

‘Insane with courage’: free university experiments and the struggle for higher education in historical and contemporary perspective

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Abstract

How can higher education for the common good and progressive social change be organised within conditions of advanced capitalism? What forms can and should democratic higher education take in the future, and how will they emerge? These questions underpinned struggles to democratise the modern university throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and have again assumed strategic importance for reformers in the twenty-first. As Anglo-American models of the liberal and public university are unmade, state support for adult education in post-welfare-state societies diminishes and the neoliberal university attains hegemonic status around the world, space for critical, non-capitalist and democratic learning is shrinking within universities. In response, new projects to reform, reclaim, reinvent, escape and even abolish the university have emerged. In the United Kingdom and other countries where public university systems are being transformed into managed higher education markets, this response includes the emergence of ‘free universities’ that operate independently from the state, capital and dominant theories of knowledge and higher education. Since the turn of the twenty-first century, these projects have been posited as alternatives to both public and private university systems – and, in succeeding or failing as institutions, have become objects of both hope and disappointment. Yet it is not often recognised that free universities belong to a rich tradition of educational experiments in autonomy which has shaped the history of the university from below. Contextualising contemporary free university projects within both a ‘people’s history of higher education’ and contemporary global movements for autonomy can help clarify how these ‘infrastructures of resistance’ contribute to the development of democratic educational practice both within and outside the university today.

Keywords: autonomous education, educational experimentation, free universities, public higher education, neoliberalism

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This article considers the role of experiments in learning in movements to democratise higher education ‘under the rule of capital’ (Gutierrez, Navarro and Linsalata 2017). It focuses on the emergence of a new generation of ‘free universities’ in the United Kingdom, situating these in an historical tradition of educational experimentation and a current context of global movements for autonomy from the state, capital and dominating epistemologies. It argues that free universities can contribute to transforming the relationship between knowledge, university and society, but that these contributions are often invisible within the logic of the dominant institutional systems. Conceptualising the projects as struggles for autonomy renders these contributions visible and valuable for educational reformers working both within and independently of the university. John Dewey (1939/2008) once wrote that universities are ‘continually reborn’ through reform, reimagination and struggle, and the public university is ‘an incomplete and contested project’ that has been shaped by struggles over the power of capitalist rationality in educational affairs (Gerrard 2016: 865). However, a global shift towards neoliberal higher education policies during the 1980s created fundamental ‘shifts in the governance and understanding of education in comparison to the post-WWII welfare state policy settlements of the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s’ (Gerrard 2016: 861). Early analyses of this transformation focused on how higher education for the common good, democratic life, critical thinking and progressive social change could be practiced within institutions that were being tightly refunctioned to produce economic value, and how it could be protected from being overtaken by capitalist rationality (Thompson 1970; Readings 1996). Research in the field of ‘critical university studies’ in the twenty-first century has subsequently documented the effects of this process on academics’ bodies and minds; learning and pedagogy; research and knowledge production; life chances and livelihoods; political subjectivities and relationships; and social and epistemic justice (e.g., Davies 2005; Gill 2010; Gray 2003; Hall 2014a, 2016; Lynch 2010; Motta 2013; Mott, Zupan and Debbane 2015; Morrish 2016; Pereira 2015; Watermeyer and Olssen 2016).

This accumulation of research into the undoing of the public university offers critical insights into the structural adjustment of higher education. However, while critiques of the neoliberal university proliferated in professional publications, conferences and campaigns during the 1990s and early 2000s, the transformation of the university progressed apace through changes to academic labour (through casualisation, performance-based employment and the abolition of academic tenure), pedagogical relationships (with the legal redefinition of students as both capital and consumers), research infrastructure (through the commodification, marketisation and metricisation of knowledge), and institutional governance, financing and regulation (through the abolition of faculty senates, privatisation of study, creation of debt-dependent educational markets, and criminalisation of campus dissent). These changes, all parts of a process of neoliberal corporatisation, not only displaced traditional values associated with public higher education but created ‘toxic’ and harmful institutions (Gill 2010; Hall and Bowles 2016). It has been suggested that the university is ‘dying’ (Evans 2004).¹

