

Appendix 5A _OS Right to the City

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Right to the City: Education Forum

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22nd January 2011, Partick Burgh Halls

Student debt as a mechanism of social control

Student debt is a work issue, because:

Schoolwork is work; it is the source of an enormous amount of new knowledge, wealth and social creativity, supposedly benefiting 'society' but in reality providing a source of capital accumulation (extracting profit from labour). Being asked to pay for education is in fact paying twice, once with work, and once with money (or debt). In both these actions students' relationships to capital are reproduced: they are simultaneously producer and consumer, and are therefore doubly bound. To view the work that students do on their courses as without value is a mistake; they are producing something very valuable to their society: themselves.

Students compete for multiple jobs (often precariously) to repay or attempt to avoid loans, so debt, or a body of indebted students, has a downwardly competitive impact on labour markets, wage demands, and labour rights.

Skills accreditation - HND, Degree, etc - is posed as indispensable for obtaining employment. The decision to take on debt cannot be treated as an individual choice. Paying for one's education is a toll imposed on workers in exchange for the possibility, not even the certainty, of employment. In this sense, it is a collective wage-cut. It shifts the costs of socially necessary education on to the workers themselves, forcing workers to take on more of the cost of their reproduction (their ability to reproduce themselves as 'wage-workers'), at a time when tremendous transnational competition exists in the labour market.

Debt enforces 'work-discipline': representing a way of mortgaging many workers' and their families' futures, constraining decisions of which jobs and wages they can seek, and undermining their ability to resist exploitation and/or to fight for better conditions.

Student debt is part of a growing debt market. Debt in general is constructed to humiliate and isolate the debtor yet is clearly a struggle that involves subjects other than students. Accepting student debt is accepting defeat, for it marks a major set back with respect to the 1970s and 1980's when education was largely debt-free and still

financed by the state.

The Edu-Factory: The Current Delivery of Education

All government policy is a form of education: teaching us what society should be, how it is structured, who has influence over decision-making and resources. The education cuts are therefore to be seen as a means to redefine what the purpose of educational institutions is: training of potential employees for the private sector, public subsidy for commercial research and development, which risks starving the ability to question and criticise. The Localism Bill is doing the same for welfare services. However these are not unique to the current coalition government. Labour was already re-defining the purpose of education through changes in funding and assessment policies towards similar ends, and within welfare was already commodifying care under the promotion of 'social entrepreneurship'.

Can resistance to the cuts become a way to draw attention to the current regressive nature of education and provide opportunities for dialogue about how education, and society can be transformed?

Defending 'Education'?

We have witnessed a resistance within the 'education movement' to deal with the possibility of transformations of the University, are we content with preserving this current situation, or should we look at the scope of *what is educational*?

What about education do we value and through what and whose framework do we assess that worth? Do we agree with the notion that the search for knowledge is only justified if it achieves profits? In other words: what and on what grounds are we fighting for?

Are these two possible battles - a) to preserve the current system and b) to change to a better system - possible to fight at the same time?

There seems to be a fear that a critique of education within a protest / resistance movement undermines the movement itself. But the struggle for education necessarily starts with education, so here a question might be suitable; what is educational about protest?

A stated intention of this forum is to form a 'critical intervention' into the education movement, how might this be manifested through pedagogical means? How do we

develop alternative pedagogical modes - our system for teaching, learning, or teaching/learning.

How might the logic of our action in protest, in occupation as well as in the organisation and participation in events such as this one inform mechanisms of educational delivery? Let's examine and implement not *what* we have learned but *how* we have learned.

The Local and the Transnational

Some students are currently trying to co-ordinate a world-wide 'Spring of Resistance' based on what they have noted as similarities across nation-states. The suggestion is that, globally, education systems seem to be moving towards this consumer-pays method of funding, and this business-orientated curricula, in a manner that is largely homogeneous and bypasses local cultural facts. Witness the Euro-wide 'Bologna Process' whereby education is standardised in order to make Europe more 'competitive as a trading block, and universities are turned into "diploma factories". Is there a truly new moment possible whereby the mobility of industry and of labour is matched by the mobility of protest and of analysis? Is this - the European and North American protests - simply a 'Western' picture, or is there an opportunity for international solidarity?

What sort of cross-border understanding would be necessary to reduce the power of nation-state constructs to divide the world into markets that can be used to discipline each other?

The Uneven Assault on Social Sciences, Arts and Humanities.

Stefan Collini writes in his critique of the Browne report 'Securing a Sustainable Future for Higher Education' that:

What is at stake is whether universities in the future are to be thought of as having a public cultural role partly sustained by public support, or whether we move further towards redefining them in terms of a purely economic calculation of value and a wholly individualist conception of 'consumer satisfaction'.

The issue of increasing fees is not an isolated issue. It is part of a much more thoroughgoing marketisation of higher education. This is having a particular effect on social sciences, humanities and arts subjects. It is suggested that these subjects will

effectively lose state funding - and within a money-orientated society this suggests they are viewed as without value for that society, that they are an aesthetic luxury. This raises a set of key questions about the extent to which marketisation is being used to discipline and reshape the content of higher education. It raises the spectre of social sciences/ humanities/ arts subjects becoming, or becoming even more explicitly, the preserve of the rich and wealthy.

