

For the Public University; Report of a Workshop at the University of Nottingham, 15th June 2012

The workshop organiser, Professor Andreas Bieler, framed the day as contributing to on-going critiques that speak truth to the power so profoundly damaging of those in the public university as we search to build alternatives. The day was significant; it added to developing understanding of what has been happening to the public university so that it can be differently realised in future . . . either within or, for some, (also or solely) outside the public university. Perhaps even more importantly, at least one person told me afterwards that the day had so impacted him that he will no longer seek a job outside the UK, but will stay to fight within and against what is being created by the government. I would suggest that those of us organising workshops in future reflect further on how we can anticipate and encourage such responses into our future organisational planning.

The first paper, by Sarah Amsler and Sara Motta, sought to add another dimension to the kinds of critiques of which Bieler spoke: considering how neoliberal forces are profoundly damaging the affect, bodies and spirits of academic mothers, one group of others whose selves are invisibilised, pathologised and distorted spatially and temporally and whose subjectivity is consequently damaged. Amsler and Motta also suggest that spatially speaking, academic mothers are now pressed to keep their personal and professional lives even more separate than previously, which is difficult in the university (for example, when children are ill or off school for other reasons) and outside (for example, when they try to find time to do academic works given their parenting/domestic roles). As university labour is increasingly intensified and calculable, keeping these two spheres separate whilst maintaining one's identity in both spheres becomes increasingly problematic. Temporally, juggling personal and professional demands is challenged and challenging—academic work must be squeezed into discrete moments in the evenings and on weekends, and this squeezing, coupled with little time for rest, damages the self and makes one feel inadequate, silenced, limited in her thoughts, actions, spirit and very being. Amsler and Motta take the brave step of bearing witness to this damage, affirming the power and possibilities that can come from moving beyond and against it into unknown borderlands of the kind that Gloria Anzaldúa and other feminist writers speak. Thus, although the presentation was titled 'The REF and the politics of motherhood', the focus was primarily on the challenges that academic mothers face in and as a consequence of being in the neoliberalising university and how these women can resist these pressures.

Steven Cowden and Gurnam Singh then spoke (in a presentation titled 'SAT-Nav Education: A Means to an End or an End to Meaning') of the ways that the SAT-Nav offers a powerfully resonating metaphor of the increasing instrumentalism of learning that neoliberalisation encourages. Just as the SAT-Nav seemingly guarantees that we will never get lost and will not need to communicate with others on our journey from a to b, so does neoliberalised higher education encourage our students to believe that learning can be done instrumentally,

mechanistically. Thus students increasingly are being 'trained' to consume and regurgitate bits of information with which they can 'move on', sustained by certificates received along the way. . . rather than being 'educated' to critically reflect upon and question what is.

Perhaps rather than continuing to believe, a la Tesco, that 'every little bit helps (university learning)', Cowden and Singh suggest that academics be guided in their teaching by insights of Freire and other critical educators. As such, they (we!) can acknowledge the powerful politics with which all aspects of university education is increasingly imbued and work to build alternatives—both in and against and beyond and against the neoliberalised university. They acknowledge as well that academics should take hope from the split, contradictory position in which many students are located (of which Freire and others spoke): both wanting quick training (to satisfy their well-fed consumerist desires) and engaged learning (to affirm their ontological need for meaning given the never satisfying desire that consumerism engenders).

If the first two papers spoke of the profound emotional and intellectual damage of the neoliberal university at a micro level and of possibilities for creatively resisting this damage, the next four papers explored the theme of restructuring and marketization. Andrew McGettigan and Susan L. Robertson spoke of macro level implications of the shift of the university from being a public good towards being a private, for-profit good. Whilst McGettigan and Robertson suggested that the micro analyses of the first two papers needed to be located in the wider context of the macro processes they analysed, I would say, in response, that all of us researching the public university (and/or emergent alternatives), need to speak with/read those whose focus is other than our own to frame our own partial analyses.

McGettigan's presentation, 'Public good or state-funded monopoly? The ideological stakes of higher education reform', spoke of the implications of this macro-level shift in English HE. As universities will shortly receive less than 50% of their income from government, in what ways can we say that they remain 'public—or 'private' institutions? Should these concepts mean the same thing for all HEIs? Elite institutions (the Russell Group), are now turning to privatised funding on a much larger scale than ever before: one is launching a bank to support SMEs whilst others are creating joint ventures with business or issuing bonds for loans that don't go on their books and won't need to be paid back for 30 or 40 years. Newer universities don't have this capacity given their lesser financial resources. McGettigan suggests that the elite should be allowed to become fully privatised given how fully enmeshed they already are in these privatised endeavours so that other universities can fight to maintain their public status to some degree.