Yet the need and desire for higher learning are not dead. Their vitality is palpable wherever neoliberal corporatisation destabilises the relationship between the intellectual and political project of the university, on the one hand, and the institutional forms of the ‘university-as-such’, on the other (Undercommoning Collective 2016). As Richard Hall writes of the British university system, ‘at issue is *whether* the University offers a space in which alienation can be refused or pushed back against, to take back social ownership of the curriculum and its means of production, and the pedagogic cycles or circuits through which an emancipatory curriculum might be renewed’ (Hall 2014b, italics mine).

Attention has thus shifted from how to ‘reclaim’ and ‘reinvent’ the public university to whether the institutions can facilitate (and will permit) non-economically oriented and democratic education – and, if not, where and how such learning is possible.

These questions are posed at the limits of what is possible and must be answered experimentally. While a discourse of political depression circulates throughout academic communities in the U.K., there are many projects seeking to intervene in the future of higher education. There are campaigns to defend the social-democratic architectures and promises of the public university, which lobby for progressive institutional regulation and legislation (e.g., the Campaign for the Public University, Council for Defence of British Universities, Convention on Higher Education and Reclaiming Our University). There are utopian projects within universities to co-operativise capitalist and managerial institutional structures (Neary and Winn 2015) and to realise ‘utopian pedagogies against neoliberalism’ in classrooms (Cote, Day and Peuter 2006). There is ‘undercommoning’, a disobedient practice of redirecting institutional resources towards self-organised learning to ‘experiment, explore and enjoy building solidarity between these outcasts onto whom the university-as-such casts its shadow’ (Undercommoning Collective 2016). In recent years, student-led strikes and occupations have aimed to abolish tuition fees, ‘change the way universities function’ by creating counter-hegemonic (and increasingly criminalised) learning communities within the institutions, and make specific demands for universities to democratise governance, offer fair employment contracts, disinvest from global conflict and fossil fuels and eliminate racial and sexual violence on campuses.

Where possibilities to reclaim or remake the public university are believed to be foreclosed, and where the university-as-such is theorised as an essentially oppressive institution, academics, students and activists have also created autonomous learning spaces beyond the institutions. These are ‘autonomous’ not only because they exist independently of the state; such is also true of private ‘providers’ in the British university system, and ‘institutional autonomy’ is a central component of neoliberal education policy. Projects that are *critically* autonomous share five qualities.² First, they strive to exist independently of and in opposition to state power and forms of recognition. Second, they try to survive and self-reproduce without depending upon the capitalist market. Third, they aim to be independent from hegemonic values of knowledge production. Fourth, they co-operate with other autonomous projects in order to create and defend conditions for self-determined, democratic social life. Finally, critically autonomous educational projects are ‘embedded in specific social, economic, cultural and political relations that one cannot simply escape’ and thus engage in struggle to make autonomous learning and living possible (Böhm, Dinerstein and Spicer 2008, p. 10). These qualities align experiments in higher education with global struggles in which the organisation of autonomy has become ‘a central demand’ (Dinerstein 2013).

Autonomous higher education in historical perspective

Experiments in educational autonomy have played important parts in movements to democratise knowledge, learning, the university and society. The history of higher education is replete with transformative possibilities that have emerged, flourished, changed, submerged, been incorporated and then retrieved in subsequent struggles for institutional and social change.

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, higher education became essential for participation in industrial economies and civil society. Projects of autonomous adult education in the forms of workers’ education, independent working-class education, women’s education, co-educational study circles, educational settlements and communities, and anarchistic ‘free’ universities proliferated throughout Europe, the U.K. and the U.S. (Steele 2010). As faith in the developmental power of higher education deepened, these were accompanied by tuition-free educational programmes dedicated to spiritual and intellectual self-improvement for men and

gradually women, and by organisations encouraging the ‘working class to produce its own thinkers and organisers’ (Waugh 2009: 3). This period also saw the creation of ‘experimental colleges’ both within and beyond universities, such as the Deweyan-inspired University of Wisconsin Experimental College (1927–1932) and Black Mountain College in North Carolina (1933–1957). These were not only spaces of pedagogical and artistic experimentation in higher education but influential in the introduction of liberal arts curricula into U.S. universities and in affirming the value of the arts, humanities and critical thinking in education for democracy (Reynolds 1999).

