What was once proven can now only be imagined

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Abstract

In this paper I will argue that the Art School, in its various incarnations throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, was, not just a site of personal transformation but of radical societal change. Offering crucibles of experimentation and radical visions of what the world could be, and might be constructed, in spaces in which it was possible to "desire, conceive, and create the new structure of the future"[1]

Such places if not already gone are under pressure. Out of step with a culture in which as Wendy Brown notes "social equality, liberty, and worldly development of mind and character are outmoded and have been displaced by another set of metrics: income streams, profitability, technological innovation." [2]

An education culture of league tables, excellence frameworks of personal entrepreneurial 'success' and 'student satisfaction' In this paralysis of the cultural imaginary it has been recently argued that, "the future has been cancelled."[3] Can a reconfigured "Art school" side step nostalgia and be utilised in the conception of radical new structures? By taking Ranciere's conception of a "critical art" to "produce a new perception of the world, and therefore to create a commitment to its transformation." How

can we re-engineer the future in the neoliberal value system? The solution seems obvious: In order to reengineer the future we must first reimagine it.

Overall, I am satisfied with the quality of the course

Contemporary culture appears to be in disarray. Mainstream politics so recently so static as to be considered post-historical has become suddenly volatile and unpredictable not from without but within. In Europe and North America, we seem to be witnessing challenges to the dominance of "third-way" "depoliticization" perhaps as part and parcel of the decline of neoliberalism, or, maybe as harbinger of this, equally possible is that this marks not an end to neoliberalism but another adaptation or modal shift such as can be seen in the shift of rhetoric that marked the transition from Reagan/Thatcher to Blair/Bush.

Do recent events suggest that amidst this turmoil there is the possibility of an alternative?

The Art School, in its various incarnations emerged from vocational industrial origins in the 19th century to become by the mid 20th century not just a site of education and personal transformation but of radical societal change. One that offered a crucible of experimentation and radical visions of what the world could be, and might be constructed, in spaces in which it was possible to "desire, conceive, and create the new structure of the future"[1]

Such places if not already gone are under increasing pressure. Out of step with a

culture in which as Wendy Brown notes "social equality, liberty, and worldly development of mind and character are outmoded and have been displaced by another set of metrics: income streams, profitability, technological innovation." [2]
An education culture of league tables, excellence frameworks of personal entrepreneurial 'success' and 'student satisfaction'

Whilst much of what is to follow relates not just to the art school but the higher education system in the UK as a whole, I'm building my focus around the art school specifically as in its varied incarnations internationally has manifested variously as sites not just of radical experimental content but also of form. Eg: The Bauhaus, Ulm, Black Mountain College, Cranbrook, Hornsey.

Universities and more specifically art schools had by the mid 20th century begun to evolve from their origins in the 1870's as vocational training centers for industrial applications of creativity into sites of experimental activity in terms that extended well beyond an experimental view of the subject into broader questions about hierarchies and purpose per se.

It is now three decades since Margaret Thatcher initiated The Education Bill of November 1987 in "The Next Move Forward" Conservative Manifesto of 1987, as part of her vision of "Britain of the Future" a vision that introduced the notion of market forces to education. Education as a commodity to be 'purchased', owned, and utilised for personal advantage.

The historian Elie Kedourie published a pamphlet titled *Diamonds into Glass: the Government and the Universities*. Criticising the 1986 research assessment exercise (RAE), which he described as *haphazard and hasty exercises* of assessing quality. In it he wrote that:

"Those who remember the university as it used to be, only three or four decades ago, will know that here lies the secret of its extraordinary power to stretch the intellect of those within its portals, and to inspire loyalty and affection as the alma mater who bounteously bestows, on all those who work to possess them, the prodigious riches contained in the Aladdin's Cave of the mind. The great value of Aladdin's Cave is that its riches are wholly unexpected and un-covenanted. The moment a licensed valuer is sent to make a survey according to ruling market prices, the charm is broken, gold turns to lead, diamond to glass.[1]"

In the final days of the last Tory Government before the dissolution of parliament, overshadowed by newsfeeds choked with 'Brexit' and the looming general election the Higher Education and Research act championed by Jo Johnson the "Minister of State for Universities and Science" promoted as "Success as a Knowledge Economy: Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility and Student Choice" quietly passed through the House of Lords with some minor amendments to Royal Ascent and became law.
This act of parliament paves the way for new and more radical change to an education system already fundamentally altered.
Shortly after the Labour party manifesto pledged to remove student fees first

introduced by the Blair government as part of the Teaching and Higher Education Act 1998 and in 2010 Following the Browne Review raised to £9,000 a year by the Cameron Clegg coalition.
But what does the simple removal of fees on its own achieve in the new landscape of the contemporary 'Knowledge economy?