If McGettigan focused on what is happening to UK institutions in terms of their financialisation/privatisation, Robertson's presentation, 'Resectoralising Higher Education: from Public to Private Good', explored how UK HEIs are servicing those elsewhere and how these HEIs are learning, and applying, the marketising logic rapidly in order to develop their own market niches still elsewhere. Malaysia, for example, which has UK based universities in its territory, is now using their USP of providing Islamic education to sell their brand of HE to other

interested nations. Further, the entry of the WTO and GATTs into national, publicly funded educational spaces effectively enables university core activities to be re-organised so as to meet corporate interests first and foremost. To do this, cutbacks must be made in research and academic salaries, providing more instrumentally organised courses and offering students high interest, privately subsidised, loans. It also enables, perhaps more frighteningly, the logic of militarisation to add to that of the financialisation, of HE. Robertson suggested that just as drone technology aims to minimise possibilities of 'collateral damage' so does the entry of supra-national organisations like the WTO enable them to protect their interests at a distance from the national sites within which they operate and cause profound damage. Thus the privatising of English HE is radically transforming the logic with which universities were organised, further imbricating strategies of competitiveness more deeply than previously

The second two papers continued the theme of restructuring and marketization with a focus on the challenges faced by the English university today (John Holmwood) and the local challenges now being faced at Salford University as well as some progressive national trade union responses to this restructuring (Phoebe Moore). Holmwood's presentation, 'The public university and higher education's social mission', suggested first that the university *can* serve public interests *and* has a public function of ensuring social justice and democracy—but it faces great difficulty realising these interests and functions given the pervasiveness of neoliberalisation. Whilst subaltern knowledge has long been enriching universities' intellectual/political processes of contestation, these processes are threatened as HE is increasingly considered an investment in human capital and research is frequently done in co-partnerships with business and industry that compromise the possibility of developing challenging knowledge and practice. Holmwood, like many of us, fears the future greater polarisation of the university system than at present. Elite institutions likely charging more than the current top limit of £9k will be highly resourced, serving international elites and corporate interests, with those charging less than £9k (with the divide growing) serving local communities, but with less funds and resources. Disciplines not deemed economically useful will likely disappear and 'Widening Participation' will increasingly be seen as a problem of individual aspiration rather than of structural inequalities, as indicated by current high levels of youth unemployment (here and elsewhere).

How can this situation change? Prior to the Browne Report (2010), a 2009 survey found that 70% of the public believed that universities should serve the public interest. A more recent survey reported on a shift in public opinion, with university graduates predominantly believing that HE should have higher fees and be more restricted to those deemed most 'gifted' . . . whilst non-graduates want no fees and no such restrictions. Clearly the public is no longer so strongly in favour of the state-funded university as it had been recently—and the advantaged seek to pull the ladder up from those who might otherwise follow them. Perhaps, Holmwood suggests, we can hope that the introduction of fees provokes the kind of rebellion that occurred when the poll tax was rolled out in the early 1990s. In any event, we need to hold on to the idea of the university as a public good and fight to re-create it rather than to defend what it has been reduced to in recent years.

Moore spoke primarily of the 'Report on Workers' Education Meeting, TUC/Unionlearn; Leeds, 11/06/12'. She pointed to key features of this meeting: they demanded that HE have a public function and serve local communities at least in part (as they have long done). Moore pointed to the fact that the trade union movement has begun renewing its dialogue with HE as it becomes increasingly clear (as Holmwood noted) that the path to university for working class people is being made more difficult by raised fees and programme cutbacks. New models of and for learning and teaching that take on board insights from critical education need to be developed. These can include cooperative models, models that utilise assumptions about 'the commons' and summer schools with an explicitly political agenda. Trade unionists need to make their resources more widely available, in part by publicising what they offer.

Moore also spoke briefly about the ongoing battle at Salford University, which is intensively commercialising itself. In 2008 there was a high level of support staff redundancy which has recently been followed by further tranches of redundancies. She and her UCU colleagues have recently been able to prevent most (150) of the 180 threatened academic redundancies but the university had sought to make all staff more insecure by requiring academics to compete with one another for their own (slimmer) departmental jobs. Whilst they were facing interviews in the week commencing 18 June 2012, they were able to stop this process in its tracks . . . at least for the moment.

