Steele does not simplify the subject by arguing stereotype threat could be attenuated by eliminating stereotypes. Instead, he proposes that if you want to change the behaviors and outcomes associated with social identity, don’t focus on changing the internal manifestations of the identity, such as values, and attitudes. Focus instead on changing the contingencies to which all of the internal stuff is an adaptation (p. 84).’ The analogy Dr. Steele uses to connect the reader to the influential powers of stereotype threat is the story of Brent Staples, also the muse for the title of the book. Brent, too, is a black male who grew up in Chicago. Walking down the street between his classes while attending the University of Chicago, Brent

noticed white couples locking arms and crossing the street to avoid him. Fearful actions displayed by these couples were not based on the actions of Brent, but were based on his stereotype threat as an aggressive, violence prone black man. Out of nervousness, Brent began to whistle Vivaldi’s *Four Seasons* as he walked down the street. He noticed the positive impact of his whistling as the tension drained from peoples bodies’ when they heard him (p. 6). By whistling classical music Brent made the aggressive stereotype less applicable to him and demonstrated how he, too, was educated and refined. But can dealing with the pressures of stereotype threat be as easy as whistling Vivaldi?

The primary objective of the social and psychological research presented in *Whistling Vivaldi* is to better understand why individuals underperform in certain circumstances, with the thesis being that stereotype threat plays a pivotal role. *Whistling Vivaldi* covers this material in eleven chapters, but the book is essentially organized into four fundamental themes: describing stereotype threat; exemplifying the impact of stereotype threat on performance based tests; exploring the mechanisms linking stereotype threat to poor performance; and providing scientifically backed methodology (i.e., peer-reviewed publications) for attenuating the effects of stereotype threat. Dr. Steele uses the platform of the book to cre-

ate a narrative that covers his personal research history including the etiology of his ideas, his preeminent studies and their conclusions, and finally offers ideas for desired applications. Through this literary style, a broad audience would appreciate and enjoy the book; however, its conclusions and applications will be of more value to individuals interested in the underlying causes of academic underachievement. For instance, future educators and administrators would be particularly interested in his work on stereotype threat's impact on female science and math testing as well as standardized test underachievement in black students. The caveat is that a detailed discussion on these topics is absent from the book. Instead the reader must refer to the actual peer-reviewed articles written by Dr. Steele and co-authors. Dr. Steele kindly provides a reference list associated with each chapter at the end of the book, however, so that readers can easily find these articles online or in a library.

To frame his argument that stereotype threat is linked to intellectual performance, Dr. Steele discusses one of his early studies on female underperformance in advanced math classes in college. He does not posit that women possess a lesser biological capacity for mathematical analysis, but instead suggests women present a psychological vulnerability due to gender stigmatization (stereotype threat). For

the first study, men and women of equally strong math skills and commitment to math education took either a 30-minute GRE math test or a 30-minute GRE literature test. Men and women performed equally well on the literature exam, but women significantly underperformed on the difficult math test. What this result meant for Dr. Steele was that during a difficult math test women, aware of the stereotype of their underperformance on math exams, become concerned about confirming their gender's negative stereotype, and thus they are presented with an identity contingency, absent from men, during the exam.

Dr. Steele discusses how similar effects of stereotype threat play out everyday from bad standardized-test scores by minorities to professional athletes playing for historically underachieving sport franchises; but how can stereotype threat affect performance? Dr. Steele acknowledges that people often see themselves in terms of whichever one of their identities is most under attack. This is because we often have an emotional connection to our identities. We tend to think well of our identities because we like to think well of ourselves. When identities are under attack people can become myopic, diverting attention from the task at hand. That is the psychological basis, but there is also a physiological basis to stereotype threat's effect on performance. Stereotype threatening test environments can

increase anxiety, as marked by increases in mean arterial blood pressure; but perhaps the most striking example of the physiology of stereotype threat was observed by having women take an advanced math test while concurrently having neural structures analyzed by functional MRI [work conducted by collaborators of Dr. Steele (Krendl et al. 2008, *Psychology Science*, 19(2):168-175)]. Mathematical learning is typically observed in the angular gyrus and left parietal and prefrontal cortex of the brain; however, under stereotype threat there was an excitement of the brain regions better associated with social and emotional processing. Overall, for women this contingency 'diverts attention and mental capacity away from the task at hand, which worsens performance' and 'further exacerbates anxiety (p. 126).'

