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## Making a Co-operative University: a new form of knowing – not public but social

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**ABSTRACT** Calls to establish public education avoid the fact that public education is provided by the capitalist state whose real purpose is the market-based model of private gain. Public against private education is a false dichotomy; rather, public and private are complementary forms of capitalist regulation. Radical alternatives require a more foundational critique of the structures of capitalist education, grounded in an understanding of the contradictory relationship between capital and labour on which the institutions of capitalist civilisation are based. This article suggests a counter project: not public education but social knowing as the basis for a solidaristic form of social life. Our model for social knowing starts with the idea of a co-operative university.

Work is ongoing to establish a co-operative university in the United Kingdom. Led by the Co-operative College, Manchester, the co-operative university will be a federated network of independent higher education co-operatives. Currently, these are: the RED Learning Co-op (Oxford); Leicester Vaughan College; the Centre for Human Ecology (Glasgow); and the Feral Art School (Hull). RED Co-op will offer courses in trade union studies, Leicester Vaughan College will run courses in the humanities and counselling, the Centre for Human Ecology will teach environmental studies, and the Feral Art School will organise courses in art and design, while the Co-operative College will establish courses in co-operative studies. Student fees will be £5500 in England, and there will be no fees in Scotland. It is expected that more independent higher education co-operatives will join the federation as the work develops.

A co-operative is an enterprise owned and run democratically by its members for their own benefit, the benefit of the co-operative movement and the wider community. Co-operatives adhere to globally agreed values – self-help, self-responsibility, democracy, equality, equity and solidarity – forming

the basis for a set of principles: voluntary and open membership, democratic member control, member economic participation, autonomy and independence, training and information, co-operation among co-operatives, and concern for community and education (ICA, 1995). The Co-operative University will be a specific form of co-operative enterprise to educate students and produce useful knowledge for the benefit of society.

There is a strong resonance between co-operatives and universities. The Oxbridge model of higher education is based on a collegiate system where students and academics are members of their colleges with democratic rights. Dan Cook finds co-operative principles across the higher education sector: 'Co-operative principles are academic principles. There is a close alignment between co-operative principles and mainstream academic values' (Cook, 2013, p. 19). Cook's conclusion is that the idea of a co-operative university is not radical but 'realistic and desirable' (Cook, 2013, p. 57), and 'in many ways the higher education sector already is co-operative' (Cook, 2013, p. 59).

Cook points to the existing co-operative university, Mondragon University (MU), in Spain. Established in 1997, MU took advantage of changes in the legislative framework allowing higher education providers in Spain to award their own degrees (Wright et al, 2011). MU has 9000 students across four faculties: Engineering, Business and Management Studies, Humanities and Education, and Gastronomy. The distinctive feature of MU is that the faculties retain their autonomy and independence as co-operatives, with MU acting as a secondary co-operative to support and harmonise the activities of all of the faculty co-operatives, establishing general university policies and strategic alignments.

The governance structure at Mondragon is democratic and participatory, with academics, students and external stakeholders represented at all levels of decision-making as part of a system of comprehensive self-management. Academics and administrative staff are owner-members of the university, based on an investment of 15,000 euros. One of the main co-operative principles at MU is the sovereignty of labour as 'the main factor for transforming nature', with the wealth of the co-operative 'distributed in terms of the labour provided'. An important principle of MU is the 'instrumental and subordinate nature of capital to labour' (Mondragon Corporation, 1987). Re-engineering the relationship between capital and labour is a fundamental aspect of the Mondragon higher education model (Neary et al, 2018).

Winn (2015a) has substantiated the link between the co-operative movement and higher education. He sets out a number of propositions by which the transition to a co-operative university might occur: *conversion*, a process by which existing universities take on co-operative values and principles; *dissolution*, co-operative principles are developed within a university through, for example, curriculum development, research activities, as well as co-operative cafes and co-operative housing provision; and *creation*, in the form of new co-operative experiments.

The Social Science Centre, Lincoln (SSC) is an example of the *creation* model – an experiment in co-operative higher education. The SSC organised no-fee co-operative higher education in the English city of Lincoln. It was formed in 2011 by a group of academics and students in response to the massive rise in student fees, from £3000 to £9000, for people who were unwilling or unable to take on the burden of massive debt to pay for a university degree, and in opposition to other government policies that saw the increasing neoliberalisation of English universities.

