Editorial

The scandal of contemporary universities

It used to be said that it was possible to travel from Oxford to Cambridge entirely on lands owned by one or other of the two universities. Maybe. It's certainly likely enough, given the extent of their historic assets. There is, though, a contemporary equivalent. Walk south through central London from the Euston Road to the river and at every point you are assailed by a proliferation of heavily branded new glass and steel structures advertising the corporate presence of University College London (UCL), the London School of Economics (LSE) and King's College London (KCL). Day by day, it seems, more older townhouses are purchased, gutted and refashioned as physical testament to the dynamism and financial power of the contemporary university. Senate House, the core of the old London University, is beginning to be colonised by its erstwhile constituents: the value of the 'federal' university of the capital is now only a matter of sentiment. The Institute of Education, housed since the 1960s in what seemed at the time an imposing, modern symbol of the nation's commitment to school education, since 2014 has been part of UCL's expanding empire: its premier positions in World University Rankings and in the Research Excellence Framework (in the category of 'Research Power' - helpfully explained as 'GPA multiplied by the size of the entry') are proudly broadcast to passers-by. Provincial universities in the UK, and their foreign overseas counterparts, vie to get in on the act, a London base signifying prestige in the globalised academy and, if prudently managed, a good opportunity to park a small segment of capital until more urgent matters obtain. In these circumstances the older idea of Bloomsbury - signifying a ramshackle network of bookstores, nearby cinemas and clubs, and pubs with their daggy upstairs rooms for rent, home to many dramas of political disputation - feels like another age, as

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relevant to the imperatives of contemporary university life as the inconspicuous blue plaques commemorating previous generations of the neighbourhood's luminaries.

The financial means by which this capital acceleration has occurred are far from transparent. Specialised knowledge on such matters remains the preserve of the new species of university CEOs, property investors and hedge-fund managers, which no institution of higher education can afford to ignore - and this specialism and its technicalities are themselves integral to the mystery by which they proceed. However, some basics are clear. First, as in so many other departments of British life, the speculative boom in university spending has been driven, at least in the capital and in the south-east, by the property market. Even if university managers in central London had sat still and done nothing - there's a thought - their assets would have risen enormously. But how tempting to make a killing when the times were good, and to be able to adorn the new university prospectus with inviting, glossy images of student life. Second, elaborate systems of borrowing huge sums of capital against the future - 'private placements' - have tied the fortunes of universities into the global financial markets. Third, the imposition of student fees provided a windfall: while real incomes in the universities have dropped since 2008 (for the majority, that is), the huge new tranche of money coming in from the students could be diverted where it could most easily generate new capital: in expanding property portfolios. And fourth, relatively 'incidental' income streams have fortuitously appeared, such as the selling off of student accommodation to private investors, a significant number of whom (it has been revealed) operate as off-shore financial companies, free from the reach of the British state.

This is to emphasise, simply, that the financialisation of the universities in the past decade or so represents a defining element in the organisation of higher education. Nowhere was this more evident than in the state selling off the student debt to private investors, reducing personal investments in tertiary education to the status of junk bonds. Ideologues in central government and amongst the makers of public opinion, as well as some managers within the universities themselves, have laboured to make all this happen. They are not shy about what they do, and see no cause for shame. They live by the ethic of utilitarianism and are more than ready for the battle to be taken to the universities.

My sense, however, is that the majority of university managers aren't ideological in this way. More or less, they still hold some memory of the values of collegiality.

They are not zealous in the pursuit of the market, as a value in itself. But pragmatically, when presented with a dilemma, they find themselves bending to the prevailing wind. Why should this be so? Because, in the minds of those charged with running the universities, there are no practical alternatives. There is a logic which supposes that anything which impedes the bottom line, or which threatens its close correlate, the rankings and the metrics, cannot - 'in the real world' - be countenanced. Concessions can be made here or there, for old time's sake, or to appease a pocket of resistance. But when matters come to a head there is no alternative.