Dr. Steele does not present the dilemma and leave the audience perplexed. He offers many suggestions to reduce stereotype threat in testing environments. Briefly, these solutions range from changing how proctors administer exams, prompting short writing sessions on self-worth and values before starting tests, and educating young individuals on brain plasticity and convincing them that working through 'hard' questions improves future brain performance. A major critique that is appropriate to address here is that stereotype threat necessitates the individual to actually care about

his or her performance on the task at hand. For instance an individual that more strongly identifies with sports, may not value mathematics, therefore relinquishing stereotype threat during a mathematical exam. This means stereotype threat is very much internalized, and any educator hoping to drastically improve test scores should not consider solutions provided within the text the ultimate means to an end.

*Whistling Vivaldi* provides a passionate and detailed argument for reassessing underperforming individuals and structuring curriculum to avoid stereotype threatening test environments. Dr. Steele mentions that ~85% of jobs are obtained through networking, and accessing these networks is a matter of opportunity contingent on educational success. Whether these social networks actually exist for particular minority groups, independent of educational success, however, is never addressed. Also, it could be argued that stereotype threat is not the only cause of educational and vocational disparities. However, after reading this book there will be no denying that happenstances of birth (being born white, black, male, female, rich, poor) can create certain identity contingencies that will help or hinder an individual's future success. But, with proper action by individuals responsible for creating test-taking and learning environments (e.g., educators, administrators, admissions staff) Dr. Steele

believes that the negative identity contingencies can become irrelevant; and identities can be seen as positively and uniquely contributing to complex and diverse societies.

**Endnotes:**

<sup>1</sup> Specifically, the circumstance, whether physical or psychological in nature, brought forth by a fear of confirming a particular stereotype that an individual must overcome in order to get what s/he wants or needs in a situation. Dr. Steele uses the example of white athletes competing in athletics dominated by black athletes, the National Basketball Association, where there is a national stereotype that the white athletes have inferior athletic ability. [The white athletes] have to survive and prosper against a lifelong gauntlet of performance situations loaded with this extra race-linked threat. No single good athletic performance would put the stereotype to rest. The effort to disprove it would be Sisyphean... ' (p. 11).

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**P. Dunleavy. 2003. *Authoring a PhD. How to plan, draft, write and finish a Doctoral thesis or dissertation*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003, 312p., £18.99 (pbk). ISBN 1403905843.**

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*Keywords: PhD, dissertation, writing, academic writing, advice*

Unless we decide to perceive it as an individual, idiosyncratic and almost intimate stage of research, writing should be subject to the same attention and detailing that applies to other aspects of social research. *Authoring a PhD* pulls together the thoughts, guidelines and advice developed over the years by LSE Professor Patrick Dunleavy in his seminar on PhD writing. Writing is a dimension to which he attributes 'around 40 to 50 percent of anyone's success in completing a doctorate'—a self-admitted 'extreme' view (p. 2). Dunleavy places his motivation for writing a full-fledged book on authoring in his initial observation that this crucial stage of any doctoral research faces a relative neglect within the methodological literature devoted to guiding

social research (p. xi). His book develops beyond the call for simplicity, concision and clarity in writing, a call already turned into an excellent book by Howard Becker twenty years before (Becker 1986). Rather, Dunleavy establishes a clear link between the 'craft skills' of authoring and the management of reader's expectations on the one hand, and the handling of the whole research process on the other, stating the need to begin with clearly defined research questions.

Thanks to the coherent, well-thought out structure of the book, the reader will be able to dip in and out of the book as necessary. However, for the graduate student to take on board the notion that 'authoring' is integral to the entire research process, it would perhaps be



best read cover-to-cover early on in the planning stages of the PhD, and then particular chapters referred to when needed at later stages. The text is interspersed with literary quotations, providing several opportunities to pause for reflection.