The fight for racial justice in and through higher education took two other experimental forms in the U.S. during this time: struggles to open white universities and academic curricula to black women and men, and to establish autonomous institutions for black people. The constitutional abolition of slavery did not dismantle the structures of racial violence, and both the denial of higher education for black people and the reproduction of injustice by elite white institutions perpetuated this racial dictatorship. In a defence of knowledge for empowerment, sociologist W.E.B. Dubois argued that ‘the university of black men in the United States must be grounded in the condition and words of those black men’ (1933). As there was ‘no alternative’ to creating such spaces both within and outside existing institutions, this work demanded a radical relationship to possibility; one that required reformers to be ‘insane with courage’ (Dubois: 1933: 422).

Such experimentalism was demonstrated by Anna Julia Cooper, a teacher, school leader, social reformer, and president of the Frelinghuysen University (later the Frelinghuysen Group of Schools for Colored Working People) in Washington, DC (1917–1961). Working for years without salary and donating her home to the project, she organised higher education programmes for ‘the lowest down, the intentionally forgotten man [and woman], untaught and unprovided for either in public schools...or the colleges and universities’ (Cooper 1892 cited in Johnson 2009: 53). Embodying principles of self-definition, self-reliance and collective autonomy (May 2012: 42), Cooper regarded advanced learning as an essential element of ‘black people’s struggles to improvise agency out of conditions they were not expected to survive’ (Bonnick 2007: 179). While her experiments in integrating liberal, academic and vocational learning, particularly for Black women, were ignored at the time by male educational reformers, today they are believed to have influenced the ‘later widespread movement toward community colleges’ (Richardson–Keller 1999: 51) and the development of decolonising pedagogies (May 2012: 51).

The twentieth-century Free University Movement

Despite the expansion of higher education, by the 1960s many public and private universities in the U.S., U.K. and Europe remained exclusive institutions dominated by epistemic hierarchies and state and corporate interests. As new social movements heightened awareness of the institutions’ limits and failings, another form of counter-hegemonic autonomous higher education emerged: the ‘free university’. These self-organized projects aimed to liberate knowledge and learning from the constraints of the established university on the grounds that ‘anyone can teach’ and ‘anyone can learn’. They were low-cost or cost-free, non-credentialed and voluntarily run, oriented towards radical education for social change, responsive to community needs and organized in accordance with principles of participatory democracy. While many worked for a limited time in response to historically specific needs, some were sustained and adapted over many years (Chiolak 1965; Thompsett 2016).

Some free universities aimed to institutionalise conditions for a ‘truly radical approach to education done within the existing structural arrangements of a constituted state or private university’ (Chiolak 1965). Others conceived the university as a strategic site for de-institutionalizing knowledge, education and the idea of the university itself (Jakobsen n.d.). Some were integrated into struggles such as the ‘freedom school’ movement, the 1964 Berkeley Free Speech Movement