Amongst the larger multitude of those who work for universities, as teachers, administrators or service staff, I have yet to meet a single person persuaded by the virtue of this state of affairs. On the ground, in the job of teaching the students and looking after their welfare, unexpurgated market values simply don't work. And the good sense that underwrites this common viewpoint also largely derives from a non-ideological standpoint. It's simply a reflection on how complex institutions work best, and how they best address elemental human needs. In the interstices of institutional life, it remains the case that local knowledge can claim an integrity which top-down managerial initiatives seem designed to miss. And yet here too, as the financialisation of our workplace continues apace, even though hardly a single soul is persuaded by the merits of the argument, resistance has seldom been realised. Why, in turn, should *this* be so? Because of the generalised conviction that the forces pressing for the financialisation - the commodification, the metricisation - of the university, whether hard or soft, are too powerful to be turned around. For too long, faced with the latest hair-brained scheme for this or that, we have held our heads in our hands in despair.

Life in a financialised university

Last autumn I enjoyed my teaching more than I had for a long while. I'd devised a new course, shaped in part to address the new demographic of our particular student intake, and it was organised by questions directly arising from my own research. Notwithstanding the cumbersome new administrative apparatuses which 'course delivery' now requires, once the door was closed it was just the students and me. Discussion couldn't be prescribed and the outcomes couldn't be corralled into

'Critical Knowledge Enlargement' (CKE) or 'Subscribed Professional Training' (SPT). (OK. These are my inventions. But only just.) Whatever the administrative logic of the new universities, there remains an immediate stratum of intellectual dialogue which, in itself, resists management from an external source.

Yet as the semester drew to a close, and the intensity of essay tutorials increased, one by one the lives of the students began to reveal themselves. And the stories the students told didn't accord at all with the PR gloss of the official university mission statements and protocols of principles, in which the prospect of 'social mobility' holds an especial currency. At the very same moment that the students were engaged in learning, and new continents of knowledge were opening up, their own lives were often hanging by a thread. In addition to the stresses of college work there existed a battery of material matters which were the cause of incessant low-level turmoil: navigating the labour market; finding somewhere to live; the need to care for family members (mainly but not exclusively a job falling upon female students); periodic financial hardship - by which I mean having *no* access to money, for bus-fares or for a sandwich; the search for employment after college; and, hanging over all these things, the knowledge that their lifelong personal debt was rising exponentially. Hearing these stories, one after the other, imbricated into the very centre of the vaunted 'student experience', confirmed the existence of a new kind of social immiseration, exacting a heavy toll on mental and physical lives.

This real-life predicament of students amounts, in my view, to a social crisis which has to be acknowledged as just that: a social crisis, created in part by the institutional structures of the universities. The succession of damaged students can't be explained as a series of individual, contingent misfortunes. This isn't to say that all these depredations were caused by the systems of higher education. They're not. But it is legitimate to ask how universities might operate with less instrumental imperatives and how, as a start, the life of the mind - with which, after all, universities might have some concern - can be accorded greater acknowledgement and respect.

Student life is particular in the anxieties it incubates. But it is not exceptional. Anxiety and stress run through the universities, from the very top to the bottom; it is common to service workers, administrators, the young precariat allied to the teaching staff, to early career teachers with the inordinate demands placed on them, and so on. It seems a naturalised fact of life that young female academics are

confronted with the choice between becoming successful in their chosen career or starting a family. What are universities becoming if the zealous pursuit of 'outputs' precludes the possibility of children?

It might seem bizarre that in this situation the bulk of academic staff - but not only them - voluntarily undertake great swathes of unpaid labour. Working twice the stipulated hourly quota in any single week is common. It's been estimated that the unpaid work of academics to the national economy amounts to billions of pounds each year. In part, this surplus labour is due to rising demands on staff, as increasing dimensions of the professional life of the academic are judged to be in need of more vigilant monitoring. In part also, academics concede often enough that the job entails a deal of intellectual and emotional pleasure: as we know, teaching in particular is a source of significant satisfaction.