The first chapters cover issues of structure as they occur when 'envisioning the thesis as a whole' (ch. 2), and provide advice on how to begin authoring by discussing creativity, crucial for the graduate student who must show evidence of independent and original thought. Establishing a meaningful internal structure for the thesis (ch. 3) and for its sub-entities (chapters or papers, ch. 4) is an equally complex task, approached mainly through exemplification.<sup>1</sup>

Within the next chapters, which focus explicitly on writing, most of the basic grammatical and referencing standardised guidelines (ch. 5) should be redundant to the graduate student. The practical tips listed in 'Managing the writing process' (ch. 6) prove much more useful, as Dunleavy's vision of writing as a 'multi-stage process' (p. 135) effectively impresses upon the reader a sense that good academic authoring is the product of comprehensive protocols rather than the emanation of ethereal talents normally attributed to fiction writers. Throughout these chapters, a particularly persuasive aspect of the author's argumentation resides in his capacity to anticipate and successfully confront many reactions from his readership,

especially when touching upon time-consuming practices that may seem counter-intuitive, or that come with high adaptation costs (like paragraph restructuring, pp. 112-113).

The following chapters respectively cover data visualisation, the last steps of PhD submission and examination, and publishing strategies.<sup>2</sup> The author provides a full chapter on an often-neglected part of research, the presentational aspects of data (ch. 7). The importance of data visualisation is acknowledged in disciplines that handle vast amounts of graphical and cartographical material, such as geography and other specialties which often resort to geocoding information systems. However, it is still an under-investigated side of most research, perhaps because the idea that professional, objective criteria apply to all forms of data visualisation is far from widespread, which would explain why 'poor presentation is so endemic' (p. 158).<sup>3</sup> Dunleavy provides both the rationales and principles for this task, as well as several guidelines and visual examples. One might regret, however, that no reference is made to Edward Tufte's insightful – as well as fascinating – analysis of data visualisation.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, there is little reference to the presentation of more qualitative data, such as verbatim, drawings, field-notes, observational diagrams and photography. A missed opportunity as these data are often challenging to present in

ways that successfully convey ideas to the reader and fairly represent the research participants.

Finally, the author's emphasis on the importance of the 'end-game' (ch. 8) and transition to further publishing (ch. 9) contains an implicit lesson on doctoral training. Specific attention is given to submitting and then defending the doctorate, as well as to the strategic stage of converting a doctoral manuscript into journal or book material.<sup>5</sup> Chapter 8, which covers how to finish one's doctorate, is an exceptionally strong section that wraps up and consolidates ideas developed earlier in the text.

Throughout the book, the authoring problematic is systematically approached through an assessment of various options, ending with an argument for one preferable option over the others. At times, however, this style can appear excessively prescriptive. This is probably the risk of offering grounded advice in an area where many are not willing to take too firm a stance,<sup>6</sup> and where methodological pluralism is widely accepted. The author's proposed principles of doctoral writing is a double-edged sword: showing that the process is replete with more or less explicit rules may reassure uncertainty-stricken readers (perhaps those at the earlier stages of the PhD), although the amount of attention (and, more importantly, time) required to respect these rules might seem potentially unsettling.

Overall, the graduate student can expect far more from *Authoring a PhD* than a set of commonsensical guidelines on how to write properly. The author's approach to PhD authoring expands far further than stylistic and literary considerations and covers the (often psychological) dimensions of writing up one's research. The book effectively shows that doctoral authoring requires a specific state of mind and set of professional practices that both justify extensive training.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> At this stage, researchers working on an exploratory piece of research with any kind of organic methodology or 'data-led' analysis such as grounded theory (Strauss and Glaser 1967) may find some of Dunleavy's assumptions on structure discouraging and problematic, although not uninteresting.

<sup>2</sup> *Authoring a PhD* appeared dense enough to us to justify a co-authorship of this review, in order to engage more critically with the text. The main sections of this review were written when the authors were in their first and second years of doctoral research; consequently, the review was not written from a retrospective viewpoint, but rather the contrary.

<sup>3</sup> For examples of deficient visualizations of data, see <http://junkcharts.ty-pepad.com/>

<sup>4</sup> See especially Tufte (1998) and other references at <http://www.edwardtufte.com/>

<sup>5</sup> Other useful readings on this topic are Gerring (2004) on writing and Dowding (2003) on article publishing strategies.

<sup>6</sup> Silverman (2005, Section 5), for instance, does not dig as deeply in chapter microstructures, and does not comment as extensively on how to write clearly, apart from the mere recommendation 'know your message and stick to it' (p. 316).

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