(Freeman 2004) and Students for a Democratic Society (Chiolak 1965), or affiliated with radical experiments in community living, anti-psychiatry and avant-garde art (Frederiksen 2011, 21:00). A manifesto for the Free International University in Düsseldorf (1973–1988), written by artist Joseph Beuys and writer Heinrich Böll, captured the movement’s spirit: to create space for art and thought which nurtured the ‘creativity of the democratic’ and ‘values of life’, in order to counter the ‘brutality of the [post-WWII] reconstruction period, the gross privileges afforded by monetary reforms, the crude accumulation of possessions and an upbringing resulting in an expense account mentality’, as well as the degradation of hope and utopian thinking (Beuys and Böll 1973). While estimates of the scale of the Free University Movement vary, records suggest that by 1970 there were between 110 and 450 free universities of varying sizes – some with hundreds of students – operating in the U.S. alone (see Draves 1980 and Frederiksen 2011, 28:00; for histories of the free university movement, see Brookfield 1984; Draves 1980; Lauter 1965; Miller 2002).³ Projects were established in the U.K. well into the 1980s, for example, to ‘bring people out of isolation and into a context of mutual support and self-help’ in a way that ‘state-run centres’ of education could not (Free University of Glasgow 1987; Frew 1990). Yet as the capitalist restructuring of universities intensified during the 1990s, critical energy shifted towards defending hard-won spaces of possibility within the public university, widening participation in formal higher education for excluded groups, and resisting the progression of neoliberal university reform. The movement slowed as organisations dissolved due to lack of resources or interest or took up more conventional tasks of informal education.

Today, the educational and social significance of this movement is often judged on the basis of how it improved the systems it critiqued. For example, by demonstrating that it was possible to organise higher education in different ways, free universities opened paths for institutional democratisation. It has been argued that the British free university movement had ‘far-reaching effects on the transformation of higher education, including the inclusion of subjects such as sociology, development studies and political movements’, and on the ‘democratisation of student–teacher relationships’ (Fowler 2011). Free universities also contributed to the ‘formation of a new model in lifelong learning’ (Draves 1980: 282). Yet while the value of the movement lies partly in how ‘various experiences of marginalisation from, and ensuing disputes over, what constitutes public education’ shape higher education (Gerrard 2015: 862), it is more than this. As Pierre Bourdieu wrote nearly fifty years ago,

if the crisis of the university is simply an ‘unease’ bound up with anxieties about future employment or the frustrations imposed by a conservative pedagogic relationship, it is easy to present as solution to all these ills a technocratic planning of the development of education simply as a function of the needs of the labour market, or fictitious concessions on the participation of students in university life. The changes that the student movement has introduced *de facto* in the faculties ... can only hope to have a lasting effect on university life, and social life in general, *if the relations between university and society undergo a radical transformation*’ (1968, cited in Gerrard 2015: 864, my emphasis).

Experiments in educational autonomy problematise the assumption that ‘the university’ is the most appropriate institutional form for adult learning and collective knowledge production. The free university movement, for example, exposed the extent to which pedagogy, curricula and institutional governance in many public and private universities were organised to reproduce inequality, power and privilege. By demonstrating the possibility of self-organised learning in community spaces, it decentred the university-as-such. Finally, many free universities became alternative knowledge communities in which relationships between the self and others, knowledge, learning institutions and society were fundamentally reimagined.

In 1980, William Draves suggested that ‘the success of the free university, and indeed other adult-learning organizations like it, may well be tied not only to its educational philosophy, current popularity, or pragmatic success but also to its ultimate function in society’ (279). This function was not to create an alternative system of institutionalized academic credentialisation, but to liberate learning from the constraints and exclusions of this institutional form. Free universities also served to regenerate ‘a sense of community’ where communities had been destroyed, and specifically to organize ‘education for community’ which gave people something to ‘believe in’ during a ‘time of dissatisfaction and disaffiliation’ (Draves 1980: 279, 282). Like other twentieth-century projects of autonomous higher education, the free universities of the 1960s created conditions for the formation of counter-publics in civil society and for diverse forms of ‘sociability, solidarity, political organization and critical understanding’ in conditions of epistemic and political closure (Steele 2010). In this way, they constituted what Jeffrey Shantz (2009) calls ‘infrastructures of resistance’, autonomous forms of association which sustain practices that ‘put into effect aspects of the alternative world’ which is desired and enable people to ‘sustain radical social change before, during and after insurrectionary periods’.