Since the changes begun in 1987 the British education system has at all levels and by every government been systematically remodeled by the rhetoric of 'marketisation' in a seemingly endless regime of bureaucratic interventions in the form of inspections, classification, league tables, fees, student loans and the drive to accountability, efficiency, utility and modernisation.
But these changes have not been wrought by the market forces apparently invoked as reformers quite the opposite the last three decades have seen the formation of an entirely duplicitous neo liberal facade, one in which the state has played an unprecedented level of control at every level of finance and curriculum whilst maintaining the rhetoric of free market economics.

In this pseudo neoliberal *"knowledge economy"*[3] education is assessed and quantified according to a system of centrally controlled metrics and where league tables and excellence frameworks of personal entrepreneurial 'success' and 'student satisfaction' are the primary measures of value. OFSTED and the teaching excellence framework or TEF are constructed centrally by government from statistics harvested from surveys such as the mandatory and centrally composed NSS and KIS data, the TEF according to its own website 'aims to recognise and reward excellence in teaching and learning, and help inform prospective students' choices for higher education.'

UNISTATS "The official website for comparing UK higher education course data. Includes official data for undergraduate courses on each university and college's satisfaction scores in the National Student Survey, jobs and salaries after study and other key information for prospective students."
It is worth noting that seven out of the ten headline criteria for choosing a university course are not based on the content or quality of the course but on employment and post education salary. This form the first point of engagement posits HE as a project of individual betterment. A utile project of self-enhancement for suitability in the employment market, the cost of which follows the individual throughout their working lives in the form of debt repayment.

Through mechanisms such as the privatisation of debt through the student loan system, which not only personalises the cost of study onto the individual, but in doing so implies that any benefit of education is seen solely in terms of personal gain. Altruism, abstraction and collective endeavor and ignored or sidelined. Education is not seen as a collective project of societal development and intellectual exploration but a purchasable advantage for financial rather than abstract benefit. Not so much 'life long learning' as life long earning, with its correlate, life long debt.

Higher education is being warped by notions of salary, vocation, enterprise, customers and pseudo-metrics that seek to hardwire a culture of competing

market economics and corporate individualism into its economy and philosophy. Creating an increasingly utile and vocational terrain that transforms not just institutions but students, staff, courses and departments into siloed "companies of one" (Brown) in endless and repeated competition with one another.

The 'market' is misleading in the key respects of scale and differentiation.
As the government has control of institutions ability to set recruitment targets and fee limits the range of choice offered and differentiation is minimal if existent at all in real terms.
Differentiation is achieved again through the centrally (not market) allocated awarding of Bronze, Silver and Gold 'medals' that mark a crude three-tier league table of 'excellence'. Notable aberrations were observed in the first instance with Goldsmiths, the LSE and Southampton; all Russell Group affiliated institutions all being awarded Bronze.
The TEF in its first iteration is voluntary, so a constructed tacit acceptance of consent and the terms of engagement. The persuasion of status will soon be followed by the coercion of financial differentiation as is implied in the following statement.

"The Government has previously indicated that universities and colleges in England that have a TEF award will be able to increase their tuition fees in line with inflation. The Department for Education will confirm the 2018-19 fee caps in due course."

http://www.hefce.ac.uk/lt/tef/whatistef/

Despite the 'common sense' of neo liberal capitalism where the rhetoric of competition is posited as the life blood of all innovation, invention, efficiency and creativity. The arbiter of all quality, value and cost. The pseudo market of education requires constant and systematic state intervention to maintain a semblance of choice and difference in both aspirational and financial terms.
The educational system is now tightly managed in all aspects of curriculum, classification, assessment, funding and access. (visas).
A highly centralised tightly regulated system of hegemonic neo liberal power.
As James notes:

The neoliberalism at work here then is not primarily one of economics in terms of cost and benefit nor merely the organization of the state, governance, and post-Keynesian economics, rather as Catherine Rottenberg points out, it also produces a new "commonsense" in which individuals become "entrepreneurial actors". In the context of third-way politics, this means, for example, that there is an emphasis on liberal multiculturalism so long as "diversity" is seen as a competitive asset in a cosmopolitan marketplace. This is pernicious since it immunizes the left against its most serious political force, and makes it difficult for us to see ourselves as part of wider social groups, connections, and structures, than the ones we actively associate ourselves with. For example, the post-recession massive scale unemployment, precarious labour, and the

concomitant rise in mental health problems is seen as a transitory state of affairs.
Responsibility is put on individuals to get into the market, to gain self-esteem, to work on themselves'. So, most pertinently, the depoliticisation of everyday life actively obscures the ways in which 3rd way politics and neoliberalism *rely* upon massive local and global inequalities, both material, and normative, which are occluded by the removal of such difference from the realm of the political.

The Education Bill that recently passed to Royal ascent.

"Will make it quicker and easier for new high quality challenger institutions to enter the market and award their own degrees. A new Office for Students will put competition and choice at the heart of sector regulation: it will operate a more risk-based approach so that we can focus attention where it is needed most to drive up quality."

