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University Experience: Neoliberalism Against the Commons

Jason Read

As something of a hypothesis, I suggest that we view the question of the university through its tensions and contradictions. As several contributors to the discussions on Edu-factory have already indicated, these contradictions can be broadly categorized through the way in which the university is both a site of the commons, of the circulation of knowledge, and of neoliberal restructuring. Secondly, I think that these tensions can be viewed most productively as not just the tensions between different principles, the pursuit of knowledge versus the training of future employees, but between different practices, practices that ultimately produce different modes of living and thinking; that is, different formations of subjectivity.

To illustrate what I mean by the connection between practices and subjectivity, we can start with the image of the college student as rebel, and connect this to fundamental practices of college life. If for decades the figure of the student was synonymous with social rebellion, with a ruthless criticism of everything existing, this may have less to do with theories taught at the university, than with a particular practice, a particular experience of living. Universities uproot students from their homes, from their familiar and entrenched place in a familial order, and place them in a context that is halfway between communism (collective living, eating, sleeping) and anarchism (the necessity of creating a social order *ex nihilo*, even if it is only the social order of two, between roommates). On top of this there is all of the time, free from work and other demands; time to spend in clubs and social activities. There is something radical about student life, independent of the classroom, in the way in which it produces new experiences, and experiments in living. (Or at least there was,

more on this below.) Moreover, we could add to this liminal experience of college life, the fact that the life of a student is an immersion in a particular form of intellectual commons. These commons take multiple forms, from the library with its often overlooked stacks of books, to the more flashy and visible forms of “information commons” and the access to high speed internet. (The latter has become one of the main perks of college life.) What links these different practices, different forms of the common together, is that in each case the common or collective use or appropriation of knowledge is seen as the necessary condition of any individual production, or use. Intellectual production, writing papers, doing experiments, etc., requires the collective and shared work of others. (I am indebted to George Caffentzis for this point). Thus, one side of student life is a veritable education in not only the commons, in the free and collective exchange of knowledge that is at the basis of every discovery, but in social experimentation and transformation. This side is countered by the neoliberal structuring of the university, a restructuring that is as much a matter of practices, modes of living and subjectivity, as it is of policy. The cut in funding to state universities and the rise of tuition have as their effects not only the shifting of the funding of education from a public good to a private good, but a transformation of how education is lived and experienced. Students at state universities work jobs, on campus and off, and are often forced to live at home. Thus, the liminal moment of the university, that made the subject position of the college student anomalous, neither child nor adult, is being eradicated. College life is caught between the double pinchers of childhood and adulthood. The gap between these spaces is closed; one now answers to parents and to future employers at the same time. What we see in the university is a neoliberal production of subjectivity, a production that can be understood as a response to the liminal and collective production of subjectivity. As Michel Foucault argues in his lectures on neoliberalism, one of the central aspects of neoliberal theory and practice is the refiguring of human beings as “human capital.” Everything that makes up the human individual, intelligence, appearance, education, marriage, location, can be understood as an investment of time or energy that makes possible future earnings. As Foucault writes: “Homo economicus is an entrepreneur and an entrepreneur of him or herself” (Michel Foucault, *Naissance de la biopolitique: Cours au Collège de France, 1978–1979*, Paris: Seuil: Gallimard, 2004, 239). As much as the university is an experience underwritten by the commons, by collective use and sharing of knowledge, it is interpreted, especially by those who attend it, as an investment in their human capital. Every class, every extracurricular activity, every activity or club becomes a possible line on a resume, becomes an investment in human capital. The question asked by every student at practically every college or university is: “how will this help me get a job?” This interpretation of

the university experience is not just a product of a prevailing neoliberal ideology, but is actively produced by the overwhelming feeling of insecurity and fear that is brought about by the cuts in university funding. The partisans of the “Culture Wars” are correct to see the university as a struggle over hearts and minds, but incorrect in where they locate this struggle. It is not so much a matter of content, of Smith versus Marx or the western canon versus its many others, but of the form of knowledge itself. Is knowledge a social good, a common, which must circulate in order to produce effects? Or is it a commodity, something that can be purchased, an investment that has value only as property? These conflicting understandings of the value of knowledge are conflicts that are embodied in the practices of the university, in its structure. As such they have the potential to extend beyond the ivory towers of the university, to spill over into two very different understandings of the organization of society: one based on the commodity, on private possession of knowledge, resources, and rights, the other based on the commons. (On this point see Nick Dyer-Witford, “The Circulation of the Common” <http://www.geocities.com/immateri-allabor/witfordpaper2006.html>.) The political question then is how to develop the commons against their neoliberal reduction to property and investments? To subjectivize the commons, making them a way of life?