But the difficulty is that the financialisation of the sector, and the collateral transformation of the students into customers, have infiltrated the internal social relations of the institution. There is now an increasing preponderance of dead, abstract, commodified labour. As the university becomes more heavily commodified, the knowledge it produces becomes ever-more subject to the rule of exchange: the use-value of knowledge diminishes, and academic time is increasingly devoted to establishing the exchange-value of the knowledge we produce. This is where metrics impinge: in the incessant league tables, in the Research Excellence Framework and in the Teaching Excellence Framework. All these initiatives require the input of colossal quotients of dead labour in order to transform the knowledge we produce (the use-value knowledge) into a commodity embodying the properties of exchange, so that it can be established that the 'outputs' of University A are superior to those of University B. 'Teaching Excellence' is determined by the income of a university's graduates. The final grades for the students are calculated, no longer by collective discussion, but by the logic of an unknown algorithm. Relations between staff and students are increasingly regulated by metrics - such as the Happy Meal score students award to staff at the end of each course. The greater incursion of dead labour is itself exhausting, and does little to further the use-value functions of an intellectual vocation. It comes to fill up the lives of the academic.

Commodified labour - which makes up a growing proportion of our work - does not belong to the human source from which the labour originates, i.e., it doesn't belong to us. And, as things continually escalate, it is starting to feel as if it's the dead

labour we undertake which is coming to *own us*. It is difficult to conceive how, in such circumstances, the university itself can belong to any of us, staff or students. In this scenario the classical ideal of the university as a community of sovereign scholars has become a lie.

The strike and its consequences

And then, at the beginning of the year, industrial action threatened. The contention was about staff pensions.

This was not a promising prospect. The current generation of students has little conception of what a pension is, where it comes from or what it means. (Just as, we were to discover, a minority weren't sure what a strike was, and rather more were puzzled by the concept of a picket. Turning to the heavens I caught a fleeting glimpse of a triumphant Margaret Thatcher.) When the precariat who work with us try to imagine themselves in a comparable situation, they find it almost impossible to believe that - thirty or forty years down the line - the hard-earned bounty of a pension could conceivably be theirs. The possibilities of turning essentially a sectional struggle into one which was broader and more effective didn't look likely. The established staff had, in any case, come to be inured to defeat, believing this to be their collective fate.

But for reasons which are still not clear, the employers - the Universities UK (UUK) - settled on what was in effect a frontal assault against the University and College Union (UCU). Maybe they'd become accustomed to the reluctance of the UCU to mobilise, cockily confident that they'd win anything going. Maybe they calculated that if they set the bar high, and if they got only half of what they were supposedly seeking, they'd have still won, and in the final settlement they could make a big show of 'compromising' with those whom they'd just battered. Who knows?

The grounds for the assault turned on an interpretation of the financial state of the university pension - the University Superannuation Scheme (USS). The UUK determined that this was perilous, and could not be sustained for the future. A colossal deficit, it seemed, lurked around the corner. To offset this, the UUK proposed that the USS shift from a Defined Benefit pension scheme, in which on retirement a known (defined) income is guaranteed, to a Defined Contribution scheme, in which - notwithstanding the vocabulary - nothing at all is defined. (This

is the same ruse that is being pursued across the pension sector, for both public and private employees.) The purpose of such a shift is clear. The full scale of investment risk, however it is to be calculated, is transferred away from the fund and onto the individual future pensioner.

From this point on - and this is still the case - the economics of the dispute are contentious and complex. There's an entire archive of competing interpretations, turning on how the USS assets are to be valued. Like many others involved in the strike, I have to rely on the calculations of others, and arrive at my own conclusion. As I, and many others, see it three things are clear. First, there can be little doubt that the entire purpose of the endeavour was to shift risk onto the recipient of the pension who had in good faith accumulated a lifetime's savings in order to provide security in old age. Second, the USS assets are not close to the danger zone which the UUK proposed. And third, if the UUK proposals were to be realised, university workers now about half way through their careers would be likely to lose some £10,000 a year, and younger colleagues a great deal more.