How can the monetized and goal-oriented value systems which inform the Browne report, and the tone of current debates, be challenged. This also speaks to a broader tension in the cuts movement. How can the importance of social sciences/ humanities/ arts research be defended and articulated without accepting and reifying the status quo? How can the education movement deepen and critically invigorate what this research can be about? How do we recognise the importance of all disciplines: including sciences, engineering and so on?

An Absent Future?

...words like 'proletarian' or 'working class' will never catch the aspirations of people going to school, they have a lot more to lose than their chains. What they have to lose are the potentials, the life chances, offered by the social state. Face it, people want something from the state! The budget cuts break the promise, that's what hurts, that's what makes people angry. ... It's not about reform, it's about transforming the institution that fabricates social beings, with their subjectivity and their knowledge and their technical skills.... it's an anti-zombification strategy, a way to prolong the autonomy of thought and emotion that's gained in struggles and street demonstrations.

(Brian Holmes)

According to the 'Communiqué from an Absent Future',

The university has no history of its own; its history is the history of capital. Its essential function is the reproduction of the relationship between capital and labor. Though not a proper corporation that can be bought and sold, that pays revenue to its investors, the public university nonetheless carries out this function as efficiently as possible by approximating ever more closely the corporate form of its bedfellows. What we are witnessing now is the endgame of this process, whereby the façade of the educational institution gives way altogether to corporate streamlining. ... The university is subject to the real crisis of capitalism, and capital does not require liberal education programs. The function of the university has always [?] been to reproduce the working

class by training future workers according to the changing needs of capital. The crisis of the university today is the crisis of the reproduction of the working class, the crisis of a period in which capital no longer needs us as workers. We cannot free the university from the exigencies of the market by calling for the return of the public education system. We live out the terminus of the very market logic upon which that system was founded. The only autonomy we can hope to attain exists beyond capitalism.

But is it possible to go 'beyond capitalism' without being in it, through it, and against it? Does everyone here want to?

Beyond the Academy?

For over one hundred years the relationship between students and workers has been a potent force in radical politics. The increase in student numbers in recent years means that this relationship is more important than ever, both in the wider struggle against austerity and in the education movement.

More than just a matter of the obvious inspiration provided by the protests of last year, this is also about how something often seen as a weakness in student movements- namely their transience, can become a strength. The source of this potential strength is twofold. First, students depend on the same public services as everyone else. Second, students will face the same trials as other working people when they complete their studies. An education movement which faces outwards to the wider community will therefore provide vital continuity when radical students leave the campus.

As representatives of an education movement seeking to build solidarity with others fighting against austerity, these same students will effectively be that education movement's outreach into the wider community. Renewed and refreshed by successive student generations, these relationships will naturally strengthen the workers in the education sector in their struggles. They will also help provide the education movement with the social basis for its broader agendas, e.g. the debate about the nature and purpose of education itself.

Working to build active relationships with the full range of campaigns against austerity in all its forms is therefore a priority for the education movement in and of itself and also for the empowerment of the workers in that movement.

Speaking to Orientation

This short provocation considers praxis (learning through the combination of theory, reflection and 'doing') in relation to the creation and evolution of an effective education movement. As such, it focuses on the need for orientation. For an orientation of 'in, against, and beyond capitalism', and other systems, institutions and relations of oppression, repression and exploitation. It speaks to the need for vision and strategy, both as regards education and society more broadly, centred on demands for social justice.

'Social justice' should be read as shorthand for social, ecological, kinship, cultural, economic and political justice, speaking to a complementary, holistic response to the integrated oppressions we face across society.

In contributing to debates around vision and strategy, we must be clear that our aim is to build on our solidarities, to create an open, reflective, dialogue around orientation that avoids unnecessary splitting or splintering and that speaks to the evolution of a stronger, deeper and broader movement.

There is a need to move beyond reaction and resistance. Not just to higher education cuts and education policies more broadly, but to wider issues of privatisation, corporatisation, and marketisation of public services and the destruction of a public service ethos. Such an oppositional stance is necessary but not sufficient.

To go beyond reactive opposition, dialogue is needed around evolving a proactive stance, or orientation, in favour of social justice. To return to the education aspect of the debate – the need is for a conception of education as a democratic public good, speaking to a better society and world. We could address the question: What kinds of educations are necessary and desirable?

There is a need for the movement to focus on the purposes and functions of education – learning, teaching, and research for what, and for whom? Both in terms of understanding its role in contemporary society and its potential for developing an evolving understanding of ourselves, others, the word and the world, and the relationships between them, allied to an appreciation of our individual and collective agency, and an orientation in favour of social justice.

The call is for vision(s), and related strategies, that orientate us towards a better future and avoid the danger associated with focusing only on resistance and the fight for what we already have, of intellectual as well as tactical kettling.

