Resisting Managerialism and the Pursuit of Excellence in Higher Education: a report on the university as the space for a general critique of capitalism

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As a student of Cultural Studies, I was affected by the events that led to the final moments of the Department of Sociology at the University of Birmingham and thereof mobilised to investigate the contemporary idea of the University as a graduate employment distribution centre (or, as I like to call it, the "Job Centre++"), responsible for the creation of a politics of labour to generations of workers in a hegemonic and seemingly irrefutable manner: curriculums streamlined to match career requirements in the Culture Industry and the Market; increasing focus on employability and ‘transferrable’ skills; increasing pressure on students to gather work experience, ultimately regulating individuals’ modes of life by selling them fabricated desires, career prospects, and lifetime aspirations.

Part I: The Problem

The University and Neoliberalism

Bill Readings’s The University in Ruins explores the changes to the ‘Modern University’ at the time of the erosion of the values of Justice and Culture: a time at which just as the ‘national’ is replaced by the ‘multinational’, and the ‘old sovereign state’ by the collaboration of the state and the ‘corporation’, so the University’s ‘Pursuit of Culture’ is replaced by “the Pursuit of Excellence”. Today, “the great significance of neoliberal attacks on the autonomy of higher education is that they use a mystifying strategy for undermining academic and scientific autonomy in the name of freedom and competition... as a means of
realizing individual liberty” (Morrow in Rhoads & Torres, 2006: xxix). This strategy proposes non-ideological solutions to social problems by allowing the market to decide their fate (Morrow in Rhoads & Torres, 2006: xxviii). “Neo-liberals seek to privatize not-for-profit higher education and redirect public subsidy to private entities” (Rhoads & Slaughter: 136); paradoxically, this strategy actually constrains choice and autonomy; the two values that neoliberalism treasures (Morrow in Rhoads & Torres, 2006: xxx). In turn, this has given birth to a faster and exclusively mercantile “educational capitalism” (de Sousa Santos in Rhoads & Torres: 64), in which Universities are being asked by the state to become financially independent by building ties with the private sector, becoming “an entity that not only produces as a market but which is itself produced as a market” (de Sousa Santos in Rhoads & Torres: 65).

**The University of Excellence**

The contemporary University “...is busily transforming itself from an ideological arm of the state into a bureaucratically organized and relatively autonomous consumer-oriented corporation... [in which] what exactly gets taught or produced as knowledge matters less and less” (Readings, 1996: 5; 11; 13). Interesting evidence of this is the position of the administrator rather than the professor as the central figure of the University of Excellence (Cabal in Readings, 1996: 3). Readings highlights, through the work Jacques Barzun, that the challenge of the contemporary University is addressed to the administrator **as such** (1996: 8). This challenge is the “Pursuit of Excellence”, and it comes with a package: a corporate logo; University merchandise for the public expression of “symbolic belonging”; and the obsessive adoption of market research, following the customer service assumption that everything can be quantified in order to accumulate information towards the development of capital growth strategies (1996: 10-11; 132). The fact that “[corporations] have bought into established universities, utilising a series of deals such as sponsored chairs, fellowships, investment in research,
customized courses, and close consultancy relationships” (Smith & Webster, 1997: 107), makes it plausible to sustain that corporations have sought in the University the opportunity for a sound business investment: much material to be transformed into consumer products. Indeed, a global market of university services has come to exist (de Sousa Santos in Rhoads & Torres: 67): “since the beginning of the 1990s, financial analysts have called attention to education as potentially one of the hottest markets of the 21st century. Merrill Lynch analysts think that the “educational sector possesses... a gigantic market, fragmented and unproductive, looking to improve its low technological level, with a tremendous deficiency of professional administration and a low rate of capitalization” (de Sousa Santos in Rhoads & Torres: 68). Furthermore, in the USA “the growth of educational capital has been exponential and the rates of return are very high: $ 1,000 invested in 1996 was worth $ 3,405 in 2000, a gain of 240 percent” (ibid.).

For example, the Higher Education Institution I attend – the University of Birmingham, UK – mentions “excellence” as one of its “five core values”, stating: “we are committed to excellence at the heart of everything we do” (University of Birmingham, 2010: 5); a value which is technocratic and technological in the sense that it organises and manages the production of knowledge as a social activity in the University towards the ends of capital: in a confidential document entitled *Sustainable Excellence*, the University of Birmingham outlined its plans to become “a leading global university”:

The phrase ‘sustainable excellence’ is designed to capture these dimensions of the exercise. We view these three aims as mutually inter-dependent. They will be achieved through a variety of methods:

(a) investment; (b) income growth (particularly through postgraduate recruitment and increased research grant and
contract income); (c) performance management; and (d) restructuring, disinvestment and cost savings” (University of Birmingham, 2009: 3).