In January something unprecedented happened. In the national ballot the union voted 88 per cent for strike action, and 93 per cent for action short of a strike. I voted for the strike on account of the enormity of the assault we faced. Yet I wasn't certain I'd be amongst the majority, and from long experience I wasn't sanguine that, even if the vote favoured strike action, the strike would be sufficiently significant to turn back the employers. I thought it necessary to vote. But I am not and never have been a syndicalist (well, apart from a day or two a long time ago), and I entertained no faith that a strike could do any more than address the union issue in hand: that in other words it wouldn't do anything to draw into the open the more profound democratic deficit that increasingly was coming to mark the intellectual life of the universities. In the preparations for the strike I was uneasy about the vehemence a younger colleague demonstrated in his insistence that the picket line was the heart of the strike. I didn't believe him. In my experience the picket line had always been the site of division, the moment when colleagues of old crossed the line with barely a sheepish smile.

As things turned out, I was proved wrong on every count. The picket lines, in the dark and the snow, were indeed convivial locations of joy and determination, and the occasion for unprecedented conversations with colleagues - feet stamping in a bid to ward off the bite of frozen limbs - about everything under the sun. Collegiality took on new, active dispositions. A portion of students, and those

teachers with the most fragile foothold in the institution, moved into the vanguard, bringing to bear their own concerns while lending solidarity to ours. Everything - *everything* - about the political and intellectual configuration of the universities was opened up. Teach-outs ran on, alongside the pickets and demonstrations.

The accumulated frustrations with the managerial university were, in a great burst, collectively articulated. In the very process of organising the strikes, alternative ways of being could be felt. Momentarily there existed the shared anticipation, against a dogged fear that this could never be so, that there are indeed alternatives and that the university could - perhaps, one day would - be ours. Such luminous moments will not be forgotten. Things will never quite be the same again.

I can hear the murmurs of dissent. UCU did not win the strike. At best, it was a draw, the employers agreeing to postpone any serious reform of the pension system for another year. The serious danger in this is that the mobilisation from below will have to happen again, in new circumstances, and it will be very difficult to ensure a repetition of anything on the scale we have just witnessed. All that is true, and I believe that the Union did a disservice to its members in recommending that the truce should be accepted - although I wasn't the least bit surprised by the membership endorsing the official recommendation. The outcome is yet to be decided, although I find it hard to let go of the fact that for the first time for an age *we hadn't lost*. Perhaps on that realisation struggles in the future can be built.

It's also the case that my experience - in my university; in my department - was not universal. It was perhaps a London phenomenon where the economic and social disparities of contemporary life are for students more heavily pronounced, although there was undoubtedly evidence of comparable activities elsewhere. I know there was no uniformity across the many campuses, and care should be taken in extrapolating from the single experience.

Even so, at least the democratic deficit of universities has entered the light of day. The arbitrary, executive authority of the governance of individual universities, of the UUK and - to boot - of the USS has been revealed for all to see. The putatively 'private' miseries of those who work and study in higher education can be articulated as a public issue, for which we are all responsible. Maybe, one day, we will all be able to believe what we once collectively felt: 'We Are the University'.

Bill Schwarz (with thanks to Caroline Knowles)

In this issue

On work and machines: a labour process of agility

Phoebe Moore

The increasing use of digital technology across industry is bringing unprecedented changes within the labour process. The more creative aspects of this revolution have been associated with the positive notion of agility, but the adoption of agility as a management style mainly involves the search for ever more intense processes for the extraction of surplus value from workers. Digital technology has been used to closely monitor performance in both manual and clerical work, through a variety of digital monitoring devices, often worn on the body. We increasingly work alongside, with and against machines, in both cognitive and manual workplaces.

Policies for inclusive economic growth

Sylvia Walby

The best way of securing a future of economic growth is to integrate growth with social justice, in particular through the fuller utilisation of women's labour - by investment in human capital, reducing discrimination in labour markets and re-orienting industrial policy. Gender equality needs to be mainstreamed into all aspects of social and economic policy-making, rather than women being treated as a separate group or identity in need of special treatment. This means engaging with policies for finance, social investment, employment, democracy and preventing violence, and a re-orientated industrial policy.