Twenty-first century free universities as objects of hope and desire

Yet these infrastructures of resistance were not immune to neoliberal structural adjustment or to the ‘enclosure of knowledge’ in Anglo-European higher education systems during the 1980s and 1990s (Federici 2009). Educators have since come under increasing pressure to valorise knowledge ‘according to its profitability, rather than its contribution to social improvement’ (Federici 2009: 455). Many critical spaces that had been created inside universities during the 1960s and 1970s were disciplined or closed, and critiques of the economisation of knowledge weakened against perceptions that resistance to this enclosure was impossible. In this context, calls to ‘bring back radical adult education’ resurfaced (University for Strategic Optimism 2011) and the autonomous ‘free university’ re-emerged as an international phenomenon. Projects such as the Provisional University in Ireland (est. 2010), the People’s Free University of Saskatchewan (est. 2002), the New Experimental College in Denmark (2013–2014), the Copenhagen Free University (2001–2007), the Université Populaire de Caen (est. 2002), the Slow/Free University (Poland), the Alternative University (Bucharest), and the University without Conditions (New Zealand) are examples in this new generation. In Australia, the Melbourne Free University (est. 2010) and Brisbane Free University (est. 2012) will soon be joined by two new projects launching in 2017, the Queensland Free University and the Australian Free University.

In the U.K., a series of new conservative government policies accelerated the privatisation and marketisation of higher education at the turn of the twenty-first century. These intersected with new political cultures generated by the Occupy movement, student strikes and occupations and the popularization of ‘DIY’ politics which articulated pedagogy as an important element of transformative politics. Between 2010 and 2014, there was a ‘surge in alternative education projects’ across the country which created a new terrain of democratic and self-organised learning that refused the dominant institutional logics (Scathach 2011). These projects also generated new hope that a free university movement could become a ‘powerful weapon against hegemony and neoliberal capitalism’ (University for Strategic Optimism 2011). In 2012, more than 40 radical educators gathered for a conference on ‘Sustaining Alternative Universities’ which united people from across the U.K. and wider Europe who felt ‘a crossroads [had] been reached at which the need to participate in the creation of new, alternative educational spaces – away from the personal stresses, moral compromises and political injustices imposed on university life – [had] become urgent and irrepressible’ (Lazarus 2013). Hopes were high that, as one group suggested, local groups could form a ‘network of radical community centres’ to weave a ‘radically non-institutional education network’ into a web of autonomous community services (University for Strategic Optimism 2011). While U.K. Free University Network exists primarily as a virtual community, the

idea of a free university movement remains a resource for political articulation. According to a new generation of student activists, it ‘might just have a key role to play in building a movement for free, inclusive and radical education that is able to sustain itself beyond unpredictable cycles of activist struggle, crackdowns by university management and police repression, and the periodic turnover of students’ (Wilson 2015).

The free university projects that are active in the U.K. today strive at least to fulfil the first aspiration and are informed by historical and contemporary experiments in educational autonomy. The Free University Brighton (2016), for example, defines itself as ‘both a protest against the growing marketisation of education and a practical response’ to this problem. Its founders are ‘inspired by the free school movement of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the 1960s Antiuniversity, the Occupy movement and other free universities around the world’. The Free University of Sheffield, a ‘broad association of those concerned by the state of higher education’, organises activities ‘for free education, against privatisation and for a living wage’, and supports collective action for change within the university (Free University of Sheffield 2016). The Social Science Centre (with branches in two English cities), which offers co-operatively run courses in interdisciplinary social science, was inspired by the international co-operative movement, the Transition Town Movement, the European social centres movement and ‘many past and present projects in popular, adult and community education’ (Social Science Centre 2016). ‘Antiuniversity Now’ is a ‘collaborative experiment to revisit and reimagine the 1968 Antiuniversity of London in an ongoing programme of free and inclusive radical education events’ which attempt to challenge ‘academic and class hierarchy through an open invitation to teach and learn *any subject, in any form, anywhere*’ (Antiuniversity 2016, original emphasis).