The Centre ran a series of educational courses on the social science imagination, the history of co-operative education, as well as documentary photography and poetry projects. The courses were developed and taught in a collaborative and co-operative manner between students and teachers (Saunders, 2019), with courses led by a teacher and a student. To express the democratic sensibility that underpinned the SSC, the terms ‘students’ and ‘teachers’ were not used, all members being referred to as ‘scholars’. The approach to teaching was inspired by critical pedagogy and popular education. There were monthly planning meetings to manage the affairs of the co-operative, as well as an Annual General Meeting.

The SSC did not have degree-awarding powers, but provided the opportunity for scholars to work at a level that is equivalent to a university degree, including postgraduate, and to be able to have an intellectual life collectively with other people. There was no fee to take part in the teaching sessions and none of the members were paid for the work that they did at the Centre. Members paid a subscription based on what they could afford in money or some other payment in kind. The SSC did not have large running costs, operating with a turnover of approximately £2000 per annum. There were around twenty members, the number originally envisaged by the founders, as well as associate members not involved in the day-to-day running of the Centre and its activities who acted as critical friends and supporters all around the world.

The SSC had no institutional connection to any formal higher education provision, but was linked to other alternative providers, including the Free University of Brighton, the Social Science Centre in Manchester, the Ragged University, and People’s Political Economy in Oxford. The SSC felt a strong connection and resonance with the history of adult and community education. It was originally envisaged when the SSC was set up that other higher education co-operatives could be established using the SSC model. This happened when the Social Science Centre, Manchester became a co-operative in 2015, running programmes on Brexit and Donald Trump. The membership of the SSC Lincoln reflected the demographic of the city, with a mixture of gender and ages, although most were mature students.

The SSC saw itself as a local provision based in the city of Lincoln. The SSC did not have its own building but made use of the local public facilities: libraries, cafes, community centres, pubs, museums, art galleries and parks. Some members liked to say the SSC occupied the city (Neary & Amsler, 2012). The

SSC had a website but there was no web-based teaching (<http://socialsciencecentre.org.uk>).

The SSC closed in February 2019, with a commitment to further the development of co-operative higher education in other ways, including through the new UK-wide co-operative university.

### **Student as Producer**

Some members of the SSC had already been involved in developing a radical pedagogic model of teaching higher education, namely Student as Producer, at the University of Lincoln, based on the provision of research-engaged teaching (Neary & Winn, 2009; Neary & Saunders, 2016). Research-engaged teaching means the curriculum is organised around research and problem-solving activities, rather than being based on a model where lecturers transmit knowledge to students. There is a strong democratic aspect to Student as Producer, with the idea that organising teaching in a collaborative and co-operative manner could underpin the creation of a democratic university in opposition to the neoliberal model of university education that is dominating higher education in England. The concept of Student as Producer is still one of the organising principles for teaching and learning at Lincoln (University of Lincoln, 2019), although its radical ambitions have been recuperated under the increasing intensification of neoliberalism in English universities (Neary & Saunders, 2016).

The concept of Student as Producer is based on an article, 'The Author as Producer', written in 1934 by the Marxist intellectual Walter Benjamin (1892-1940) (Benjamin, 1934/1998). Benjamin asked the question: how should radical intellectuals act in a time of crisis? Student as Producer poses the same question: how now, confronted by a range of global emergencies and the rise of fascistic politics around the world, should radical intellectuals react? Inspired by the dramatic theatre of Bertolt Brecht, Benjamin advocated a politics of emancipation whereby the object-victim of history becomes the subject-maker of history. In Brechtian terms this means turning the audience into the actor, the reader into the author and the student into the teacher.

But more than that, Benjamin's productivist vision demanded a transformation in the social relations of capitalist production towards a communist society. Student as Producer articulated this transformation in the language of the co-operative movement: a society in which capital would be subordinate to labour – and then radicalised it further: not the emancipation *of* labour, but the emancipation *from* labour. To be clear, this new authority goes beyond the idea of public provision regulated by the capitalist state, to envision a world free from the dull compulsion of work, not based on waged work, but on the needs and capacities of people and the planet.

Not all colleagues at the University of Lincoln are revolutionary Marxists, but we conceptualised Student as Producer in the language of Marx's social theory, as an antidote to the 'managementese' of the neoliberal university

(Docherty, 2014, p. 54). Student as Producer challenges and invites academics and students to engage with this language of critical political economy, rather than with the neoliberal economics that contaminates university life. In an educational environment dominated by a 'business ontology' (Fisher, 2009, p. 17), this felt like a triumph.

### **Why Now?**

The idea to set up a co-operative university goes back to the late nineteenth century, but it was never realised. Making the co-operative university now has been given impetus by three main factors: new government legislation; new forms of co-operatives in which the interests of workers can be reconciled with the interests of consumers and other stakeholders; and calls across the sector for more democratic governance in higher education (Neary & Winn, 2019).