The problem that is Labour local government

David Byrne

Labour's recent turn to the left is reflected in debates on local government. The wider context is the narrow room for manoeuvre at local authority level because of central government imposed cuts and the crisis in land and housing. Finance capital is increasingly investing in property, thereby driving up prices; the planning powers of local councils have been drastically cut; the accountability of executives to party members and councillors has been reduced; and the retention of business rates within the local area is causing problems in deprived areas outside the main conurbations. This is why Labour councils have been arguing over 'pragmatism' in relation to property and housing developments. Would it be

better for Labour to refuse to take control and thereby responsibility for imposing austerity?

Agonies of pluralism: Germany and the New Right

Simon Garnett

The emergence of the AfD as a parliamentary party and the largest party of opposition places in doubt the sustainability of status-quo centrism in Germany. Some argue that it is the failure of Merkel's leadership to engage with anti-immigration sentiment that has led to the rise of the AfD. German history - not just the Nazi era but also the strong focus on democracy and consensus of the Federal Republic era, as well as the inheritance of East German cultures and discontents - gives these debates a specifically German context. How to best confront the far right's challenge to German centrism has become a contentious issue across all the democratic parties.

Reshaping common sense: management, power and the allure of medical leadership in England's NHS

Steve Iliffe and Jill Manthorpe

Medical Leadership has become an obsession in the NHS. It is seen as a solution to the slow rate of change within the service, particularly in the integration of health and social care. The NHS was set up by socialists on the principle of 'to each according to their need', with centralised allocation of resources and a hierarchic management structure dominated by professionals. From the early 1980s successive governments favoured market mechanisms of management, but this failed to produce the changes desired by governments, so the focus has now shifted to the idea of leadership. The nature of leadership is here discussed from the perspective of socialist thinking and experience, for example through considering practitioners as organic intellectuals or as 'cadres'.

'An enormous sense of solidarity': London and the 1984-5 Miners' Strike

David Featherstone, Diarmaid Kelliher, David Donovan, Terry Conway, Sally Davison

Alongside the 1984-5 miners' strike there developed a large and diverse support movement. Accounts of the 1970s and 1980s often see class politics as in opposition to liberation movements organised around gender, sexuality and race; they thus ignore important forms of alliance and solidarity which cross-cut these differences in

powerful and innovative ways. Three personal testimonies from activists involved in support for the strike give a sense of the depth and diversity of that solidarity.

Democracy in the making

Lynne Segal talks to Jo Littler

A series of reflections on a political and intellectual life that began in the optimistic period of second-wave socialist feminism, but then had to explore how to sustain hope in more difficult times. Central to this process has been consideration of the ongoing relationship between the personal and the political. Topics covered include happiness as a social good and its relationship to care; the importance to feminism of both economic production and social reproduction; men's violence; the politics of difference; masculinity; queer politics; transgender politics; and Corbyn and Labour.

Conversations with Stuart Hall: the tenacity of race

Pankaj Mishra

Stuart Hall's work resonates today in a variety of national and global contexts. *Policing the Crisis* is a landmark text in understanding the centrality of 'race' to achieving a consensus that could justify inequality and the criminalisation of the poor, and thereby secure the support of the silent (white) majority; while *The Fateful Triangle* is an attempt to account for the tenacity of race in human history. Today we see a similar process at work in the targeting of minority groups in India, Myanmar and Indonesia. Democracy is being re-imagined as a pact between ethnically and racially homogenous groups, in which the rights of individuals who don't seem to belong can be revoked by sovereign and elected power.

Conversations with Stuart Hall: the inheritors of '68

David Edgar

The argument that the most enduring legacy of 1968 was the neoliberalism of the 1980s is mistaken. Thatcher herself saw her politics as an antidote to '68 and the 'enemy within'. Although she was an economic libertarian, she was always a social conservative. Since then the mainstream parties have embraced a variety of combinations of social liberalism/authoritarianism and economic liberalism/interventionism. But support for traditional values has in fact been in continuous decline in Britain since the 1960s. Corbynism was not about a year in politics, but a decade in which the 1960s compound of social emancipation and anti-capitalism had been renewed.