These and other projects have become symbols of hope for reformers seeking what Erik Olin Wright (2010) calls ‘desirable, viable and achievable’ alternatives to the commodified, marketised university. In some cases, the simple existence of autonomous learning projects offers hope amidst otherwise ‘gloomy prospects for education in the current context’ (Evans 2012). The deeper question, however, is not whether such projects can exist but whether they enable people to resist ‘various forms of immiseration in everyday life and a sense of political disenfranchisement’ within higher education itself.⁴ There is some desire to believe that they can. In 2013, an article in a leading British newspaper asked, ‘could the free university movement be the great new hope for education?’ (Swain 2013). Another article announced that ‘the free university movement is growing’ as ‘across the U.K., a new generation of cooperative and non-fee-charging institutions are springing up with the aim of creating an alternative model of higher education’ (Bonnett 2013). Could they, by providing ‘education for love, not money’ (the Free University Brighton’s motto) ‘make learning more accessible to those without the time or resources to attend a formal course’ in a period of economic decline and rising private costs to attend university? Can free universities make learning *happy* again? (Hill and Lyons 2016)

Free universities matter for the individuals who participate in them. These offer opportunities for personal development in the absence of non-employment-oriented adult education programmes; tuition-free study of academic subjects; skill sharing; participation in public intellectual life; opportunities to organise education with others on the basis of radically democratic and co-operative principles; spaces to ‘unlearn’ institutional modes of thinking and being; respite from institutional violence; permission to do experimental work; and encouragement of utopian practices. Professional academics who teach at free universities can be ‘emboldened by their experiences in a different kind of intellectual community’ such that their work for change inside the university is strengthened (Woodhouse in Newson, Polster and Woodhouse 2012: 67). The experience of creating and sustaining autonomous space brings new insights into the joys, effects and disappointments of self-determination in neoliberal society, and of understanding political change as an emergent process. This space and time for emergence, in which possible futures are neither

predicted nor foreclosed, is regarded as a radical accomplishment. ‘Perhaps *nothing will come of it*’, wrote one reporter in an article about Free University Brighton. ‘But the impression that no one gives a damn right now is what makes it so exciting’ (Gander 2016). Another asked, ‘What will all this lead to? Perhaps nothing. The free university movement is an experiment-in-progress’ (Bonnett 2013). And in the words of David Brazil, co-founder of the Bay Area Public School, ‘What are we actually doing? To some degree we don’t know. And it is useful and good that we don’t know’ (interview cited in Thompsett 2016: 61).

It is ‘useful and good’ to create space for living with this open possibility because such uncertainty necessitates autonomous thinking and action. Learning in this context is dominated by institutional discipline, audit technologies, metric measurement, epistemic hierarchies, market demands, risk assessments, performance management and predetermined targets. Experiences of learning and self-organisation in today’s free universities are personally and politically transformative not because they challenge institutional systems on their own terms, but because they open alternative ‘ways of comprehending, organizing and transforming reality’ (Marcuse 1964: 219). But do experiments in autonomous education contribute to radically transforming the relationship between the university and society in the U.K. today?

Conclusion

As illustrated in previous sections of this paper, the people’s history of higher education is one of twofold struggle: on the one hand to transform institutions which are exclusive, repressive or abusive, and on the other to construct the economic, cultural and intellectual conditions of education for the common good. Some of these are held in collective memory as examples of success: the expansion of educational opportunities for women, black people and workers; the creation of state-funded public university systems; the opening of academic disciplines to diverse knowledges and epistemologies.

However, key insights are easily lost in recuperating these achievements to inform contemporary movements for higher education reform. One is an understanding that they were struggles to realise visions of both higher education and society which were, in the political logics of their own times, ‘impossible’. It is precisely through working at the limits of what is conceivable and realisable from within existing institutional frameworks for education – not knowing in advance how to transgress them – that ‘the relations between university and society undergo a radical transformation’ (Bourdieu 1968 in Gerrard 2015: 864).