In 2017 the government brought into law the Higher Education and Research Act (HERA). This new legislation offers a historically unique opportunity for the introduction of co-operative governance and leadership in higher education. The government is encouraging 'challenger institutions' to offer new forms of university provision. This legislation provides the space in which the co-operative university can be developed. The co-operative university is a challenge to the 'free-market strong state' (Gamble, 1994; Shattock, 2008) model on which current higher education is regulated. The group working on the co-operative university project has submitted paperwork to the Office for Students, a new body constituted by the HERA legislation, and hopes to be granted degree-awarding powers in the academic year 2019-2020.

Ridley-Duff and Bull (2014) show how the co-operative movement has developed a multi-stakeholder constitutional model that is appropriate for a university. The multi-stakeholder model is compatible with traditional collegial structures (Cook, 2013). Ridley-Duff and Bull (2014) examine 'the historical shifts that have led to the emergence of a social and solidarity economy, and how those shifts were expressed in the UK during its formative years' (p. 2). The multi-stakeholder co-operative model, also referred to as the 'solidarity' or 'social' co-operative model, overcomes the single-member models of worker or consumer co-operatives and recognises that both workers and consumers, as well as other supporting individuals and organisations, might each wish to share the responsibility of owning and running a co-operative.

The multi-stakeholder co-operative model is relatively new as a form of corporate governance; most universities were created before it was introduced into the UK in 2009, but it is now a credible model of governance. It has emerged at a time when existing public and private models of higher education governance are under intense pressure and failing (Farrington, 2018). The multi-stakeholder model of co-operative governance has been formally supported by Co-ops UK since 2012, and was internationally endorsed by the co-operative movement in 2011 (CICOPA, 2011). Now, for the first time in recent university history, a model of institutional ownership and control exists

that is adequate for a post-1968 university, one which helps overcome the unnecessary antagonism between the interests of academics and students.

There are calls for greater democratic accountability by university staff and students in the face of increasing higher education redundancies (University and College Union, 2019), unaccountable university senior managers on exorbitant salaries (University and College Union, 2019), academic strikes to protect pensions (USSBriefs 2018), and demands from students following the student occupation movement of 2010-2011. A review of the websites of over 35 student occupations that had taken place since 2010 (Winn, 2015b) found that students were seeing the issues they were protesting against as a matter of a 'democratic deficit' (McGettigan, 2013) in higher education. Increasingly, among the list of demands issuing from the student occupation of university spaces, there was a demand for greater student participation in the formal running and governance of their institutions. This could take the form of elected staff-student councils to be responsible for all of their institution's managerial decisions. It was widely recognised by academic staff that the University and College Union (UCU) strike against proposed negative changes to pensions and other staff benefits opened up the space to consider all aspects of university governance and management (USSBriefs, 2018).

### **Not Public but Social**

The co-operative movement encompasses a variety of alternative models for capitalist production and consumption. The political impulse that underpins the co-operative university, based on Student as Producer, is a call not for more public education, but for a new form of social institution based on social solidarity. In the language of critical political economy: public and private are complementary forms of capitalist regulation (Clarke, 1991). The distinction between the market and the state is a false dichotomy (Neary, 2013; Neary & Winn, 2017). The extent to which public provision has been able to generalise some of the progressive aspects of capitalism has been undermined by capital's inability to maintain expansive growth and the negative consequences of whatever growth has been achieved. The social democratic notion of the public sector was only ever the prevention of communism (Binns & Dixon, 1988). The current global emergencies require a more fundamental critique pointing towards a post-capitalist civilisation.

We can ground this critique in the politics emerging out of the co-operative movement: a reconfiguration of the antagonistic relationship between capital and labour, towards a view of the social world based on solidarity. Not only more democracy framed around the liberal principles of freedom and equality and a rights-based model of social justice, but democracy grounded in a historical and materialist commitment to a new form of social value or commonwealth, as the basis for social life. This utopian vision means the production of socially useful knowledge for society as a whole. Not knowledge commodified within universities as credentials and research outputs for the

military-industrial complex, but knowledge that seeks to recover a new authority for non-alienated individuals and communities.

The co-operative university is not yet the future; it will rely on government funding. But the concept of social knowing, and the critique of the capitalist state on which it relies, means it is on the way to the future, providing us with a radical epistemology on which to build a post-capitalist world. It is not a question of whether this form of social knowing is a realistic proposition; rather, social knowing is necessary and required.

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