Jo Johnson Success as a knowledge economy May 2016

This represents a new and profound intervention that is designed to destabilise and disrupt the current monopoly of universities by two mechanisms:

- Force differentiation on cost, where previously the universities refused to by linking fee caps to TEF awards.
- Introduce new "challenger' institutions which will operate much in the same way in relation to universities as academies do to state schools.

These are no longer underwritten by an existing university, as was previously the route to degree awarding powers, but are assessed centrally by the office for students, which will replace Hefce. Degree awarding powers will be granted on the basis of meeting certain basic requirements, initially annually but after three years of successful application a longer certificate will be granted.
The aim is to challenge existing universities on cost and efficiency by creating a pincer movement of coercion into e form of TEF related fee caps and persuasion with competition on cost.

A culture not of collective endeavor, collegiate cooperation, societal construction but instead the logic of competition that is that of winners and losers .

Hegemonic power reaches beyond the political into the social. Power is constructed, conceded and concentrated in the minutiae of our lives. Common sense as per Gramsci "creates the folklore of the future, a relatively rigidified phase of popular knowledge in a given time and place." (1985- 420-21)

Is it possible to create spaces in which we can rethink the way we conceive of construct and engage with everyday life?
Can we make spaces in which it is possible to rethink cultural agendas rather then to replicate and reinforce the current ones?

Can we create sites of experimentation in which we not only abstractly ponder other modes, but instead actively construct and engage in experimental modes of existence?

The ability for a society to conceive of its supersession is fundamental.

The last 30 years has seen consistent efforts by governments of all parties to control education in terms of removal of funding and personalisation of debt.
Centralisation of curriculum
Subject benchmarking and standardisation of assessment (QAA)
Creation of league tables
Assessment of Research (RAE/REF)
Assessment of teaching (TEF)
Implementation of Student satisfaction Survey (NSS)
Unistats comparison sit (KIS)
and perceptions of purpose and worth. Realigning education with a narrow focus on training and vocational outcome, whether this be entrepreneurial or employment.
Academic freedom operates as a token gesture within a series of institutional matrices both persuasive and coercive.
Persuasive in the form of league tables, medals, ratings, degree classification, job prospects.
Coercive in terms of fee caps, personal debt student loans, QR funding, degree awarding powers.
Research is coupled with enterprise.

TEF REF and KIS assessment are all both direct and indirect mechanisms of control that repurpose education as engines for neo liberal value systems. Both for students and staff. The subject benchmark statements directly preclude any digression experimentation and especially sedition.

Whilst desirable in the short term and necessary for a healthy educational culture accessible to all fiscal reform (i.e. Removal) of the fee system will on its own will not be sufficient to undo the current culture of HE.
This would undoubtedly improve things financially for prospective students but reforms that dealt only with the superficial aspects of funding would be in danger of creating what has been referred as 'Zombie Neo liberalism.'
By this I mean that the mechanisms that drove and empowered the current status quo have been removed but the ideology has been so thoroughly ingrained into the culture and systems of power and decision within the institutions in the form of mission statements and core values that they remain tacitly and implicit despite their explicit removal.

The new educational bill is presented as a radical challenge that will make it quicker and easier for risk based competition to drive up quality.

In a sector where austerity pay freezes have only applied only to the rank and file and where

" The average salary and benefits package paid to university heads rose by

£14,595 to £252,745 in 2014-15, a rise of 6.1 per cent. When pension contributions are included, average remuneration was £274,405."
THE May 19, 2016

The temptation for many beleaguered public sector academics will be to see "challenger institutions" as an opportunity to cut out the middle man of middle and senior management in order to create, better conditions and greater autonomy.
It seems obvious that this contains a neo liberal trap designed to encourage further entrepreneurial activity by challenging the existing institutions solely on the mercantile grounds of efficiency and value for money rather than any real cultural alternative or difference.

But as we've seen from the endless needs for central control, revision and intervention mistakes are made and the outcome of legislation is often not that predicted (fees were not supposed to rise across the sector to £9,000).

Does this represent solely a further a new threat or is there with careful thought the opportunity to repurpose these new structures as machines for left common sense? To retool the deregulation as an agent of change of an entirely different order

Could a reconfigured notion of the radical pedagogies of the "art school" side step nostalgia and be utilised in the conception of radical new structures? By taking Ranciere's conception of a "critical art" to "produce a new perception of the world, and therefore to create a commitment to its transformation." Future platforms retooled as Machines for left common sense, with the Capability for adaptions and revision. Crucibles of experimentation and radical visions of what the world could be, and might be constructed, in spaces in which it was possible to "desire, conceive, and create the new structure of the future"[1]?

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[1] In 1987, the historian Elie Kedourie wrote a critique of the reforms to research funding in a pamphlet titled *Diamonds into Glass: the Government and the Universities*. This took aim at the 1986 research assessment exercise (RAE), which he described as *haphazard and hasty exercises* of assessing quality.

Tom Bailey
http://wonkhe.com/blogs/thatchers-legacy-to-british-universities/