The last four papers focused on alternatives being developed now, or in the past, in the UK. My paper, 'Critical education in, against and beyond the neoliberalised university: an English perspective', explored emergent possibilities developing such alternatives both within and outside the public university, focusing, for this talk, solely on outside alternatives. I suggested, first, that to create alternatives to those now being forged through the prism of neoliberalisation, we must conceptualise neoliberalisation as a staged process that be undone, as Brenner, Peck and Theodore¹, building on David Harvey², have. Alternatives now emerging (such as the two in which I am involved—Birmingham Free University and the Social Science Centre, Lincoln) can be seen as negating what is in order to move towards alternatives. Perhaps, then, these alternatives can be seen as similar to the first, disarticulated, step of neoliberalisation. They need deepening in order to create firmer roots and link with other similar alternatives developing locally, regionally, nationally and internationally.

If my paper looked to the present and future, that of John Holford looked back, to 'The Public University in British Left-wing thought and practice'. Holford spoke of 19th and early 20th century critiques and alternatives that could inform current critiques/alternatives and help us realise possible impacts from those of earlier efforts.

¹ Brenner, N., Peck, J. & Theodore, N. (2010) After Neoliberalization?, *Globalizations* 7(3): 327-345. 2010; Peck, J., Theodore, N. and Brenner, J. (2010) Postneoliberalism and its malcontents, *Antipode*, 41 (issue supplement s1, pp. 94-116, January 2010.

² Harvey, D. (2008) *A brief history of neoliberalism*, New York and London: Oxford University Press.

Earlier activists/educators were well aware of the idea, later articulated by critical educators. that education is not neutral but is a political process; they argued that university education serves ruling class purposes. Thus, scholar activists (as we now call them) needed to work with labour movement reformers to build upon the latter's radical, democratic processes.

Terry Brotherstone then spoke of a recent *Report of the Review of Education Governance in Scotland*, in which he participated³. His talk, 'Why Scotland Matters: devolution, neoliberalism and the fight for the future of the public university in the UK', indicated some key principles guiding Scottish HE that those of us in England can learn from. First, Scottish universities are deemed to be 'independent public bodies'; private providers cannot enter the system. Second, academic freedom is a statutory right that must be protected. Third, collaboration, rather than competition, between universities is to be fostered. Further, universities should have regional responsibilities (worryingly, alongside those of national and international interests). University Principals should be appointed by a panel including academics and students. Finally (and these are just a few points), principals' remuneration packages should be determined by democratic bodies. Whilst, as Brotherstone suggested, these are modest recommendations (rather than requirements), their trajectory is against that now being imposed in England. It is in our interest to work with Scottish colleagues to begin to imagine and realise alternative models of university governance.

The final speaker, Andreas Wittel spoke of 'Beyond state and market: Higher education as a commons.' Wittel suggested that we reconceive HE as a commons to develop our struggle to resist the growing commodification of HE. The notion of 'the commons' reconceptualises natural, social and virtual resources as shared and therefore their usage needs to be negotiated, not exploited. It is relatively easy to consider education a commons, a resource to share rather than a commodity to have and exploit for one's own or corporate benefit (we need think only of Wikipedia, he suggested, which, once uploaded, requires no further effort for its reproduction). But how can the university be a commons, given that learning and teaching and their organisation require continuous human labour? Wittel explored two contemporary commons-based initiatives. One is 'the university of the people', a rapidly expanding free university education online supported by an army of academic volunteers uploading their lecture notes and videoed lectures. But exams need to be marked and markers doing the marking need to have their labour paid for. This raises the issues of what a free university can do given labour costs. The second initiative is that of the Open Education Resource (OER) University' that seeks 'to create free and open learning for tertiary education credentials using OER'⁴. Although the OER University has yet to open its virtual doors, it raises the question (as do, implicitly, the kinds of free universities of which I spoke) of how can they be said to entail resistance to the logic of capitalism given that academics freely volunteer their labour which, as we know from Cameron's Big Society, fits all too comfortably within the neoliberalised regime?

This paper, and those that preceded it, raised many issues that need further

³ <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2012/02/3646/0>

⁴ <http://edtechfrontier.com/2011/02/22/open-educational-resource-university-oeru/>

consideration. Who will now organise the next workshop for such consideration? And might future workshops have fewer talks and more discussion (Gurnam Singh suggested to me afterwards that small group discussions of talks would be much more engaging of fuller dialogue amongst participants)? I, for one, look forward to such an event and I thank Andreas Bieler for this one.

Joyce Canaan. Birmingham City University, 21 June 2012