The Struggle Now

Within the education movement we face a range of organisational and practical challenges, and a host of different ways of overcoming them. The usual accusations of top-down bureaucracy or vanguardist parties stifling direct democracy, creativity and participation have been made. But do we all care as much as each other about the form our movement takes? And if we do, why is it so important?

We have the opportunity to develop structures, practices and relationships through struggle that can demonstrate the future we want to create in the here-and-now; in our everyday actions. In students' assemblies, direct action collectives, 'free universities' and so on, we may be sowing the seeds of new ways of learning and teaching, and new ways of living. But to some, this feels vague and unfocused. There are very good arguments for never forgetting the lessons and analyses gained and produced in the past. Are our struggles anywhere near developing new ways of living, are we just stabbing in the dark, are we reproducing the mistakes of the past?

Hope Against Hope?

Hope is a material thing, produced and distributed through social channels and institutions. Institutions like the University.

Different societies produce different kinds of hopes. Hope is a mobilizing and organizing force that structures the direction and possibilities of our lives. Hope shapes our understanding of the future – what there will be, what there could be, who and how we will become something more than we are today.

For us, living in a neoliberal world, that hegemonic form of hope is perhaps 'aspiration'. Aspiration has a particular hue and tint - it means social mobility. It means a better job, more money, more things and a higher rung on the career ladder. Hope is individual in our world, never collective. Hope, the dominant form of hope, is to do better than your parents.

It is here, at the juncture of a new social order and the collapse of the remaining entitlements of the welfare state, that the restructuring of hope comes to be generally seen as a crisis of hope.

Social mobility (as such actually exists) is under attack. The student revolt speaks to us all as the first open revolt against the expansion of social death and the collapse of the more general circulation of aspiration.

But here both we who are students and we who are not find ourselves in a double bind. We need to defend mobility in the world as it stands – its defence is the defence of actual existing lives and the real possibility to have a meaningful social existence. And we need to defend the funding of education as it stands. To resist paying more for education is to defend the social gains made by previous generations and to defend the social wage.

But in merely defending it we are in fact defending the most sacred of neoliberal freedoms – the freedom to be unequal. Defending this freedom means defending the University as a filtering device set up to segregate us into educated and not; those with access to a 'professional career' and those who do not. Those with meaningful lives and those without. So can we go beyond defence.

People can see clearly what the University is now. If the protests and occupations speak only of the importance of education as it is, and the necessity to defend the University as it is, people will quickly fall away. The myth of mobility that has underpinned the University in recent years is coming undone. These protests are the first protests in Britain to contest the changing meaning of hope, and the austerity of dreams that is the coming neoliberal future. Where do we go?

NOTES AND FURTHER READING

Student debt as a mechanism of social control

The Education Act, 1962 made it a legal obligation for all Local Education Authorities (LEAs) to give full time university students a maintenance grant.

The Student Loans Company (SLC) was established in 1990 to introduce the loan system into student funding.

Following recommendations from the Dearing Report, 1997, the Teaching and Higher Education Act, 1998, introduced tuition fees.

Legislation to enable the government to sell off the Student Loan Book was passed 21st July 2008.

<http://www.parliament.uk/documents/commons/lib/research/rp2007/rp07-078.pdf>

Student Loans in the United Kingdom

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Student_loans_in_the_United_Kingdom

Is the College Debt Bubble Ready to Explode?

<http://finance.yahoo.com/college-education/article/111460/is-the-college-debt-bubble-ready-to-explode>

The Student Loan Debt Abolition Movement in the US

<http://reallyopenuniversity.wordpress.com/2011/01/08/the-student-loan-debt-abolition-movement-in-the-u-s/>

Education is a duty

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Common Sense: Journal of the Edinburgh Conference of Socialist Economists, issue
17, <http://commonsensejournal.org.uk/issue-17/>

The Edu-Factory: The Current Delivery of Education

<http://k-punk.abstractdynamics.org/>

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The Uneven Assault on Social Sciences, Arts and Humanities. The Uneven Position of Social Science, Arts and Humanities.

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An Absent Future?

Communiqué from an Absent Future

<http://libcom.org/library/communique-absent-future>

On Pop Clarity: Public Intellectuals and the Crisis of Language

<http://www.truthout.org/on-pop-clarity-public-intellectuals-and-crisis-language57950>

Let freedom ring

<http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?storycode=410620>

Links:

<http://researchanddestroy.wordpress.com>

<http://ucwalkout.ning.com>

<http://ucfacultywalkout.com>

<http://www.edu-factory.org>

<http://tinyurl.com/universities-in-struggle>

<http://occupyca.wordpress.com>

<http://reoccupied.wordpress.com>

<http://wewanteverything.wordpress.com>

The Struggle Now

Toni Prug, "A worker-inquiry: The Objects of Communism, State-form Hacks",

<http://hackthestate.org/2009/12/11/objects-of-communism-state-form-hacks-v06/>

Speaking to Orientation

Hope Against Hope?

Adapted from 'Hope Against Hope: A Necessary Betrayal', Nic Beuret.

<http://reallyopenuniversity.wordpress.com/2010/12/15/hope-against-hope-a-necessary-betrayal/>