**The University and Civil Society**

“University mission statements, like their publicity brochures... on the one hand, all claim that theirs is a unique educational institution, [whilst] on the other hand, they all go on to describe this uniqueness in exactly the same way” (Readings, 1996: 12). On December 1st, 2011, Professor Edward Peck, Head of the College of Social Sciences and Pro-Vice Chancellor at the University of Birmingham, published an article in *The Guardian* newspaper in reaction to the “growing resentment at the so-called new managerialism coming into the academy... [whereby] the motives and integrity of senior leaders are being questioned merely because they occupy these roles”. Peck argues that instead academics must “support their peers who move into leadership roles or risk external intervention” and reports the essence of the idea of excellence as such:

Protective of the much vaunted but often ill defined concept of academic freedom and of a sharply critical turn of mind, academics are adept at pinpointing the ideological origins and logical flaws of any government policy. Typically self-reliant, with allegiance to discipline over organisation, and fondness for an artisan rather than an industrial approach to our activities, we have a clear sense of our own identity and importance. These are all important virtues, but they will endear us to neither politicians nor public if they start to suggest that universities are uniquely exempt from the demands of the political and managerial logics that exist in the rest of a society which ultimately pays our salaries (Peck,
The aforementioned account, you will have noticed, reduces the production of knowledge to its exchange value. A deconstruction of this technocratic order and a defence of social critique in Civil Society must be put forward for the conceptualisation of a reversal of the current state of affairs.

The University is enveloped in a dialectical relationship with civil society in which it is both in symbiosis with and differentiated from societal structures and phenomena. For example, social critique is informed by social mechanisms outside the conditions which make the construction of critical knowledge possible in the University. At the same time, the University and social critique attempt to externalise themselves from society in order to be able to treat it as an object of study: the critique’s Other. This inevitably others society and widens the gap between it and the academy: academic work becomes again embedded in the authoritative structures that make the contemporary University possible. This is exemplified by Boaventura de Sousa Santos, who argues that the heterogeneity of knowledge produced in the contemporary privatised University “not only destabilizes the current institutional specificity of the university but also questions its hegemony and legitimacy in such a way as to force it to evaluate itself by self-contradictory criteria” (Rhoads & Torres, 2006: 74). Thus, we come to the realisation that social critique must accept its existence in symbiosis with civil society if it is to have a practical impact. However, what society in the name of neoliberal ‘public interest’ is contributing to the University at the moment is a force – managerialism – which impedes the latter’s very intentions and hinders its autonomy by reducing its products to their exchange-value in the knowledge economy.

This exchange-value dependent relationship between the University, managerialism and society, therefore, is fundamental to an analysis of
excellence. For example the *National Student Survey* – the collection of feedback which posits the student as a consumer – makes Universities accountable on the grounds of customer satisfaction with the provided services. This market discourse of student choice is also evident in the British coalition government’s attempt to enhance the Higher Education sector’s development by placing students “at the heart of the system” through the increase of tuition fees, thus allowing Universities to compete over the amount of financial aid made available to prospective students amongst other things (Rhoads & Slaughter in Rhoads & Torres, 2006: 106). Unfortunately in time – as has already been the case in the United States – this strategy will yield an elitist system in which the increasing demand for places in Higher Education Institutions makes it so that the provision of financial aid is not a requirement for the allocation of places in *excellent* institutions, ultimately forcing prospective students from low-income backgrounds to go into debt to finance their studies (Rhoads & Slaughter in Rhoads & Torres, 2006: 107). This is certainly the case, for example, with the inaccessibility of postgraduate studies for students from low income backgrounds (Rhoads & Rhoades in Rhoads & Torres, 2006: 288). A worse case still is that of the Research Assessment Exercise/Research Excellence Framework: the proponents of excellence’s attempt to assess the quality of research from a marketing perspective, in order to bridge the gap that makes highly technical research content hard to sell as a consumer product. As a result, excellence enforces a tendency that reduces the Social Sciences to the assessment of verifiable data and measurable results.