Another is that while autonomous educational projects may challenge relations of power within existing institutions, their primary functions have been to decouple education from the state, capital and hegemonic notions of knowledge, and to help teachers and students reduce dependencies on, and investments in, state and private knowledge institutions. They challenge the monopoly of the university over higher education in its broad sense, exposing how this power produces and reproduces social injustices, and demonstrate that it is possible to organize collective learning in a variety of autonomous and democratic ways. Free universities can undertake activities which not only ‘shape or give form to social capacities’ to produce social life in common, but also ‘generate the conditions to resist, question, subvert and/or overflow the relations of capital and state’ (Gutierrez, Navarro and Linsalata 2017).

Finally, this history contains reminders that both the university and the autonomous learning community indicate whether and how a society prioritises types of learning which expand human capacities for collective self-determination and democratic living, or types of learning which are enclosed by a system of power that imposes ‘the reproduction of capital, not of life’ and ‘attempts to erode and destroy our collective human capacity to define the use-value of life’ itself (Gutierrez,

Navarro and Linsalata 2017). While academic analyses of contemporary university politics lament the shift towards the latter, they do so with little urgency. Yet in social movements, experimental projects to self-organise higher education for the common good both inside and outside universities are critical to a post-capitalist politics in which autonomy is central, and which ask:

Is it possible to think of other ways of producing concrete wealth, forms not fully subjected to the mandates of capital? Is it possible to have other ways of organising and reproducing social life, which are more satisfactory than the modes of existence imposed by the modern capitalist world? To what extent is the use-value of the life forced upon us by capitalist modernity the only one imaginable? Can we recover our capacity to self-determine the goals, rhythms and forms of our everyday life? Where does this possibility lie? How is it produced and nurtured? (Gutierrez, Navarro and Linsalata 2017)

Free university movements and other experiments in educational autonomy demonstrate that these things are possible, though never absolutely or in a permanent way. The question they cannot answer is how such possibility can be produced in other circumstances. Challenges must still be encountered in an experimental and autonomous spirit that is ‘insane with courage’ (Dubois 1933).

In the U.K. today, such courage may consist of collective actions to test ‘whether the University offers a space in which alienation can be refused or pushed back against, to take back social ownership of the curriculum and its means of production, and the pedagogic cycles or circuits through which an emancipatory curriculum might be renewed’. It may consist of efforts to undo alienation, to create social ownership and to renew emancipatory curricula (Hall 2014b). It might look like ‘giving a damn’ about the direction of a free university movement. It will be the development of new capacities to address an ‘impossible’ problem – the liberation of learning from neoliberal corporatisation – ‘not by brooding over it, and orating about it, but by living into it’ in the autonomous way (Cooper 1892).

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Notes

¹ ‘Corporatisation’ here refers to a ‘process through which universities progressively work for, with, and as businesses’ (Polster and Newson 2015: i). It includes the commodification and marketisation of knowledge, the ‘displacement of teaching, research, and public service as the primary aims of our universities and the elevation of income generation’ (Polster and Newson 2015: ii–iii), as well as the legal conversion of public institutions into private businesses. ‘Neoliberal corporatisation’ refers to a process of corporatisation that is dominated by what Wendy Brown calls a ‘peculiar form of reason that configures all aspects of existence in economic terms’ and that is ‘quietly undoing basic elements of democracy’ (2015: 17). In more general terms, however, a corporation is simply a group of people or organisations with the legal authority to act as a single body. This definition allows for the possibility of creating alternative, non-neoliberal corporate university forms, such as the ‘co-operative’ (Cook 2013; Winn 2015) and ‘trust’ universities (Boden, Ciancanelli and Wright 2012). I am grateful to my reviewer for encouraging me to clarify this important point.

² This definition of autonomy draws on Böhm, Dinerstein and Spicer (2008) and Dinerstein (2014).

³ Examples include the Communiversities and the Free University of Berkeley (California), Midpeninsula Free University (California), the Community Free School and the Denver Free University (Colorado), Indianapolis Free University (Indiana), the Free University of New York, the Community Free University (Washington), and San Francisco State Experimental College.

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