**The University and the Law**

In his book *Powers and Politics in Poststructuralist Thought*, Saul Newman deconstructs the concept of *power* in the attempt to develop a political theory whose purpose is to act as the foundation of a new resistance for the presentation of a political alternative to *capitalist technocracy*. Jacques Derrida’s *deconstruction* (Caputo & Derrida, 1997) is the highlight of
contradictions and binary oppositions in established Western philosophical systems from a non-systematic viewpoint (Newman, 2005: 84 – 85). In Newman’s interpretation, it is an enterprise concerned with all fountains of authority which enables radical resistance without the establishment of an equally authoritative system after a revolution (2005: 86; 90) by seeking the transformation of authoritative structures into something “infinitely perfectible” (2005: 87). In other words, deconstruction must “follow two paths simultaneously” (2005: 89). It does so in philosophy – opening up the discipline’s discourse by questioning its limits (2005: 90; 92) – as it can do in the case of the University – which for Derrida should remain the prime site of deconstruction, by safe-guarding forces productive of politics and ethics within it (2001). Furthermore, the enterprise of philosophical deconstruction is the deconstruction of philosophy itself. And for Derrida any analogous movement is ethical because, as long as it admits no certainty within itself (2005: 92), it opens up a space for the coming of change. The same also applies to the Law, Violence, Sovereignty and Justice. And to return to my study of the contemporary University, my aim here is to use deconstruction in order to show how the technocratic idea of excellence hinders social critique.

The law is open to deconstruction because it is constituted as authoritative by its establishment as such; because it asserts its authority “from the power of the sovereign to enforce it” (2005: 92 – 93). This, according to Walter Benjamin, establishes the law as inherently violent because it can suspend itself at any moment, thus defying its own rules and allowing the use of violence on citizens by the hand of the Police (Benjamin in Newman, 2005: 92 – 93; 104). Here Newman points out that Derrida differentiates the Law from Justice. For Derrida, justice is unachievable because it is uncontainable in the violent discourses of the law (2005: 96). However, because the Law speaks in the name of Justice, it condemns itself to being contaminated by a tension which in turn opens up a space for its constant questioning. In this sense, différance is always already at play within the law, which is itself open to deconstruction and, down the line, also open to the demands of the Other,
plurality and transformation through periodical reinterpretation and reform (2005: 97 – 98).

To sum up, sovereignty orders a law to be enforced, thus constituting its authority. The power to undo this chain then rests in the hand of the sovereign. Furthermore, Walter Benjamin distinguishes two kinds of violence within the law: “law-making” and “law-preserving” violence (Newman, 2005: 104). Law-making violence attacks existing laws in order to construct new orders, whilst law-preserving violence defends existing ones (ibid.). With this in mind, Newman argues that the logic of State violence is analogous to that of terrorism: because terrorism is law-making violence in opposition to the State – challenging the latter’s monopoly on violence from outside its sovereign reach – it provokes a violent reaction by the latter; thus, the State has no choice but to make recourse to violence outside its own laws or control, ironically turning it into a ‘terroristic’ endeavour of sorts (2005: 105 – 106). The same applies, I want to argue, to managerialism and administration in Higher Education: the discursive order of excellence terrorises academics, creating a regime of self-surveillance of thought ultimately stripping any social analysis of its critical substance (Miller & Sabathy in Holmwood et al, 2012: 43; Rhoads & Slaughter in Rhoads & Torres, 2006: 105). Zygmunt Bauman demonstrates this by claiming that “contemporary society... [is] ‘hospitable to critique’” (2000: 23); it has stipulated a ‘pact of non-aggression’ with critique, according to which critics and managers leave each other alone and do not upset each other’s status quo (2008: 24). This, points out Bauman, blocks the possibility of any substantial critique, because “it won’t occur to [critics] to question and renegotiate the managerial philosophy of the site, much less to take responsibility for running the place” (ibid.). On the other hand, without support the substantial contemporary Critical Theorist finds herself without a job due to excellence’s obsession with improvement, cutting, merging and down-sizing following fast and recurrent reviews with preconceived agendas and premeditated decisions which make the maintenance of institutions in which critical thought can foster at its slow and bureaucratic pace impossible.
Worse yet, this trend does not stop in the corridors of University management, but follows through into those of the Students’ Unions. For example, the spatiopolitical action of occupations by the hand of students, focused on the corporate centres of the University of Excellence – where the institution is sold to the private sector – is followed by the similarly spatiopolitical reaction of the closing of University building doors as ordered by officials, along with the bodies of security guards being linked together to block access to University managers and thus to the possibility of preventing the flow of capital. Furthermore, it is important to note that the campus space is covered by video surveillance, which enables the swift arrival of order-restoring forces after the minimum amount of disobedience manifests itself. Thus, the possibility of change is hindered, and today’s struggle for its taking place requires heavy reinforcement.

**Part II – The Alternative: the Reproduction of Campus Space**

Spatiality has been neglected from the analysis of social and political phenomena. Instead, it is indispensable for an adequate understanding of the contemporary University and for the imagination of further political action on campuses. Doreen Massey argues that the objects of study of the Social Sciences create space-time in their interrelations (Bates & Smith, 2008: 198). This, in turn, accounts for contradictions, chaotic and dynamic elements in institutional analysis, whilst at the same time leaving the latter more open to interpretation (2008: 199). Space thus becomes open to difference. This is indispensable for a conception of the imagined space of the University Campus – most often *spectacularly* represented in maps which give the impression that it is an enclosed space – as the location of grassroots political movement, or the demand for change, “as always under construction” (Massey in Bates & Smith, 2008: 199 – 200). However, “spatial relations do
Henri Lefebvre conceptualised the possibility of the production of revolutionary spaces through the re-appropriation of state-owned space by the hand of the ‘Other’. For Lefebvre, social relationships cannot exist without space (1991: 401-404). Space is not just an assemblage of objects that highlights lines of sense perception (1991: 27). It instead occupies an active role in social planning strategies drafted by the state through the use of architecture and technology (1991: 8-11; 23). In Lefebvre’s analysis, ‘state-produced’ space seeks to control and wield power by ensuring the endurance of capital through the establishment of cohesion, performance and efficiency (1991: 28); it is a product of premeditated design, symbolically present in surroundings for the reinforcement of the dominant hegemonic order (1991: 33). ‘State-controlled’ spaces such as industrial zones and sky-scraping financial city centres are “spaces of accumulation” of wealth defended by violent, repressive and authoritarian barriers which dilute the effects of differential resistance to the state (1991: 49).

However, this order (e.g. the World Market) is not a sovereign entity capable of absolute control; it is multifaceted; it does not pertain to any particular logic; it houses internal conflicts and contradictions (1991: 404) which constitute a “spatial chaos”. Within this spatial chaos, new contradictions arise which are not fully controllable because of their lack of consistency (1991: 41). That is, the violence of power and order-protective barriers triggers the violence of subversion against itself (1991: 21) – as differences from ‘normality’ constantly transform through political struggle and, whilst they lose most of their battles (or, alternatively, leave the battleground without their demands having been considered), continuously re-emerge (1991: 23). In other words, the constitution of the financial or governmental centre as well as the locations it gradually abandons throughout the transformation of its strategies necessarily destines this establishment to
change (1991: 51), because it inevitably attracts the interest of the requests of differential forces. This spatial dialectic thus presupposes new directions for, at the very least, theoretical reconceptualisations of resistance which regard space as an underlying factor of the political sphere. “Any ‘social existence’ aspiring or claiming to be ‘real’, but failing to produce its own space, would be a strange entity, a very peculiar kind of abstraction unable to escape from the ideological or even the ‘cultural’ realm” (1991: 53).

In practice, a spatiotemporal analysis of change in the University – fragmented and by no means conceivable as a unified and generalizable whole – allows us to map it as an institution suffering the advances of global capital as any other in society, bringing the account of its current status more in sync with its relationship with civil society. The critic is therefore allowed to see change in a spatiotemporal dimension heading in multiple directions and guided by the various organs of the University: the administrator, the professor, the teaching assistant, the research student, the politically engaged undergraduate, the apathetic undergraduate, the services employee, the janitors, etc., who all play a role in the imagined and fluid community space that is the campus. For example, the campus of British Russell Group Universities is a hybrid of old and new. Old ‘redbrick’ architecture, crests and rituals are the symbols of the sanctity of Higher Education Institutions which attract the interest of collective consciousness and memory, in which lie the ruined remains of the idea of the University under the care of a Sovereign Charter: in other words, the idea of the degree as a spiritual experience. At the same time and place, the new research community space is fetishized: consumption fulcrums present on campus turn the research community into a commodity, often relegating the research content to secondary importance in prospectuses.

The recent redevelopment of campus infrastructure has given rise to so-called ‘social studying spaces’: where one is allowed to study, consume, and socialise simultaneously and freely, without the sacred imposition of silence of
the old library. According to my analysis, these spaces are politically ambivalent. On the one hand, they encourage unexpected and interesting encounters, and allow us to conceive the University as an assistive meeting sphere for political groups. On the other, they pose an obstacle to the possibility of existential reflection caused by the mundane distractions they host. Such a process could also take place in the political representation systems of the Students’ Union. Admittedly, the Union is the technocratic simulation of mainstream politics in order to reabsorb and internalise radical action on campus; but it is also a fertile ground for radical democratic reform and the rise of umbrella political student organisations committed to the re-politicisation of the campus space for the questioning of the same technocratic order which controls that space. In this sense, therefore, the social studying space, the Students’ Union and the University’s conference parks ought to be radically reappropriated as a possible site for the development of difference.

**Bibliography**


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